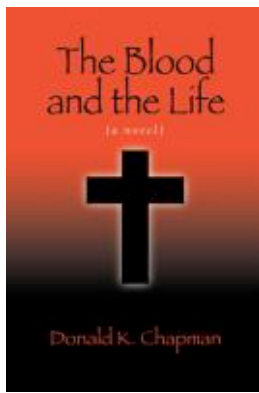


The Blood and the Life

{ a novel }



Donald K. Chapman



Rejected by his family, his village, and those he thought of as his brothers, a broken young man makes a desperate gamble and drinks the blood of Jesus as Christ dies on the cross. Transformed into a creature of the night with powers that elevate him to god-like status, Feranos pursues fulfillment of the empty space within himself as he grapples with what he has become and who he needs to be.

The Blood and the Life

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First Edition

The Blood and the Life

a novel

by

Donald K. Chapman

for my parents

Now

Feranos limped toward the cross, ignoring the glares of the man's disciples who were attending to weeping women. The lounging soldiers on either side of the three crosses watched as he approached; finally, as he neared the foot of the cross, one stood and barred his way with a spear, speaking in Latin a warning to stay back. Feranos stopped and knelt, as if he were one of the disciples. This seemed to placate the guard enough that he relaxed the spear.

Feranos looked up into the face of the man on the cross. In the strange, low light of this afternoon, he could see dirty, bloodily matted hair framing a gaunt face whose eyes were closed against pain. He was repeatedly muttering something Feranos couldn't make out. There was a crude ring of thorns on his head. Rivulets of blood trickled down his forehead and face where the thorns bit into his flesh. More trails of blood were visible on his sides. The scent of so much blood caught Feranos' nose and he inhaled deeply.

Finally.

A deep rumbling as thunder ran though the earth. Suddenly Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Feranos and the soldiers scrambled to their feet and backed away. The loneliness in the voice caught at Feranos' heart and he felt a sudden kinship with him. He stepped closer as Jesus bowed his head again. Jesus' breathing was deep, but ragged. Through the matted tendrils of his hair, Jesus' eyes peered out at Feranos. Again, the feeling that Feranos' soul was being laid bare overcame him. He tried to move, but was held captive in the unimaginable pain he saw in those eyes. Jesus attempted to raise himself, but pain rippled over his face and he slumped down, hanging by the nails in his hands.

"I thirst."

The words came from Jesus' parched lips so softly Feranos wasn't sure he had said anything until a guard stepped near him and extended to Jesus' lips a spear tipped with a sponge soaked in what smelled like

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vinegar. Jesus wet his lips from the sponge and his head hung again. Blood continued to run down the man's back.

A wash of pain ransacked Jesus' face as he raised his eyes toward the sky. "It is finished," he said, his eyes searching the sky for something Feranos could not see. The words Feranos had overheard, but not understood, at the Passover meal unexpectedly came to his mind as their eyes met again. *What you are going to do, do quickly.* Feranos moved to the foot of the cross, thrust out his hand, and collected a trickle of blood running down Jesus' side. Putting it to his mouth, Feranos took the blood into his body as Jesus once again cried out.

"Father! Into Your hands I commit my spirit!"

A thunderous crack came from the direction of the Temple. As if an immense curtain was being torn, a rip of power exuded from the cross as the blood touched Feranos' tongue, shuddering through his body and continuing down the hill into the city. Feranos tried to move, but found his limbs wouldn't respond to his commands. His eyes were locked on the body on the cross that was suddenly outlined by a ring of light burning brighter than a noonday sun. As Feranos absorbed the blood, Jesus' head dropped one last time and the power doubled. It blasted from the cross and Feranos was blown off his feet, landing heavily against a boulder. Rocks shook loose and went rolling down the hill. People fell to the ground. Boulders cracked. Above, the heavens erupted with fire. Lightning crackled over the place of a skull. Thunder exploded around the city and the ground itself shook. Feranos rolled over and sheltered himself with his cloak against the storm that had suddenly made the day bright again. A great wind came upon the hill, sending dirt and sand whipping into his eyes, scourging his unprotected arms, blasting ankles and feet raw.

Then it was calm.

