



BECKONING BLOOD

DANIEL DE LORNE

This sick monster that wore his face

1390

Carcassonne, France

I

The pig refused to die. Thierry's blade only nicked the skin, but the animal bucked and fought beneath him. *Stupid, squealing creature.*

'Christ's balls!' his brother spat behind him. 'What's the matter with you?'

Thierry ignored him and readied the knife for a clean cut, waiting for the moment the swine calmed a little, hugging it tighter as it tried to pull away. Its bristled hide stabbed him like dried sticks through the grime and blood coating his chest, but he held on. The pig screamed louder.

Why wouldn't it just be silent?

A shadow fell in front of him, as much as a shadow could form in one of Carcassonne's abattoirs, where light barely penetrated the wooden slats that penned them in.

'Are you trying to kill it or fuck it?' Olivier said.

The other slaughterers chuckled, then Thierry's twin sighed, grabbing the pig's ear close to its skull, yanking the head up and plunging a knife into its neck. He sliced forward and out, blood spilling onto the stone floor as death shuddered through the pig's body. Thierry released the animal as it weakened and then stood when it collapsed to the floor.

He turned to his viscera-coated brother. 'I had it.'

'Like hell you did.' Olivier shook free the flecks of blood in his black hair and smiled a smile familiar yet so different to his own. One that said, *Admit it, you need me.*

They might have been twins, but Thierry knew *he* never smiled like that.

'Marcel, did Thierry have that pig?'

Marcel just laughed and went back to hanging the meat. The other workers snickered. Olivier smiled wider.

Thierry grabbed one of the pig's back legs and dragged it past his brother. When he got to the hooks, Marcel winked at him before going to pull in another animal. Thierry hoisted the carcass and slid a metal spike through it. Olivier's cut had been deep and the blood was mostly gone, but Thierry slit the throat wider to fully drain the animal, and then sheathed his blade by his waist.

He sensed his brother's eyes on his back, that questing gaze sliding up and down the gore and sweat on his skin. And then he felt that...*probing*...inside him. Not a gentle touch around the edges, rather the full hammering of Olivier's need to know what was going on inside his brother's mind. Deep breathing usually blocked his twin, but summer in the walled city was always bad, and here in the abattoir the air was stifling. Flies buzzed around the meat or landed on the men and bit into their flesh. He tried to breathe through his brother's intrusion, the hot, heavy stink filling his lungs doing nothing to prevent Olivier working the bond in deeper.

And Thierry knew, then, what he was really looking for.

Or who.

He turned and glared at Olivier who stood there, eyes bright even in the gloom, a liar's smile on his face, convinced he was getting closer to Thierry's secret.

Thierry snorted and headed out the back door to a yard filled with tethered beasts. The air there wasn't much fresher, but he sucked it in anyway and Olivier's presence lessened. It faded almost to nothing, and then another pig screamed.

A vacant smile didn't fool Thierry. The bond worked both ways, after all, and he was far more sensitive to it than his heavy-handed brother. As gentle as a forest stream, he travelled back up Olivier's diminishing connection and stole into his brother's thoughts and feelings. His twin boiled and Thierry boiled with him. The deeper he went, the closer to *one* he grew, until finally he could see through Olivier's eyes, feel the grip of his hand on the leather hilt of the butcher's blade, and smell the blood spraying onto his brother's chest. Underneath it all, arrogant and unguarded thoughts tumbled over one another.

Thierry. Thierry. Thierry...

He tried to swim out of his brother's surging thoughts, but the torrent swirled and caught him. Thierry kicked to get free, panicked, and fell onto buckled legs against the outside wall of the abattoir, sweat pouring down his forehead and neck. And now he forced himself to breathe deeper, just to prove he wasn't really trapped beneath the obsessive, greedy storm.

He didn't want to return to the abattoir, but Henri would be back soon and he'd know, just by looking at him, that Thierry hadn't done his share of the work today, and then he'd be as good as unconscious after the shouting was done.

God bless the Father.

He pushed off the wall and turned to go inside when the animals fell silent. All of them. No braying, no bleating. As if someone had shoved rags into their mouths.

The silence *pressed*.

Then something brushed his neck, subtle and discomfiting. Ugly enough to make him freeze when everything in him wanted to run. A gaze.

He wanted to believe it was Olivier, but his brother was inside, slaughtering. Though he couldn't be certain, because the link between them was suddenly as quiet as the animals in the yard. That alone chilled his blood.

Who watched him?

As quickly as it came, and before he could spin and peer into the shadowed recess between buildings, the sensation passed. The world breathed again and the animals returned to their calling, louder than before.

Yet the rank darkness of the abattoir didn't feel so hostile now.

He hurried back inside, his eyes taking a moment to adjust to the dim light. Olivier hunched over another pig, the muscles in his bare back tensing and relaxing as he sliced and gutted the animal. They had leather aprons, but in this heat it was better not to wear them.

