

The Good Shepherd

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Â Winner of the 1st place in the 2014 Literature Competition

Ay me, how many perils doe unfold

The righteous man, to make him daily fall!

- Edmund Spenser, "The Faerie Queene"

The sickly green orb of Morrslieb eclipsed the cold grey ball of Mannslieb as the two moons rose in the summer night sky. Pale vermilion light illuminated the plains of Laverne, casting strange shadows as it fell on the mounds of corpses that littered the field. It flickered and reflected off the armored hauberks of dead knights and gently caressed the rusted ancient armor of their foes. The sickly scent of death held sway over the remains of the battlefield, the foul stench of rotting corpses both old and new.Â

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Yet, despite the tempting feast of dead flesh laid out before them, the carrion beasts of land and air did not descend upon the plain. Whining wolves slunk through the woodlands bordering the battlefield, their hungry eyes reflecting the emerald light of Morrslieb, yet they did not advance past the edge of the forest. In the sky, circling crows and ravens cried their hunger to the winds before slowly flapping away in search of more wholesome pickings. The animals knew better than to disturb this particular abattoir.

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In their place, far fouler scavengers slunk through the dead of Laverne, gorging themselves on shattered wreckage of men and horses. Cackling madly, the ghouls worked their way slowly through the piles of bodies that had once been the heroic host of Count Carrone. Large bats and darker, more unearthly things flitted through the air, their chittering replacing the cawing of birds. At the center of the battlefield however, there was no movement. A large pavilion of black silk sat there like a fat spider in the center of a web. Surrounding it were the ordered ranks of the undead. All their unseeing eyes were turned towards the pavilion, facing the beast that had dragged them from their graves to fight for its cause. The wind sent tatters of rotted flesh and scraps of cloth swaying as it whistled through the orderly ranks of the macabre army, yet not a single soldier shifted in the slightest. Then, with sudden precision that would have put a Reikland drill sergeant to shame, the dead host parted. Their ancient armor creaking, the rows peeled back to create a perfect lane to the front of the tent. Two undead warriors, dressed in the resplendent armor of ancient kings and glowing with ethereal power, half-dragged half-carried a

tattered survivor of Carrone's army towards the pavilion.

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Olivier Serrent, Grail Knight, Slayer of Gazulghust, Guardian of the Chapel of Avigne, struggled against the bony claws that held him. His efforts were futile. Weakened from his wounds and still half-dazed from the clamor of battle, Sir Serrent's current strength was nothing compared to the unyielding grasp of the two wights. The brutal wound across his ribs bled profusely as the Grail magic imbued in his body desperately struggled to seal the cut. It was a wight's sword that had done it. Those vicious black blades had a dark magic all their own that was raging through his system. A normal man would have been dead by now, not just weakened to the point of helplessness. Yet death on the battlefield would have been better than this. He was not sure what fate awaited him at the black pavilion but he knew it would not be clean or glorious. A wave of nausea swept across the wounded knight and his head drooped. Serrent's mind whirled with the violent memories of the battle that had just occurred. Glittering in their martial finery, confident in the power of the Lady, the army of Count Carrone had sallied forth from the city of Guscelin to drive back the undead invaders that had stormed down from the mountains. Sir Serrent had joined five of his brother Grail Knights to support the Count's offensive. Indeed, he had been one of the most vocal supporters of the attack, shouting down the advice of those who sought to hide behind the walls of Guscelin and wait out a siege. More fool him, it seemed.

