

Sanguis Dei, Blood of God

It is night in a forest miles beyond the the walls of Carcassonne, in the county of Toulouse in the Frankish states. The Third Crusade has ended, both sides declaring victory and retiring from battle. But no war is truly ended until the last veteran has found his grave.

The monster woke to pain. He could feel it across his bare arms, through the rude cloth of his trousers. A thin line of fire, like being clapped in irons heated in a forge. His limbs were without strength and the needless, instinctual urge to breathe was a struggle. Every twitch of his flesh brought fresh, new agony in return. It could only be blessed silver. Though it dulled his senses and weakened his body, he could still feel someone to his side.

He opened his eyes. The stars stretched above, glittering and aloof. He turned his head to look at who could only be his captor. The man locked eyes with the monster. "Vampire," he said. It was both observation and accusation.

"Yes," the monster replied. His captor made a small noise of satisfaction, as if pleased to hear such an admission. There was no sense in denying it. The monster had not fed in weeks. A sated vampire could pass for human, clouding the minds of men and women, appearing fair and beautiful. A starving vampire was nothing of the sort. All glamour was lost, nothing left but the gaunt, fierce features and lean limbs of a hungry corpse. A starving vampire was unmistakably other, arousing instinctive revulsion and fear in even the dullest mortal. But the very limits of extremity gave such a monster terrible strength. He should be drinking from this man's throat and yet he was defeated before he even knew danger was upon him.

The man said nothing, continuing to peer at the monster.

"You know what I am," the monster challenged him. "Are you to kill me?"

"I will not." The man's voice was mild, almost sympathetic.

"Will you remove this chain?"

"I will not."

The monster was silent for a moment. "Dawn is coming."

"Yes, it is."

"That will be the death of me."

"If God wills it."

The monster was silent for a longer moment. "I do not understand your purpose here."

"I will take your confession," the man said.

The monster laughed and broke into a cough, his voice rasping in his dry throat. "A confession? I am damned, you fool! Those pretty words are for the living."

"God judges the living and the dead. How would you be condemned to Hell if not by His word?"

The monster's voice dropped to a whisper. "You speak of God. What a hideous thought! A callous and petulant child surrounded by broken things."

The man gestured towards the monster, encompassing his predicament. "You blame Him for this?"

"The God I once worshipped, once believed in? No. That God would not allow such a thing as me to exist. The God I now believe in, He is either the author of this evil or has allowed it. Therefore, He is the greater monster than I!"

"And yet you once believed," questioned the man. "When you were a man. You lived in a world where evil prospered, the good were crushed beneath the tyrant's heel, where even the very animals must do murder to earn their supper."

"I have believed in many foolish things in my life. My experience since then have disabused me of much."

"So you say," the man said agreeably. "You speak of monsters and evil. You admit the sinfulness of your actions."

"This I cannot deny."

"And yet what have you done to sustain yourself in your life as a vampire? How much innocent blood has washed down your throat?"

"Blood? Oh, more than I can say. Red, beautiful blood, sweet as life."

"And yet you persist. Does this not compound your sin with every life you take? You could have chosen death."

"And be damned for a suicide, an unpardonable sin!"

"And yet you believe yourself already damned. Strange to think that a man could live a life of wickedness, of rape and murder and blackest evil yet receive the grace of God on his deathbed and enter the kingdom of heaven but one such as you is damned before he has even truly sinned. "

"Strange only if you consider salvation a possibility. I believe we are all damned from the start and God is just the mask the Devil wears when setting us up for the cruelest jokes. Despair is never so black as when a glimmer of hope tantalizes and fades away. I fear death is the false hope, what comes next makes this world seem a paradise. I do not think that God ever allow his playthings to escape."

The man makes a noise of agreement. They sat for a time in silence.

"So we are to meet the sun, together?" the monster finally asked.

“Yes.”

“You wish to hear of my sins? You wish to take my confession, truly?”

“Sincerely.”

The monster sighed. “Then you shall have it.”

The Monster’s Confession

I was born Delano de Narbonne, third son of the Count of Narbonne in 1143 AD. My first brother was fit to inherit my father’s title and my second brother would serve the king in war. I was an emotional and impulsive boy, full of poetry and whimsy. My father indulged such interests because he was an unlettered man and had a great respect for learning. He felt it unwise to rely solely on scribes and accountants for the keeping of important records. The woman of the house must mind the servants and the man of the house must know the working of his scribes.

Mine was a life of ease and plenty. I listened to my father and tutors talk of the affairs of important men and of the concerns of our own house but I was little bothered by them. Of the travails of our vassals and commoners I knew nothing at all. Life was summer, life was joy and I could see it no other way.