Thierry had another reason not to wear his. Without it, he exposed the long, pink scar on his back that stretched from shoulder to hip.

Olivier stopped butchering and looked back at Thierry. 'What?'

The tension and evil of moments before — of whoever had been watching him — must have infected him, because he could feel the danger of his ill-advised words even as they crossed his lips.

‘Just admiring how perfect your back is,’ he taunted. He didn’t use this weapon often, knowing it would blunt. But today it was worth wielding.

Olivier threw his knife. It clanged as it struck the stone floor, blade first. The pig dropped with a sickening, wet thud and Olivier reared up to him.

‘Is the Devil fiddling your balls?’

‘Not at all, brother,’ he said, turning to get another pig from the pen. ‘I thought you liked being watched.’

Burn, my brother. B—

Thierry lurched forward with the force of his twin’s slam behind him. They crashed into the sty wall, splitting planks and spreading the foul, shit-covered straw amongst the swine. Thierry twisted under Olivier, swinging at his face. But his brother was quick and blocked his punch, grabbed his arms and pinned him.

‘You use *that* against me?’

‘He thought I was you,’ Thierry roared. ‘That cut was meant for you. If Aurelia hadn’t —

Olivier released him long enough to strike. In the moments before darkness, Olivier’s lips drew back in a snarl, his eyes glaring down like a knight’s lance. ‘I wasn’t even there.’

Thierry shook his head to dislodge the ringing in his ears.

‘I know,’ he spat. ‘You were off fucking while father peeled the skin off my back. *Your* back.’

And Henri hadn’t even broken a sweat, those club hands deft with the skills of a master butcher. One effortless swipe was enough to cause Thierry’s permanent disfigurement. Mercifully, Thierry was drunk, and only felt a spreading sting as his skin split like a sliced bladder. He had to thank God — or perhaps, their sister, Aurelia — that he hadn’t been crippled.

‘I couldn’t have known.’

Olivier tried to hold Thierry’s arms, but they slipped in the grime. Like a whimpering puppy, his brother’s remorse and sorrow nudged at Thierry’s chest through the bond.

Thierry pushed it away. ‘Do you know what he said to me after he’d finished? “You’re a disgrace, Olivier.”’ He poured his loathing into his words. ‘I’m sick of being mistaken for you, brother. We may look the same, but we are nothing alike. I won’t be tortured for your sins.’

Olivier sagged for a moment, offering enough time for Thierry to land a good punch. He fell back, dazed, away from the stall opening.

And a pig bolted.

Once one escaped, the rest followed.

‘Fuck!’ Thierry scrambled out from under his brother’s legs, out of the putrid straw, and gestured to the other workers. ‘After them.’

Olivier rose, rubbing his jaw. ‘Take your last breath,’ and Olivier’s mind clawed against him.

Thierry resisted as hard as he could. ‘Later,’ he grunted. ‘We need to catch the pigs before Henri returns.’

Eight escaped, but between all of them it took only minutes to herd the trembling swine back into a secure pen. As Thierry towed the last by its tail, a silhouette filled the doorway.

Henri d'Arjou was built taller and broader than his sons, with muscles upon muscles, a closely shaved head, and his scalp, face and body sporting the gouges and scars of his violent life. He never smiled but a skilful turn of his mouth showed the difference between displeasure and fury with only one result: a tirade of curses and fists.

From the doorway Henri honed in on Thierry, the only one stupid enough to still have a pig in his grasp. His hold started to give as his hands dampened. He wanted to fade into nothing.

And then Olivier stepped between them.

'Where have you been, Henri?' he accused.

Those cruel eyes refocused. One heavy, booted foot followed the other as he stamped his way towards Olivier. 'What did you say to me, maggot?'

'I said, where the *bloody hell* have you been? We're behind on the work and — '

Only Olivier's split-second dodge avoided the fist aimed squarely at his head.

'I'll beat you until you shit blood.'

'You can try, old man.'

Now he was out from under his father's gaze, a need to fight alongside his brother boiled within Thierry. But did it really come from him? Or was the burning in his intestines really his brother's excitement roused?

I will not help you.

The pig squealed as he gripped its tail harder to prevent himself relenting. Then he released it and followed it as it scabbled out the door, slipping in the blood and guts of its fellows.

He grabbed a tunic off a hook beside the entrance, wiping the muck from his skin as best he could, and staggered out into the littered streets. As his brother and father brawled in the abattoir, Thierry felt the rush of fist colliding with flesh through his entire body. He felt each and every blow: in his stomach, across his face, a kick to his legs. He sucked in deep breaths to calm himself, and shore up the borders of his mind and body before he collapsed in the gutter. He would be sore later, sick probably, especially as Henri planted that one final blow on Olivier's face.

He leaned against a wall and retched.

But he welcomed the nausea since his brother's unconsciousness brought peace.

