

INTO DEBT GOES ANK

by Greg Stolze

Not long before the destruction of Borzhu, Ank Deohr ran into some trouble driving a herd of horses across the plains to the city. Within it, there were a few exceptional steeds, the high-necked kind with proud circles of hair around their ankles, the horses for which the Oursculi were justly famed. Most were more ordinary, but there were no nags, none secretly tending towards lameness, none infected with lungwick. Every one was a horse Ank would be proud to sell, for a hard-haggled but fair price, and all of them were his.

In Borzhu, Ank was to sell the herd entire to a fellow Oursculi, in accordance with papers negotiated months earlier. With the resulting payment, Ank intended to settle in the city, living with his maternal aunt's family at first, eventually getting his own place (presumably in the Oursculi quarter), finding a wife, settling down, supporting his community and faithfully worshipping as his family had for generations, in particular celebrating when Zonan sat upon the Throne of Life.

There was much for Ank to anticipate. He had been to Borzhu twice before, staying with his aunt of course, once for a few months as a child and then for a whole year as a young man. Now old enough to work for his uncle, he would assess horseflesh and keep accounts. It was all settled.

But two days out from the city, bandits set upon them by night.

Before the watching drover could sound the alarm, Ank half-woke, hearing the animals' unease and sitting up in his bedroll. When he heard the cry—"To arms! From the west, low thieves invade!"—he was already pulling on his boots, thin-toed, spurred, heeled to catch a stirrup. Not bothering with coat or shirt, he seized his belt and stood, taking long strides towards the outcry.

At each hip was a leather holster, and in each holster was a weapon his father had worn through bandit country, and his grandfather, and which Ank's great grandfather had carried in the wars against the Borzhu tyrant.

Close by, his favorite horse Sandalwood was tethered to a tree. Ank took two steps and jumped, seizing a branch to pull himself astride. As Ank clamped his knees around the mount's bare back, the chestnut stallion neighed in recognition. With one hand, Ank patted the beast's neck and untangled the traces with the other. He still was not fully awake.

Hearing the crack of whips and the rising rumble of hooves, he came to complete alertness. Reins in his left hand, he unbuttoned his right holster and gave a sharp whistle. He didn't need to dig in the spurs. Sandalwood already knew his mood.

When he saw the first dark figure, he drew forth his ancestral firewhip. He knew he wasn't seeing one of his workers—the silhouette was too bulky, too hunched in the saddle, using a leather lash instead of the traditional Oursculi long-prod. Certainly no one on his drive wore a helmet with decorative antlers.

A coin-sized horn disc cushioned the two parts of the firewhip. Ank thumbed it aside to arm the weapon. With a loose arm, he made a wide loop overhead before cracking through his wrist.

A firewhip is a sparksteel handle, connected to a rod of densely packed, twisted, forged and folded alchemical materials. When the two halves slam together, the barrel ignites and releases heat, light and force, the fuels of these reactions peeling off its surface and leaving behind vinelike incisions, like the worm tracks found within old wood. A new firewhip has a featureless column at its front. A well-used one has elaborate grooves all around it. One as old as Ank's was fronted by something that looked like silvery filigree mesh.

In skilled hands, the aim and shape of the flames and blast can be shaped. Even the mixture of light to heat to impact can be modulated by the rhythm with which it is snapped, the duration and force of the contact, the angle and twist with which it is turned. A new firewhip can be made to blast in a cone, or lob a white hot ball in a long parabola, or even to curve around a slight corner.

But an old weapon, what the alchemists and soldiers call a "cunning fan," can be induced to far more delicate tricks. A talented hand on a well-used weapon could strike three targets with a single strand of fire, unhorse a rider without a singe, or blast forth such a loud and violent noise that it rattles teeth at a dozen paces.

Ank had trained with firewhips since his boyhood. With such devices, he could twist, pull, push, burn, bellow or sigh. But he did not carry a cunning fan.

He carried *two* cunning fans.

As he dropped the traces to draw his left-hand weapon, his first shot coughed out a thick, head-sized ball of flame. It threw orange shadows into the black as it lazily arced through the air, dropping from the height of his head down to strike the bandit at the short ribs. Ank closed his eyes right before the burning sphere burst in golden sparks, launching the thief off his horse with a howl, a boom, and a brief daylike flash. Only a wash of dim red penetrated Ank's eyelids, so he opened them with some of his night-sight preserved. In the dark, he squinted at the mounted shapes mulling in confusion, trying to tell friend from foe as all called out, dazzled and in disarray.

"At them!" he shouted, wheeling his left arm once and raising it straight up, the ends of the weapon touching with the gentle linger of a parting kiss. The firewhip blasted a cone of red and purple sparks, high and light, their flare limning the scene in eerie foxfire.

Someone barked something in a language Ank didn't know, a tiny woman on a huge horse, gesturing fearfully. He focused on her, along with two others who cut towards her at her words. Beside them ran a half-dozen panicky steeds, impelled by their lashes.

With only another touch of his heels, he urged Sandalwood up to a run, the reins flopping loose beside the horse's neck. Ank didn't need them just yet. His knees, and the tilt of his body, could direct the steed towards his enemies.

"Away with you!" he cried, and punctuated it with a horizontal snap of his right hand. The fire and force barked out in a flat fan, wide and stinging, sleeting across one of the riders and only missing the woman when she ducked hard, all the way off the side of her horse, popping back upright in a display of considerable skill—all the more remarkable when her horse, its neck struck and sizzling from his blast, reared in panic. She stayed mounted and fought it back under control.