Feranos tried to calm himself as he found he was breathing heavily. He waited a moment before attempting to see. When he raised his head, he looked directly at the cross and Jesus' body hanging from it. There was no life in that body now, but a sudden, unnatural fear of that cross overtook him. His eyes widened and he felt colder than he ever had. He tried to take his eyes from the cross, but he couldn't. The longer he

stared, the deeper the fear became. Laced with the fear was a sense of . . . what? Loneliness? No. Emptiness. But an emptiness he had never felt, an emptiness even deeper than what had brought him to Jerusalem.

The longer he stared, the deeper the fear became. Then the fear became pain as the image of Jesus' eyes appeared in his mind. He blinked and saw the outline of the cross image flash beneath his eyelids. He closed his eyes and the cross was there, hovering, it seemed, just in front of his eyes. Pain erupted in his skull and he covered his head again with his cloak.

But this pulled the material from around his legs, which suddenly felt as if they were on fire. Feranos moved frantically to try and cover himself from the burning afternoon sun. He stared at his hands as they began to redden and then blister. His legs began to crisp and he slapped at the places he was burning. A blister appeared on his face and burst with a shock of pain so intense he screamed. The weeping people around him looked at him, some with fear, some with anger. The pain continued, both from the sun and from the image in his mind, ripping into Feranos, sending him into convulsions. He staggered to his feet and fled.

*

Ferano collapsed on the pallet in his room at the inn. The sprint through the city had almost robbed him of the skin he now wanted only to cool. Each time the sun touched him, it burned. He had tried to keep covered, but there was only so much he could do with one robe. In a stall at the marketplace, he had snatched another robe from a hanging rack and ran, ignoring the calls of "Thief!" behind him. He let his own robe fall into normal place, covering most of his legs, and pulled the new cloak over his head. That had given him some relief, but there were still patches left bare. And those patches now burned even though he was inside. He pulled at his clothing, ripping it off and wincing at the areas it rubbed against his raw skin. Falling off the cot, he crawled to the bowl of tepid water on the bedside table and poured its contents over himself. It did nothing to cool the heat. He fell back onto the bed, suffering and blaming the Hebrew god for doing this to him.

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For that is what he knew had happened. In his anger, the Hebrew god had punished Feranos for what the Jewish priests and the Roman occupiers had done to the god's son. It was not fair and Feranos hated the god for it. He hated Jesus, as well, for bringing him to this city of Jerusalem, calling to him with the promise of strength if only he would take Jesus' blood, tempting him with the powers that would unfold if the blood of a god coursed through him.

And hating the god and his son, Feranos fell asleep to nightmares.

Part I

Chapter One

Then

From his hiding place, the boy watched as the headman walked about his yard, clucking to the chickens he was trying to herd back into their coop. The birds flapped and crowed erratically, evading the portly leader of the village until he sat down in the shade of an olive tree and wiped his brow.

Pathetic, the boy thought, crouching lower behind the bush and biding his time. Soon, he knew, the headman would give up on controlling the chickens as he always did and head to his house, sending one of his many sons to finish the job he had begun. The boy himself had done that work for the lazy headman many times. When the headman went inside, then the boy would move. It wouldn't be difficult. He would quickly snatch up a pair of the prized birds, leap the fence on the other side of the yard and continue through the woods until he came to the hills south of the village. There, he would hide in his cave, the one no one else knew about, and prepare the chickens to eat.

His stomach growled and he put a hand there to calm it, fearful that the sound, much too loud in his ears, had traveled to alert the headman. But the older man simply sat there berating the chickens.

It had been far too long since the boy had eaten, far too long for any of his family. He was going to end that today, as soon as the headman went inside. There wouldn't be much time before one of the sons came out, so he would have to be quick. When he was fully fed and healthy, the boy knew no one in the village could outpace him. But it was much different now; he was sure he was not as quick. He only hoped he would be quick enough, for the headman was severe in his punishments for breaking his law of the village.

He had no choice.

After his father had died, his mother had struggled to gather enough food for her large family. The village had taken pity on them for a while, but then the rains had refused to come and the rest of the

villagers had been forced to see to their own needs, leaving his mother without hope. She had sent one of his younger brothers to another family who needed a worker, but that did little to feed the rest of her children. The eldest son worked as hard as he could in the fields for their family and his sisters helped as much as they could, but there was only so much any of them could do.

Little by little, the boy had learned to take less and less from the table, saving it for his mother or his sisters, until he was listless most days, receiving in return for his lack of productivity in the fields beatings from the men in charge of the work that left him even more unable to work.