My fancy was tickled by Fayanna, the daughter of a knight in service to my father. She was actively courted by myself and Squire Dareau, the son of another knight. Fayanna enjoyed this pursuit and pit us against each other. I relished this merry chase because I fancied myself her choice. I had my dalliances with common wenches as any nobleman would but she I knew I would marry. Our fathers would certainly approve.

I learned of their wedding from the giggling of serving girls. The enormity of the revelation left me unmanned. Her hand was mine, I would have sworn it! I was a cursed fool. Song was driven from my heart, displaced by a rage I’d never known myself capable of. I stormed off on the open road, walking like a commoner, trying to tire myself to the point of thinking clearly. That did

nothing of the sort. Exertion only served to boil my anger down until it was a vile residue of murderous intent. I resolved to take my rival's life.

I lay in wait for him in the woods along a path he frequented. I knew it would only be a matter of time before he would return home. He would be armed, of course, but not armored for he would not be anticipating me. It was a long, long wait, nothing but me and my thoughts. I walked through the fight hundreds of times. I had my own sword with me, something I'd considered more of an article of dress than an instrument of murder. I'd taken my instruction with my father's men-at-arms but had never considered using such skills in earnest. Would I shout my challenge with honor or fall upon his back like a brigand? I was not the fighter he was, I would need every advantage. And after he was cut down it would be easy enough to make this look like the work of highwaymen. Swords were not the weapons of bandits and I would have to disguise my handiwork. My father took dimly to duels of honor and forbade it for his family and his men, condemning it as a foolish waste of life. Were I found out, he would not go easy on me.

It was late in the day, surely past the chanting of vespers when he showed. The world was in twilight and he hurried on his way, stepping lively, a song on his lips. His sword was at his side as I knew it would be. I gripped my own, calling now upon that reserve of wrath I'd nurtured throughout the day, ready to strike him down and claim his life. And I found that anger fled. There was nothing in me but quaking fear. What if he saw me coming? What if my first thrust were parried? What if he struck me down instead? Only now did I contemplate my own mortality and realized I feared for my own life more than I grieved for my lost love. I was nothing but a coward. His back to me now, he continued on his way, never knowing of my presence and my shame. I groped my way back to my father's house through darkness. I collapsed onto my bed and endured a fitful, restless sleep.

I fled to the priesthood as is the usual end for younger sons unlikely to inherit. I did so against my father's wishes but my shame was so great his own displeasure meant nothing to me. The Church of course welcomed educated young men who could be put to the Lord's work.

I took the cloth in the depths of the most miserable time in my life and was astonished to find that this service gave me the greatest joy I'd ever known. I was the priest for an outlying village for a neighboring lord. All the poetry I'd addled my mind with, it was experiencing life in the

abstract. I was now living it for myself, seeing the minor triumphs and tragedies of the common man. I christened the babies, gave last rites, buried the dead, shepherded their souls. I'd found my place and found my peace. I'd even flattered myself into thinking that it was not cowardice but God's love that stayed my hand that day so long ago.

And then this contentment was torn from me by a monster.

Four children were found dead over the span of a week, drained of every drop of blood. The villagers spoke of a demon sent from hell, skulking in the forest in the dark of night. I thought possession to be more likely. In my training I had read of and heard first hand accounts of the crimes of madmen who had raped and murdered and eaten the flesh of their victims.

The vampire, for that is what he was, fell upon me as I slept in my church. He carried me off to the cave where he slept through the daylight hours.

He was as shocking to me as I must appear to you now -- the shape of a man, skin pale as death, eyes burning with unholy fire. He told me that he'd been intent on killing me in my bed but my sleeping face spoke to the poet in him. He asked me if a true Christian would sooner face the lion than deny Christ. I told him of course we would, as did the martyrs in Nero's games. He asked me if I would endure the torments of Peter, Paul, Luke, Mark, Andrew, James, or Thomas. I told him any Christian could endure that and more for what is a lifetime against the vastness of eternity? The vampire laughed and said he would have his answer soon enough. He pounced, latched his teeth to my neck. His strength was incontestable and I fell unconscious. I awoke a little while later to the taste of blood in my mouth. I knew the taste even if I found it unpleasant; what boy hasn't bloodied his lip? But something compelled me to drink. His wrist was at my mouth, the blood coming from a cut. I lapped at it like a dog and my hands rose to grip that arm like a branch in a flood. The blood became sweet to my tongue, sweeter than the finest mead. After a time he wrenched his arm back from my grip and without that singular, stimulating taste filling my mind I fell back into oblivion once more.