The sweltering city offered little comfort. Thierry wandered, stinking of innards and death, weaving between the crowds.

They pushed and jostled and made no effort to let each other pass, as was the way in crowded Carcassonne. Thierry shoved back, staggering blindly until the residual weakness from Olivier's fight forced him to rest.

'Thierry? What's wrong?'

His sister ran to him through the crowd. They parted for *her*, he noticed. She placed a comforting hand on his back.

'I'm fine, Aurelia.'

The words sounded more like a gurgle.

'Etienne! Can you help him?'

His head snapped up as Etienne de Balthas offered his hand. Then he focused on the buildings around them and realised his blind escape had brought him straight here: straight to Carcassonne's apothecary.

His stomach lurched. *What was Aurelia doing with him?*

He forced himself straight before Etienne could touch him. 'I'm fine. I just felt strange for a moment.'

'You don't look well,' Etienne said. 'You should sit down.'

'Thank you, but I'm better now.' He turned his gaze to his sister, and voiced what he so urgently must know. 'What are you doing here?'

Her brilliant, green eyes fixed on him. 'I was asking Etienne's advice. What are you doing here?'

Despite being his younger sibling, she spoke to him like a mother — or how he imagined a mother should sound. Theirs had long been absent.

'Olivier,' Thierry replied. Nothing more was really required.

'Ahhh.'

He tried to concentrate on Aurelia, but being this close to Etienne when he was ragged and hurting made it near impossible. He stared at Etienne's hands, imagining them —

He shook his head.

'Do you feel better?' Etienne asked. His caring, soulful eyes filled with the concern of a healer. Or a brother. Or a lover.

'Much.' He pushed free. 'I must go. Henri will be hunting me.'

Brown eyes pinned him. 'So soon? I haven't seen you in a long time. It's been nice to talk with your sister.'

His skin prickled as if all of Carcassonne watched. He pushed away from the wall. Time he was gone.

'You must visit us,' Aurelia said to the healer. 'You know Father enjoys your company.'

Panic roared through Thierry's body. 'Aurelia, I'm sure Etienne doesn't want to waste his time with us.'

Etienne smiled briefly. 'Thank you, but I don't think Olivier would approve. We've never really got along.'

'Yes, I remember,' she said. 'Still, no reason we should be deprived of seeing you, just because of that oaf.'

'That's enough, Aurelia.' And then, to his left, 'She's sorry, Etienne.'

His sister held him with her emerald glare. 'I have nothing to be sorry for.'

Etienne laughed. 'Aurelia, stop by any time. You too, Thierry.' He nodded his head in farewell, glancing only momentarily at Thierry's hands and departed.

'What was that about?' he growled at Aurelia as soon as Etienne had entered his shop, gripping her elbow and propelling her through the crowd.

'What's the matter with you? I like Etienne. You used to like him once, remember?'

'That was a long time ago. Things change.'

'Yes, I'm aware of that. Now let go of my arm. You're hurting me.'

He released her to surge ahead of him. He needed to get far from Etienne and rearrange the shields inside his mind, but as he followed Aurelia's simmering resentment through the streets, thoughts trailed behind him, catching at his heels.

He swore. 'Henri's going to be angrier than a rutting bull deprived of a cunt,' he said as they reached the abattoir.

Aurelia snatched her arm out of Thierry's grip and took a deep breath. 'Leave it to me.'

She entered, and Thierry followed. Olivier lay passed out in a heap in the corner, left where he'd fallen. The other workers carried on as if nothing unusual had happened, every one of them knowing Henri would serve the same to anyone who moved to help.

The tyrant entered, dragging a wide-eyed cow behind him through the far door. He didn't acknowledge his children, but after he'd tied the keening cow to the wall he transformed into the monster they'd lived with all their lives and stalked towards Thierry.

'Where did you go?' he raged, raising his balled fist ready to strike.

Aurelia stepped between them, and placed a hand gently on his chest, right over his heart. 'Father, please, not now,' she said in a soft, soothing tone.

Bile tanged at the back of Thierry's throat as hardness blanketed his body, and he crouched, ready to push her out of the way if Henri reacted. He'd been down this road so many times. So had Aurelia.

But it wasn't necessary.

Henri awoke from his berserker's fury and peered down at his daughter. 'Yes, now!'

But the fire had gone.

'He's back,' she smiled, 'so there's no problem. Is there?'

A growl rumbled in his throat. He looked from his daughter to his son, and his eyes narrowed. He lowered his fists and rolled his shoulders, turning to the next cow to die. 'Get back to work.'

Thierry spun her around, her green eyes slightly dulled and tired as if she'd worked through the night. 'I never understand how you do that.'

She gave him a tight smile. 'Perhaps I remind him of mother.' She slid out of Thierry's grasp and headed to the door. 'Check Olivier isn't dead. I'll see you at home.'

She left, and in her wake, above the smell of meat and sweat and shit, wafted the subtle scent of orange blossom.