The hunger pulled at him from the inside, demanding it be satisfied. He looked down at his middle and nodded, whispering, "Yes, soon. I will fill the empty place." *And not just with grains or leaves or bark. It will be filled with the best chickens in the village.*

The headman finally stood and plodded toward his house. The boy readied himself and as soon as he heard the headman call out, he ran out from his hiding place.

The many times he had worked for the headman as a younger child served him well as the chickens, quick as they were, were unable to evade him. He ran through the yard, grabbed a bird by the neck with each hand, and leapt the short stone fence, continuing into the woods on the other side.

*

In his cave in the hills south of the village, he crouched by the small fire he had stoked, rotating the plucked birds on the simple spit fashioned earlier while he had planned his theft. The smell of the roasting meat filled his nostrils, making its way into his stomach where the hunger wakened and seemed to leap out of his body.

Soon.

Soon the meat would be done and he would satisfy his need. It wouldn't do to eat the meat before it was fully cooked; he knew of the dangers if one ate a chicken before it was ready. No, he could wait a few more minutes.

Besides, he needed to be careful not to eat all the meat; there was enough there for his family to all have a portion, to keep them strong for at least a while. His mother would probably ask him where he got such birds, but he knew he couldn't tell her. She would be ashamed.

But that would be better than starving.

He turned the spit one more rotation and stopped, tenderly touching the meat to see if it was done. He nodded. The bird's juices crackled on the fire, sending tantalizing aromas into the air. Carefully, almost reverently, he moved the spit to a cooling stone and slid the birds off the spits. He calmed himself and sliced a portion with the small knife he carried. Blowing on it, he couldn't help himself and tossed it into his mouth before it cooled.

The heat was intense, but the flavors overcame it. The meat almost melted on his tongue. As he chewed, he closed his eyes in bliss; it had been so long since he had tasted something such as this, even since before his father died. They had never had such fine animals, and he sliced off another portion and ate quickly, trying to savor it while also trying to fill his stomach as quickly as possible. The headman had always had fine birds, the best in the village. It was his due, his father said, for being the leader of the village through good times and bad. The boy didn't think that was fair; his father had toiled far more than the headman each time the rains came so the village could have food for the winter. His father, his brothers, and he had worked far harder each time something threatened or destroyed parts of the village, while the headman simply stood around and directed those who actually toiled. *It wasn't fair*, he thought, dropping the knife and ripping another piece and shoving it in his mouth. It wasn't fair the headman should get so fat and healthy while his family wasted away. For what? What made a headman, anyway? He swallowed and ate more. A headman was just a man, nothing more. It wasn't as if he were all-powerful or could make others do what he wanted. Except he could, the boy knew, feeding himself with both hands now; the headman made others do his work for him all the time. How? One day the boy would know how to do that and then he would be the headman, getting fat and happy while others worked around him.

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He stopped and looked down at the birds. There was nothing left but bones. *No*, he thought, turning the carcasses over and searching for the meat he was supposed to take back home. Nothing. Scared, he looked up at the cave entrance, as if he expected his mother to appear and demand the meat he had promised. But he hadn't promised. No. No one knew of what he had done. But it was all gone. He was supposed to have taken meat home to his family.

But it felt so good to have a full stomach. He lay back against the wall of the cave, resting his hands on his distended belly. A great belch rumbled up from his gut and he let it out, hearing it echo. He laughed, surprised at such a sound coming from his own lips, a sound he hadn't heard in a long time.

*

The next morning, he walked along the dusty trail to his family's dwelling, holding his belly. The hunger had gone away for a while, but when he had awakened, it was back, as if he had never eaten. No, that was not accurate; there was a pain in his stomach that hadn't been there, as if the chickens were getting revenge for taking their measly lives for a half-day's worth of satiation. Now he was not only hungry, but in pain, and he staggered down the path wondering if it had been worth it.

But he knew it had been. The few hours of having a full belly and not having to ignore the hunger gnawing at him had been bliss. His stomach had gurgled at him appreciatively as he lay in the cave licking his fingers of the juices and fat. It had felt so good to be full and he had drifted off into a sleep so deep he hadn't realized until he awoke that he had lost almost an entire day to sleep. That hadn't been much of a problem, but then as he sat there looking about him trying to get his bearings and remember what he had done, his stomach had growled at him.