I woke to the sound of a child crying softly, nose bubbling with snot, having spent his strength on loud wailing some time ago. I could not stand in this low cave, only crawl on my hands and knees to that child. He was Remy, from my own village. I called out to him and he responded to

my voice. He looked about blindly, as if he could not see me, even though I could see him clearly in the gloom. I came to him. At my touch he clung to me, his words an incoherent jumble about devils and monsters. I could smell him clearly, the dirt and stale sweat and piss that are familiar to anyone. It was not that he stank, I simply smelled these things clearly, more intensely than I thought possible. I could smell his vitality. I could feel his blood pulsing beneath the hands I held him with. The words for thirst and hunger were bereft of meaning. This was lust, literally a blood lust, a craving greater than could possibly be contained by a human heart. And then I realized mine was no longer beating.

“You are cold, Father,” the child said. “So very cold.” My lips trembled as my tongue wetted them. I knew that I was capable of almost anything. And I saw the vampire now, crouched by the entrance, a spider in his web. I knew what that made me.

Desperately seeking to control my panic, I sat the child aside and crawled over to the vampire, whispering so the little one could not hear. “What is your design?!” I hissed at him. He smiled and said that he offered me martyrhood. I am almost like he. Drink, and I shall be. Refuse, and I will die in an agony so singular that the martyrs of old would fear it. If I could refuse the temptation of blood into the true death, I would have surpassed a temptation worthy of Christ Himself.

I lost my mind at that point and tried to overpower him. Desperation gave my limbs strength that was yet of no avail. He forced me back into the cave as easily as a kitten. He was fat with blood, plump of cheek. I was starved, crazed, and growing more desperate with every passing minute.

I held out for five days.

The vampire had provisioned the cave with food and drink for the child. I huddled in back, as far from my temptation as I could place myself. I prayed to the one true God that He would grant me my release now before I sinned, before I took an innocent life. I bared my soul to Him, begged that I be cast directly into Abaddon if only to spare that innocent. I heard nothing in return. NOTHING! Was God ignoring me? Was He even there?

There is no describing my failing. I tore that child to pieces. I ripped his throat open and drank fountains of blood. When his heart grew still I tore off hunks of flesh, wringing blood from it like water from rags. I lapped what congealed on the cave floor like a dog. The vampire saw it all and said nothing. Sated, calmed, I now returned to my mind and sat in contemplation of my utter failure. The vampire simply said that it was nothing more than he expected and left without another word. He abandoned me to this curse. I never saw him again. And the hunger came again with the next night. And once again my cowardice. I could not bring myself to risk death for my greatest love. I could not now embrace death and damnation to save blameless innocents. I was as he, vampire, and I would kill to preserve my useless, wicked existence.

I tried to slake my lust on the blood of animals. Rabbits, deer, whatever else I could catch. They were barely enough to sustain me and did nothing to abate that hunger. I would become crazed, frenzied, and the only thing that could stop that bloodlust was the taking of human life.

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The monster glared at his captor. "You know nothing of the hunger. How can you sit in judgment?"

The man smiled without humor, revealing sharp fangs. "I know the thirst as intimately as you."

The monster was astonished. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I shall tell you," the man promised. And he did.

The Man's Confession

I was Sir Léot mac Cormaic, a chaplain of the Knights Templar serving under Robert de Sablé. I was seized by a fervor when I heard Pope Gregory's call for a new crusade to free the Levant from the unholy blight of the Saracen horde. I fought with my brothers for three bloody years, from Tyre to Arsuf. I was sickened by the slaughter and questioned the justice of our cause. Through the blood and sin I could not tell Christian from heathen.

After King Richard and Saladin made peace the war was over and I felt ruined for my part in it. I questioned my vows, questioned God. We held a garrison outside of Jerusalem. While the Saracens retained control of the city, Christian pilgrims were allowed entry. For all the fighting our original goal remained unfulfilled.

My last night I forgot my vows, taking to strong drink and unsavory company. My recollection of the circumstances are dim but I remember laying with a heathen whore. I could not recognize her for what she truly was. Only when she gripped me with inhuman strength did I realize my mortal existence was at an end. Legs entwined with my own, one hand clasped around my throat, the other caressing my head in a parody of affection, she whispered to me. She was a resident of Antioch during the sieges in the first Crusade. She saw her family, her city put to the sword. She was a maiden then, and her beauty compelled a knight-captain to take her for his sport. By her own words she was now over a hundred years old and yet still appeared new to her womanhood. Held close I felt the coolness of her flesh and realized she drew breath only to speak.