By this point, all his drovers were mounted and charging. Ank alone had rare and expensive weapons, but the others had sabers and long-prods.

At twice a man's height, a long-prod can bend almost to a right angle, with enough weight on it. Being lanced with one might unhorse a poor rider, but more likely it would just compress before snapping messily straight, perhaps breaking an arm or a chin in the process. In a fight, a prod would more commonly be swung down or across with the force of a galloping horse behind it, whipping at the last moment with enough force to stun a bull, let alone a mere human.

"At them! From the left, encircle!" cried one of Ank's people, the woman who'd been on guard.

As the light from Ank's flare-shot started to fade, he saw the rustlers turn towards the small woman—their leader, he supposed. In that vicious speech of theirs, she spat again and they started to retreat. Ank breathed a sigh of relief. He'd considered firing more, but good as they were, his weapons would eventually wear out. In Borzhu, he hoped to have them partially restored, but in time every good firewhip fell silent. These had use in them still, but not so much he would spend it thoughtlessly.

Then, as the light dimmed from purple back to night's grey and black, he saw the woman leap from her steed onto one of his. Ank blinked. In the dim, the blade in her hand was just a line until it slashed into another horse's throat. The animal screamed and she kicked her new mount hard into gallop.

"*On your father's grave!*" Ank bellowed, and charged. His attack was a short chop with his right hand—a blast of pure hot flame that came close to striking her true, but she wrenched the rein-less horse to the right by hooking her own

fingers into its cheek and yanking. The fireball skated across her back, igniting her cloak and shirt, but still she stayed astride, bareback, charging into the night. Ank was ready to follow when the guard interposed herself.

“To pursue is rash when our animals are scattered,” she said, biting her lip. “Let it be on me that they reached us unseen, but I would not lose you in this darkness. They are routed.”

“On my oath, they were foul bandits,” he replied, spitting into the dust. “To slay a noble animal for spite! May Lukukel bury their bones beneath the Throne of Death.”

He shivered, only then feeling the night’s chill. But before he put on a shirt, he assigned drovers their search parameters and bade them be wary of the thieves’ return, or of ambush.

“Fear not,” said the only man among the drovers who wasn’t Oursculi. He was Aifo, and from the south, and spoke with crude directness. “Reckon they’re soul-broke and afright. You felled this one outright, I struck hard with my prod, and she smacked a loud yelp from that tall one,” he said, gesturing at the guard.

“Of all you, drovers, did any know their speech?” Ank asked. None did.

When he was dressed, he continued to arrange the search, counting his people, counting his horses. He took a moment to examine the animal the woman had abandoned. Though tall and deep-chested, it was lean and scabby, a roughly-tended beast that shied from him uneasily.

Ank also looked at the man he’d killed. He, too, looked ill-fed and unloved.

The next day was bright and clear, and quiet except for the buzz of flies around the bandit’s corpse. The Aifo man helped Ank dig a shallow grave, grumbling about the hard soil, but the Oursculi were known to take funeral customs seriously, so he did not complain loudly or long. Once the corpse was interred, they lashed four sticks into an approximation of the Throne of Death’s shape and put a stone on it—one as close to a skull’s size and shape as they could find. All around the plains, crude graves like this could be found, the mounds rounded by rain and covered with grass, strung-together memorials decaying out of their shapes.

“On the Throne of Death, which of the Great Beloved sits?” Ank asked the most pious of the drovers, frowning as he tried to remember the stars’ complicated dance by day.

“To my humble knowledge, it is Tecki, blessed be their eternal renewal.”

Ank suppressed a wince as he turned to the grave. He wasn’t even aware he was doing it. An expressionless face was the heritage of his culture.

“As he strove to steal our steeds, I did strike this man down in anger and fear,” Ank said. “I did not know even his name, but by my hand he is dead.” He sighed. “Though he died in violent dishonor, in the next life I hope he finds peace and honesty.”

Then he mounted up and drove the herd into Borzhu.

By evening he was well washed, with a pat of fine oil for his hair, taking a cup of tea with his aunt, uncle and cousins. He told them about the bandits, but said little of the struggle. To hear him tell it, they were merely an annoyance, but his mother’s sister eyed him shrewdly.

That night, as she fussed around his guest bedroom ensuring that the windows were open the right amount to get air, but not so wide that it became indecent, she tacitly broached the subject again.

“To contend with bandits atop the discomforts of a cattle drive must have seemed like a very insult from a devil,” she said.

“Upon arrival at so kind a shelter, any discomfort of weather or work is washed away by welcome.”

She delicately asked about the herd losses, in a way that he could easily deflect if he did not wish to discuss it, but he sighed and sat, telling her about the few horses lost to illness, to injury, one to a marauding beast and one after eating poisonous foliage.

“Of the last horses lost, one was stolen and one slain.”

Gently, she questioned him about that, uncovering his bitterness towards the bandit leader who survived.

“If one is hungry or needful, I can understand stealing,” he said. “It’s still wrong, but a wrongness that redounds on a flawed society more than an individual. To kill an animal for spite though... that bespeaks a personal wickedness.”

“Perhaps she was aggrieved about the man who felt your anger.”

Ank shrugged irritably. “If one does not desire a fatal response, one ought find a safer career.”

“And those who were your responsibility? They are all safe?”

“All, save one whose arm was lashed, yes.”

“In that, then, you are righteous. Would you rather that man you killed had lived, but one of yours died?”

In response, he invoked the Oursculi word “ivindemo,” which is best translated as “a subject of discussion that is more than half conjecture and therefore, a waste of time.”