As he neared his family's dwelling, he noticed there were more people than were normally there. That wasn't a good sign, especially as he recognized one of the headman's sons standing watch outside the small gate to his mother's tiny garden. He thought of ducking into the

shrub brush to the side of the trail, but the son looked his way too quickly and shouted back towards the hut. The faces of the villagers all turned to look his way and he stopped in the middle of the trail.

Coming out from behind the crowd, a furious look on his face, the headman shouted at the boy to come nearer and when he simply stood there, he dispatched his youngest son to bring the boy closer. At that, the boy turned and ran. He knew he was the fastest in the village and it would be difficult to catch him, but the boy hadn't counted on his belly betraying him. After only a few strides, the pain stabbed at his stomach and made him double over, clutching at his middle. The son caught up to him and grabbed him by the neck, pulling him upright. At that, the boy vomited what little remained in his stomach. The son dropped him to the ground with a look of disgust and tried to brush off his robe. He heard a cry from behind him and then felt the arms of his mother around him.

"For goodness' sake," he heard his mother say as she hugged him close and kept him from toppling over into the dirt. "What do you think you're doing to my boy? Look what you've done to him!"

He felt her turn him towards her and looked up into her face to see the worried expression he knew so well. "Are you okay, my son?" she asked, cupping his face in her hands and looking him over for signs of injury. He weakly shook his head. "What's wrong? Did he hit you?"

Another weak shake of the head was all he could respond with, so she picked him up and carried him back through the crowd to their hut, placing him on his thin bed of ferns. She sent one of his sisters through the crowd gathered outside of their home to the well to bring him water and wiped at the sweat that was shining on his forehead.

"What have you been up to?" she whispered to him, seemingly not expecting an answer as she took the cup from the girl and held it to his lips. He took a bit of the water, but it stung his stomach and he refused any more. "You must drink, my son."

"Is he going to die?"

His mother turned from him to regard the headman. "I do not know. I would doubt it, unless your son beat him so badly –"

"My son didn't touch the boy until he threw up," said the headman, waving his large arms towards the indicated son. "We all saw it."

"I didn't," she said.

"But we did, and that's all we need to know my son didn't beat your son. My son was apprehending him."

"Apprehending? What is he, a criminal?"

"He may very well be."

"Absurd."

"As I said when I came over, madam, there are two of my chickens missing. I want to know what happened to them." The headman turned and motioned towards the other villagers. "I've asked everyone else what they were doing when the chickens went missing. Everyone else has told me where they were. Everyone except your son. I need to know what he did with my chickens."

"How do you know he took them? You don't know that."

The headman drew himself up and looked down at her. "I have a very good idea that he did. Make the boy answer me."

"I will not."

"You will, madam. It's the law."

"Your law."

"Yes, my law," he said, nodding. "The same law that has kept this village safe and prosperous for so long." He looked back at the doorway to the mass of faces peering in and raised his voice. "The law that everyone else in this village abides by and the law you will submit yourself and the boy to."

His mother looked at the nodding heads and murmured assents from the villagers. Shaking her head, she turned back to him. He could see now how worried she was. He knew she was thinking of how she could keep him from answering yet still remain in the village if she defied the headman. Raising a hand, he gestured to her. "It's okay, mama, I'll answer."

A look of struggle moved across her worn features.

"It's okay," he said again.

"You don't have to answer him," she began, but he shook his head.

"Mama, it's alright. I know what I did and you shouldn't be forced out of the village because of something I did."

She frowned and a tear formed in her eye. "Please say that you haven't –" she started, but she was interrupted by the headman.

“Well, am I going to have satisfaction?”

His mother turned to him and nodded, helping the boy sit up. He faced the headman and said, “What do you want to know, sir?”

The headman stabbed a finger at him. “Don’t play coy. What happened to my chickens?”

For a long moment, the boy said nothing. “I took them,” he then said simply, eliciting a gasp from the crowd and a stunned look on his mother’s face that was, surprisingly, mirrored on the headman’s face.

“Well,” the headman said. “I guess . . . that is . . .”

“He should be punished,” the headman’s eldest son said.

“Well, perhaps, perhaps,” said his father. The headman crouched down to the boy’s level. “That depends. Where are the chickens, boy? Take me to them and I’ll go easy on your punishment.”