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In glory the army had ridden out and in glory they had died. He had seen that glory himself! Such mighty deeds there were! Sir Etienne du Lac slaying a great undead wyrm despite a mortal wound. The knights of Baron Gasgcone sacrificing themselves in a charge to hold the flank against hordes of ghastly skeletal horsemen. Count Carrone bravely engaging the dark master of the enemy host in single combat. The fact that he had been cut down like a child was nothing compared to the bravery of the act. Sir Serrent himself had spitted a foul vampire clad in blood red armor upon his lance, but only after the fiend had butchered the ancient Grail Knight Montfleur. Even as the vampire lord cut down Count Carrone and led its wights in a brutal charge that broke the center of the army, individual knights had heaped themselves in glory as they stood and fought to allow their fellows time to withdraw. Sir Serrent had been one of those, boldly launching a countercharge against the wights. He had fought like Gilles le Breton himself until a dark axe had ripped through the neck of Roncelles, blinding him with his own steed's blood. Desperately trying to jump clear of the falling horse, he had not seen the blade that bit deep into his side as he fell. Blinded and wounded, he had flailed at the dead around him only to realize his arm was tra- The sudden shooting pain of his broken arm hitting the ground snapped Sir Serrent out of his delirious reverie.

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the wights had released their grip, sending their captive tumbling to the ground. The knight tried to rise, grimacing as the bones in his arm ground together. Roncelles, his loyal steed of four years, had in the end caused his master more harm than good when he collapsed on Sir Serrent's arm. Whispering a prayer to the Lady and calling on the reserves of strength and fortitude only a Grail Knight could muster, he pushed himself up onto his knees and then rose unsteadily to his feet. He reeled slightly, the pain of his wounds threatening to overwhelm him again, yet he managed to stand straight. Lounging on a throne made of yellowed bones, the beast before him clapped mockingly.

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"Oh

bravo, brave sir knight, bravo." The voice was soft and sardonic in its tone. The faint accent of Bretonnian nobility, perhaps from Lyonesse, still lingered in the speech as well. "If you would indulge a jest, I think you might in fact be the last man standing on the field." The creature tittered at its own joke. There was a chattering noise as the teeth of the undead warriors surrounding the pavilion clacked together in an unholy echo of their commander's mirth. Sir Serrent spat blood at the seated figure, staring defiantly into its eyes. They glinted and glimmered in Morrslieb's cruel light like the eyes of a wild wolf. The vampire's skin was as pale as alabaster, which only accentuated its statuesque features. The creature's armor, a monstrous suit of black plate that resembled the chitinous hide of a beetle, made not a sound as it leaned back in its chair. Idly, its skeletally thin hand swiped away the bloody spittle that had landed on its breastplate. Despite the seeming frailty of the hand, Sir Serrent had seen the vampire's strength in action. With a single, one-handed stroke, it had very nearly cleaved Count Carrone in half from shoulder to hip. "Now now, sir knight, that was not very noble."

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"There

is no nobility when dealing with beasts," Sir Serrent replied, the power of the Lady coursing harder through his veins in front of this enemy. He stood up a little straighter. "Foul creatures such as yourself do not command any honor."

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"What

a thing to say about women!" Once again the vampiress tittered at its own humor. It smiled coyly at Sir Serrent, revealing incisors that would have put a wolf to shame and flicked its long white hair back, letting its alabaster features fall into a feminine pout. "Once I was the Contessa de Viruac and many a knight treated me honorably as they courted me. Of course, knights fall at my feet for a different reason now. Yet surely, as a lady of fair Bretonnia,

I still deserve some respect?" It laughed cruelly, its hand idly stroking the hilt of the black blade that rested against its throne.

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Sir Serrent's eyes narrowed as the vampire named itself. The story of the Vampiress of Viruac was well known. Unlike many female vampires of legend, this one had a taste for the martial far more than manipulation. After the gruesome defeat of Count Carrone, Sir Serrent knew the legends of its prowess were not lies.

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Â "You are no woman, fiend," the knight snarled, "I name thee beast, a creature of the old night. The only courtesy you deserve will be the cold bite of a blade! Lady give me the strength that I might deliver that blow myself!" Sir Serrent took an angry step forward but staggered, stumbling to his knees.

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The vampire rolled its eyes dismissively.