This hateful existence ended when the Crusader camp was attacked on a moonless night, djinns from the deep desert tearing them to pieces. These djinn appeared as men but were like corpses, drinking the blood of their victims. She begged them to make her as they so she could share in their vengeance and they consented. And she told me what would happen after she took my life. She would drink my blood, drain me to the point of death. She would make me as her and I would become a restless corpse, roaming the country endlessly, thirsting for Christian blood. She drained me slowly, letting my horror grow as I knew there would be no escape.

I woke with blood in my mouth but blood unlike any I had ever tasted. She gave me less than the vampire who cursed you but it is a poison in any dose. I was tossed atop a refuse heap like any corpse from the night. But I was already changing. Morning twilight stung in my eyes and I desperately sought shelter. I lay like a corpse caught in the rigor of death, wanting to writhe for my pains but incapable of doing so. That night I rose and was taken by a madness. I took a beggar boy and two dogs. I was an animal. I only came to my right mind when the blood was in my belly. I felt a compulsion to return to the people I knew, a desire to taste their lives on my tongue. This was some sick geas placed on me by the vampiress and yet I also knew it would prove impossible to resist.

I swore that I would not fall again. The cross upon a silver chain around my neck became hotter as the hunger grew. It began to burn. I had to remove it. I could not bring myself to look upon it directly. Unable to bear with parting from it, I wrapped it in rags. It felt like a hot coal, as if the rags would smolder and catch light at any moment. They did not. And still, the hunger grew. I prayed to God, to the Christ, the Holy Virgin, every saint I knew of. Let this cup pass from me!

I lasted for less than a day. I fed upon the first beggar child I could catch. I was brutal, merciless. Though he died quickly, the quality of his suffering could not have been exceeded by the finest torturers in all of Christendom.

I hid by day in the catacombs and sewers and hunted the streets at night. The rapture the blood gave me is beyond description. Heaven could not have tasted so sweet. My older brother had gloated to me while in his cups, boasting of the pleasures of raping and murdering while on campaign. At the time I'd been repelled by his words, knowing them to be true and vile. I thought my brother a monster. I now knew his truth, his perspective now mine own. I was truly the monster now.

I honestly cannot tell you how long I persisted in this frenzy of blood and murder for it all blurs together like a nightmare of fever and fog. I do remember how it ended. I found myself sitting on my haunches, shaking, gazing into the eyes of a girl-child I had savaged. Everything below her perfect, porcelain neck was tatters of meat, torn and sucked dry. But above her neck her face remained untouched by this death, seeming as peaceful as sleep. This was striking enough to seize my attention, wake me from my fury. I sat and stared at this ruined thing whom I could not even remember attacking, whose blood I could not remember the taste of though I had just drunk of her, and I realized what I must do. I must end myself before I harmed one more soul.

Though night, I could feel the hateful sun's inexorable approach. I resolved not to flee, to instead meet my end like the man I once was. I climbed to unsteady feet and passed beyond the city walls. I would see my last sunrise in open wilderness, not the stinking warrens of a city.

I no longer knew if God was there but I prayed to Him, prayed without words, just heaving sighs from the depths of my very being. I poured out my agony, knowing I was beyond

forgiveness, sins unatonable. Even if God was not in his Heaven, surely there must be a hell for one such as me.

Verily I tell you that I had never truly seen a sunrise until that day. I saw the coming of the false dawn, the highest clouds sparking with the first rays, the lower clouds catching fire in turn. I felt the diffuse light touch my flesh, fire and pressure mounting so that I did not know whether I would burst into flame or bloody ochre. I closed my eyes, knowing the end was now upon me. And finally the sun's mighty, flaming disc cleared the horizon, its rays kissing my cheek. But it did not burn, it soothed!

I opened my eyes onto clear daylight for the first time in months. The strength had fled from my limbs and I could barely hold myself upright but I had looked upon the sun once more and lived! I could feel the heat, holy light ready to burn me to dust, but I was as if in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, wreathed in flame but unconsumed. And my rag-wrapped cross, that burning coal, it had fallen cold. I unwrapped the filthy rags and could look upon it without pain. I took up my cross and hung it around my neck once more, kissing it.

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Having sat rapt throughout the man's tale, the monster could take no more. "It is a trick!" he screamed.