“I can’t, sir,” he said.

“Why not?”

“They’re no longer alive.”

“What?” the headman yelled.

“Your chickens are dead, sir.”

“And how did that happen, boy?”

“I killed them.”

More stunned gasps from the crowd and the headman stood up again. “Well, there you have it,” he said, turning with arms wide until he had made a full circle and stared at the boy again. “He admits it.”

“Of course I do,” the boy said, which brought frowns from the people.

“And what did you do with the chickens once you killed them?” the headman asked, even though it looked to the boy as if the man knew what he was going to say.

“I ate them.”

Beside him, he heard his mother crying softly. He knew what such an admission meant to her and their place in the village, but he couldn’t deny what he had done. “And I’ll tell you one other thing, sir,” he said, beckoning the headman closer. When he had bent down again, the boy said, “They were delicious,” and laughed.

Chapter Two

Long after the lash wounds had faded into scars, the boy still smiled at the headman's reaction to his laughter. Even while he endured the lashing, he had kept laughing, and not just to keep his mind off the pain. His mirth had dwindled with each stroke until he was more merely puffing out breaths of air than actually laughing as the headman, sweating and breathing hard, had finally tossed the lash to one of his sons and walked off. The boy had waited for the son to continue, but when no more strikes came, he allowed himself to relax.

That is when the pain had come to him full force and he found himself crying in the darkness as the sun set around the small, dusty village square and the post to which he had been tied. He had been glad of the dark, of the cooling evening air replacing the hot sun on his back. The darkness had allowed him to cry in solitude, knowing others would have gone home to their beds when the headman left.

Even his mother.

The hurt in her eyes had been more painful to him than the lashes. But the chickens had been so good and he had wanted the food so badly. The wounds would heal and he would learn his lesson, as far as the rest of the village would think.

Now, as he remembered the headman's frustration at not being able to stop his laughter, he allowed himself a small smile, keeping it very small, lest others see him while he toiled in the wheat fields and think he was reliving the event and that he had not changed his ways. He had suffered along with the rest of the village in the lean year before last, not raising even his eyes to the headman when he came waddling by, showing the proper amount of respect. He had learned to do without much food, taking the best he was offered at mealtimes and stealing what food he could while in the fields to keep himself strong. The few years had been good to him; he was among the tallest of the village boys his age and was even bigger than one of the headman's sons. Soon, he would not have to bow and scrape to anyone, not even the headman. Perhaps when he was old enough, he would challenge the

headman for leadership of the village, lashing the old man with his own whip when he lost. When his mother and family moved into the headman's home and cast out the sons and wives, he knew that it would have been worth the groveling he was doing now.

Bending again, he grabbed hold of the wheat stalks and sliced through just above the ground, grateful that the rains had been plentiful this year. He tossed the bunched stalks on the ground next to others, their heads all pointing in the same direction. All along the rows, he could see the bent backs of the villagers in the fields, moving about the stalks in their different jobs. The young men such as he were scything the stalks and laying them down for the young women to come along and bind in sheaves for curing. This early part of the harvest was looking to be a good one, which boded well for the later weeks in the season. Even some of the older ones were helping in the fields now, to get everything they could before the crop would go bad. Perhaps this year they would all have plenty to eat. He stood to stretch his back.

She was coming towards him.

Another row over, collecting the bunches and biding them before putting them in her basket, she stopped to chat with the others in the field alongside him. Staring, he watched as she moved, bending this way and that, her long legs browned by the summer sun in contrast to the dirty white skirt she had drawn up against the heat. When she stopped to run a calloused hand across her forehead and push the hair from her eyes, she looked at him. He felt a pull at his insides as she smiled and nodded at him. Since the beginning of this year's growing season, she had been the only one in the village to smile at him. When she had first done so, he had been amazed, but also strangely drawn to her, even though he had not given much thought to her when they were children. Nodding back, he motioned to the piles of wheat behind him.

A few more steps and she was close, passing by him so near he could smell the lavender she used to wash her hair in the river. *That beautiful hair that always seems to smell fresh, despite how long she worked in the fields.* Inside his pants, he felt something else pull at him and he shifted his stance so she couldn't see. While she didn't know he had watched her bathe on countless occasions, she did know he found her attractive. Perhaps that was why she bent near him more closely

than she did the other young men in the fields, almost rubbing against him. She looked up at him shyly, with a twinge of something else in her expression, something he wanted.