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"Such ungrateful effrontery will get you nowhere, sir knight. Here I sit, willing to offer you so much, yet you treat me with such disdain. It really is unacceptable." With all the speed of striking snake, the vampire shot forward from its chair and gripped the Grail Knight's neck in its hand before he even had time to react. It slowly dragged him up from the ground, its claws digging into his flesh. Its sibilant voice whispered softly in Sir Serrent's ear. "I could kill you now, Bretonnian. I could sup on your holy blood and it would taste like the richest of wine on my lips. I could crush your windpipe and leave you as food for my ghouls. You would feel every single bite." Gone was the cheerful bonhomie of the last few minutes. It was replaced entirely by the cruel voice of a hungry predator. Sir Serrent tried to choke out a reply but was unable to. The creature's hand clamped around his neck like a vice and tightened its grip. The vampire dipped its other hand down to the wound in the knight's side, digging a single clawed digit into the gash. Sir Serrent grunted in agony, unable to voice a scream of pain with the hand constricting his throat. Slowly the vampire brought its claw up and licked away the blood.

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"Delicious," it sighed with delight. "I often find that the blood of Grail Knights is exquisite in its taste. The purest wine is the sweetest, no?" The vampire tittered again. "And yet," it said almost petulantly, "I will resist." It released its grip on Sir Serrent, who tumbled to his knees, gasping and spluttering for air. The vampiress swung round and stepped lightly back to its throne, once more assuming a lounging position as it observed the coughing Grail Knight rise unsteadily back to his feet. "Defiant once more. How impressive. The battle is over, sir knight. Decisions must be made. Paths must be chosen." The vampiress brought its hands together, staring out at the knight over steepled claws. "In battle, you slew Geoffrey Malmont, my most trusted retainer. You spitted him like a pig on a spike. I was impressed. As such, I am glad you survived to be brought before me. Someone will need to take Malmont's place at my side. I offer that position to you, his killer. What say you?" The vampire smiled expectantly, its good cheer seemingly returned.

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Sir Serrent spat again. "You dare, fiend? You dare to besmirch my honor. That I would choose to side with you willingly! I would rather die." For a second, the vampire look disappointed. Sir Serrent was stunned. Had the beast truly believed he would take such a vile offer? He was a Grail Knight of Bretonnia, chosen of the Lady. He would never submit to such evil.

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"Death is preferable, is it? I offer you eternal life, eternal youth, eternal strength, and yet you ask for death?" The vampire's cultured voice was sour. "I would leave you to the ministrations of my necromancers. They would drain your blood in drops to study its magic. You would be kept alive for years, a withered husk ever on the edge of death as they performed experiment after experiment to test the holiness your 'Lady' bestowed on you!" Sir Serrent continued to stare defiantly at the vampiress.

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"If such a fate is to be mine, so be it. As long as my Lady is with me, I fear no death!" The vampiress hissed and started forward from her throne.

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"As long as your Lady is with you? Is she here with you now, sir knight? Look around you," the beast said as it gestured one of its clawed hands at the serried ranks of the dead. Beyond them, ghouls howled as they consumed the corpses of Sir Serrent's companions. "Where is your Lady? Your army is shattered. Your count is dead. Even now, you listen to the sounds of my ghouls feeding on the bones of your brothers! Those they do not consume will join my host and we shall reap our way through the mortals of this land!"

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In the face of the vampiress' tirade, Sir Serrent began mumbling a prayer. "Lady give me strength in this-"

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"She cannot hear you!" The creature's voice cut through the prayer like a knife. "She has no strength on this field, if she ever had any to begin with. You will die here, sir knight. A wight blade has wounded you. Even now, tiny slivers of evil work their way towards your heart. Whether I turn you over to my necromancers is of no matter. You're only chance for life is to accept my gift! Live eternally and become so much more than a lapdog to a weak and powerless goddess." The vampiress gestured towards the entrance of the silk pavilion. A misshapen hooded figure shuffled forward from the darkness of the tent. In its hands was a beautifully wrought golden goblet brimming with crimson liquid. "Here is your grail, sir knight, filled with my own blood. I am your lady, offering it to you in return for your loyal service. One sup from this and you will be stronger and faster than ever before. None will stand before your might and live. Death will have no hold on you."