"No, no," the man whispered. He leaned over the monster, fishing the cross from under his tunic. The monster screwed his eyes shut and turned his head, cowering from the pain that the merest glimpse had caused. The man brought the cross close to the monster's cheek, touching for an instant. The monster whimpered and thrashed; the skin discolored as if burned. "This is no trick." The monster's eyes opened, his face reflecting terror and wonder.

The man continued. "How had this come to be? I desired absolution, forgiveness. And did not the woman say 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.' And did not the Lord say unto her 'Go; your faith has made you well?' Then truly, God has heard my prayers!"

"But the blood!" the monster cried. "The blood! How can you live without it?"

“How indeed? And did not the Lord provide for us? ‘Blood of Christ, flowing forth in the Crowning with Thorns, save us. Blood of Christ, poured out on the Cross, save us. Blood of Christ, price of our salvation.’”

“The Eucharist? I don’t care what dogma purports, the bread and wine remains but bread and wine. How can you slake that abominable thirst?”

The man smiled. “As think I. The Lord may have turned water to wine but the wine does not turn to blood. Believe me, I have tried. No. Only blood is blood.”

“Then you must surely slay to drink of it!”

“I must surely not,” the man replied. “Control, control must be exercised above all else. We can cloud the minds of men, did you not realize? That is how I was taken though your vampire took less pains with you.”

“But your victims--”

“No! Not victims. They are celebrants of Christ’s Supper. They provide the wine, the blood.”

“Is that not blasphemy?”

“Consider how you are living, monster. Is that not a greater blasphemy? No, I do not judge you for your ignorance. I was in as sorry a state as you before the scales fell from my eyes. The celebrant is a willing participant. I will use my powers to calm and soothe the celebrant at first, for the offering I ask of them is extraordinary. If they are Christian, I ask if they would tithe to the Church. They are of their own mind when they make their decision. If they refuse, we part in peace. If they accept, the blood is consecrated, no different from the wine. It does become Christ’s and I drink but sparingly. The celebrant is left to slumber with dreams of religious ecstasy. Not a hair on their heads is harmed,” the man said with great force. “Not a hair!”

The monster’s voice trembled. “I want to be saved but I am surely beyond redemption.”

“Nonsense. All who repent and accept Christ’s mercy are saved. Did not the thief on the cross beside our Lord repent in his final hour? He said ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,’ and did not Christ reply ‘Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise?’ You will have everlasting life in Heaven. But it is good and worthy to devote the balance of your mortal life to expiating your sins. It is a debt you can never repay but in the attempt you do the Lord’s work. This is as I have chosen, this is as I have done, this is as I will continue until I shed this body.”

The monster sat in silence for a while, then spoke: “How many like us have you sat the night with?”

“Six.”

“And how many have died before the sun?”

“All of them.”

“What is it like?”

“The skin blackens and cracks like a heretic consumed at the stake. A smoke arises like from smoldering wood. The body melts into an ugly black liquid like bitumen, bubbling and foul. The clothes catch light and smoke away. The black mass dries and flakes away to dust in the wind. In an hour all that is left is a greasy stain.”

Dawn was close now, the sky brightening. The monster’s skin tingled in dread. “Can I truly be forgiven?”

“Yes. But are you truly repentant? That is for God alone to say and His answer is coming.”

“I have confessed my sins but I have not yet taken communion. I fear I face the end in an impure state.”

The man smiled. “To Abraham and Isaac the Lord presented a ram. For us my blood will

serve.”

“And what of the bread?”

“‘It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.’ If such is sufficient for the Lord, it shall be sufficient for us.” He recited the liturgy from memory.

*“Take this, all of you, and eat it:
this is my body which will be given up for you.
Take this, all of you, and drink from it:
this is the cup of my blood,
the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.
It will be shed for you and for all
so that sins may be forgiven.
Do this in memory of me.”*

The man nicked his wrist with his teeth. Blood welled up, black in the fleeting twilight. The monster’s nostrils flared with the scent of it. The man brought his wrist to the monster’s mouth and let his life drip into it. The monster’s eyes rolled back in his head and the man withdrew.

Now, only thick clouds held back the sun.

The monster went limp beneath the oppressive silver chain, spent. “I feel...sated. Content. I am undone.”

“The path is not easy. You will constantly be tested.”

“I am ready for it. My God, I am ready for it!”

The sun burst through the looming clouds. The monster screamed reflexively at the touch of direct sunlight and then marveled. It was not the searing fire of memory, of that deadly orb that he feared for so many decades. He was now in the light of day. He was in the furnace and unconsumed. He sat up, the silver chain falling from him as easily as a blanket. He stood on his

own two feet, reborn.

Together, the men walked beneath the rising sun.