"Pardon me," she said, the parched, rough sound of her voice familiar to him, yet so different from the way the other workers sounded, so alive.

"Of course," he said, keeping her eyes with his the entire time. He smiled and she returned it.

Then the headman came down the rows, yelling at his daughter to keep moving. With a disappointed and apologetic look, she dipped her head in her father's direction and moved past, the sweet smell of her hair lingering for a moment before the musty smell of the earth returned.

The headman stopped beside him and glared at him. The young man let the smile slip from his face as he turned to face the older man. He was now able to look at the headman directly, without having to crane his neck. This was a small victory, one he didn't allow to show in his expression. One day he would be able to challenge the headman, but not now. The headman still had quite a few pounds, mostly of fat but some of the old muscle that must have had made him an impressive sight in his youth. Now was not the time, he knew. Ducking his head in deference to show the headman he had learned his lesson, he stood there until the headman moved off. He smiled and then he bent again swing the scythe.

*

Days later, he saw her again. She was with a few of the other village girls enjoying the cool of the evening after they had all finished their work in the fields. The days were starting to become shorter now; it was a good thing they had a good start on the harvest. It seemed to him there would be an early cold, perhaps even a freeze before too long. When that happened, his opportunities would grow fewer as she spent more of her time indoors, away from the cold.

He couldn't wait until spring.

When he passed close by, he nodded to the passel of girls as expected and looked at her more closely. The summer sun had done wonders to her skin and hair, touching her cheeks with a blush of copper and placing streaks of honey-colored light among the darkness of her locks; she watched him with bright eyes from under dark lashes. A small smile came to her lips and she nodded at him.

"Hello," she said simply.

But it was more than just a greeting. The look she gave him as he passed by stirred him again. He said, "Good evening," and moved past her. A few steps away, he turned and looked over his shoulder. She was watching him and he smiled, hoping she received the message he was trying to send her. He turned and continued up the village street, past his home and into the hills beyond, heading for the cave.

*

When he heard the soft step of her foot, he jerked upright from where had been lying. She was silhouetted against the dim western light as the sun sank behind her. He could see the dark outline of her body against the simple white outfit she wore. Wisps of her hair moved from the gentle breeze that ran out though the cave from somewhere deep inside where he believed it connected to the other side of the hills.

"Are you there?" her voice came in a whisper.

"Depends on who you are looking for," he said, matching her whisper.

A soft laugh came from the opening of the cave as her eyes adjusted to the dim light and she saw him sitting against the wall. "Then I guess you are here," she said, stepping in a distance and looking about. "This is a nice cave . . ."

He stood and went to her, making a complete circle around her. Breathing in her scent, he nodded. "Yes, for a cave, it's not bad," he said, stepping closer until he could feel the heat from her body. She turned and looked up at him.

"Do you come to this cave a lot?" she asked, making no attempt to back away from him. He put his hands on her shoulders and ran them down the lengths of her arms. "I didn't know it was up here."

“One of my secrets,” he said, moving his hands back up her torso, but not touching her. She drew in a breath when they passed over her breasts; he touched her face and ran a finger along her hair.

“Do you have a lot of secrets?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” he said, their lips close. In the dark that had now fallen across the cave, her scent was powerful. He breathed it in and shivered. She must have moved closer, for he could feel her shiver as well.

And then their lips met.

The touch was soft and gentle, but then turned hard as she pressed into him. He put his arms around her and drew her closer. The stirring in his loins grew and he groaned as he enlarged and touched her. She pulled back from him; he looked and saw she was gazing down at him. Shyly, she reached a hand down between his legs and cupped his genitals. He grew again and couldn’t help pushing his hips forward.

“My,” she said, her breath short and clipped. He pulled her to him again and crushed his mouth against hers, forcing his tongue between her lips and exploring her mouth. She responded by tightly grasping his member. She raised a leg to circle his hip as he cupped her bottom. He slipped a hand under her dress; she responded by biting his lip. The warmth from between her legs drew him and he caressed her there, feeling her push against his hand as he explored in the dark. She shuddered as he found the soft folds and moved a finger there, stroking. Her head fell back as she arched against him, her own hand moving around him. He felt a slickness start and overtake his finger and he slid it into her. She cried out. He stopped and looked at her as the sound echoed through the cave.