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Sir Serrent stared disdainfully at the chalice. It was a mockery of his greatest moment, supping from the Grail one misty morning on the shores of Lake Redan. The thought of that cold morning, the visitation of his goddess, and the blessed taste of the waters of the true Grail strengthened Sir Serrent's soul.

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"You mock me beast. I told you, I do not fear death. My only duty is to the Lady and her people. If that duty ends here, so be it."

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"Oh yes," the creature frowned, tapping its fingers on the arm of its throne. "Oh very noble. I believe it was the philosopher knight Crusson who once said, the good shepherd lays down his life for the flock. How righteous." The tapping stopped for a second and the vampiress' frown slowly turned into a vicious grin. "Fine then, I shall give you the chance to fulfill your duty." With a snap of the creature's fingers, one of the undead soldiers stepped forward from the still silent ranks and thrust its ancient blade into the ground at Sir Serrent's feet. It was a magnificent weapon, long and single edged, with an emerald set in its pommel that reflected the green glow of Morrslieb in the most beautiful of hues. Despite the patina of age, the sword's edge seemed as sharp as if it was newly forged. The Grail Knight clenched and unclenched his fist as he looked at the weapon.

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"There is a blade, sir knight," the vampiress said disdainfully, "You may take it up if you wish. Attempt to strike me down. You will not succeed but you may try." Sir Serrent did not move to grab the sword. He knew beast's words were true. Even at his peak strength, with the fire of the Lady flowing strongly through his veins, he doubted that he could have defeated this opponent in single combat. Yet that would not stop him from doing his duty. As the only knight left among these monstrosities, he had no choice.

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"Lady give me strength," he whispered as he reached out towards the ancient sword.

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"But

wait, sir knight," the vampiress' words halted Sir Serrent's hand just as it was about to close on the wire grip of the blade. "There is one more thing." The creature's voice sounded like that of a cat looking down at a cornered mouse. "After we are done here, my undead host will march on Guscelin. With its defenders either feeding my army or filling its ranks, my horde will lay waste to that city and its people. We will defame the temples of your Lady and tear down the castle of the late count. I will personally feast on the blood of every child I find." The vampiress licked her lips with a narrow, blackened tongue. "It will be a most delicious slaughter." Sir Serrent hand closed around the hilt of the sword before him. He would make this creature pay for taunting him with its descriptions of its foul designs. By the Lady, it would pay.

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"And

yet," the vampiress continued even as Sir Serrent started to draw the sword out of the ground, "if you drink from my grail and join me in glorious undeath, I will halt my army here and return home to my keep. Guscelin will be spared." For the first time since he had been dragged before this monster, Sir Serrent's confidence faltered. The sword that he had hefted from the ground dipped back down to the earth as he stared incredulously at the vampiress. "Your words are lies, I cannot trust them!"

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"Oh

no, sir knight," the beast purred, "I do not lie. I swear on the blood of the Great Necromancer that flows through my veins that I will keep my promise to you. Despite what you may believe, my kind are not without honor. I was of the nobility once. Join me and Guscelin will live. The blood and service of a Grail Knight is worth more to me than a dozen petty townships. Now, what is a good shepherd to do?"Â

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Despite

the foulness of the vampiress, Sir Serrent could hear the sincerity in its voice. Faced with a terrible choice, the Grail Knight's grip on the ancient blade in his hand slackened. He looked away from the vampiress and up into the night sky, as if seeking some sort of sign of what he should do. There was no mercy to be had in the heavens. All he could see was the faint reflection of a mocking face in the vermillion orb of Morrslieb looking down on him. He brought his gaze back to earth, locking eyes with those of his tormentor. Silently, he mouthed a desperate prayer to the Lady asking for guidance.

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The mad cackling
of distant ghouls was his only answer.