“Did I hurt you?” he said, his voice hoarse.

She shook her head and then bit her lip, grasping him tightly. He picked her up to move her against the wall of the cave. She pulled at the strings of his pants while he fumbled to raise up the hem of her dress. Picking her up, he felt a cool chill over his member as she released it and then the warmth of her hand as she guided him towards her. He could feel the warmth of her need as he stood between her spread legs.

Then there was a step at the mouth of the cave.

And then a shout of alarm.

They both turned to look and saw her father standing there, her brothers and other men of the village behind him.

“No!” the boy shouted, moving closer to her even as she tried to hide herself. “No.” He pushed, trying to find the warmth that just seconds ago had been so close. She pulled away from him, shouting something and pushing down her dress as large, strong hands grabbed him by the shoulders. “No!” He struggled against the men pulling him away from her, his erection bobbing as he reached for her.

Then there was a strike to his head and he fell to the floor of the cave.

*

The flogging this time didn’t end when the headman tired; his sons took over, and then other men of the village. He had no laughter to keep his mind off the pain and he cried openly long before the headman had given his last stroke of the lash. When at last the lash stopped, he was a bleeding mess of flesh, strips of his skin hanging from him and curling in the dirt as he lay on the ground. He hung from the chains binding his wrists to the post, having no strength.

“Let this be a lesson to everyone,” came the headman’s voice through the haze of pain clouding his mind. “Rape will not be tolerated.”

In a corner of his mind, he wanted to shout out that it hadn’t been rape, that she had wanted it, too, but his mouth wouldn’t work. He wished at that moment the headman’s daughter would stride forward, putting herself between him and the village, and profess her love for him, claiming that it wasn’t rape.

But she didn’t. As he hung there, he knew she was thinking of her reputation. He wondered if they would lash her as they had him if they knew.

And he wished they would.

“Take him down,” he heard the headman say.

The Blood and the Life

Rough hands grabbed him and unshackled his wrists from the post. He knew that where they were touching him hurt, but he couldn't distinguish that from the pain on every other part of his body.

"Take him to the outskirts of the village and drop him there. Let the vultures have him."

He heard a gasp and a cry of "No!" he thought may have come from his mother, but it was stifled as he was lifted and hauled out of the town square. The men carrying him made no attempt to lessen the pain or discomfort caused by the trek across the rocks and hills; he didn't cry out only because he had nothing left. Tears were dry inside his eyes and his body seemed to have stopped feeling anything.

They dropped him on the dusty ground and turned without a word. He lay there, waiting for someone, anyone, to come back and leave him some water or some food or to perhaps cover him for the night, but when he began to shiver over the pain and managed to open his eyes and see only darkness, he knew he was alone.

*

Thirst forced him to his feet through the lingering pain; he didn't know how many days, if any, had passed. With parched lips and a dry throat, he stumbled up the path, not knowing in which direction he headed, but hoping it was away from the village. But if he ended up back in his village, perhaps they would take mercy on him this time and simply end his life. As much as he wanted revenge upon the headman, he couldn't return. Not now. Not after his failure. He stumbled and almost fell. *Not like this*. It was all he could do to keep himself on his feet, bent, one slow step after another.

Instead of returning him, the path grew on before him far past where he had dimly thought the village would appear had he gone in that direction. He shuffled along, each step jarring the wounds, some crusted with dirt, all with dried blood. The pain was becoming a background sensation to him as he moved, but he was becoming accustomed to it. The tightening skin pulling at him still hurt, but was more a manageable ache than the constant lance it had first been.

When he came across the small stream, he cried. Falling on his knees, he lapped up the water as quickly as he could; he tried to keep from drinking too much, since he knew that could cause him more internal pain, but he couldn't stop. He finally sat back on his knees and allowed the water to fill his stomach, cooling him. Gingerly, he cupped water in his hands and began washing his face. When the water ran down his chin onto his chest, it stung the wounds. He didn't want to face the pain of washing away the dirt and grime, but knew if he didn't, the wounds would fester and be much worse than how it would feel to clean them now.

But the knowledge of what he had to do didn't lessen the pain.

When he awoke, after passing out as he had tried to wash his back, he dipped his head in the stream and held it there for as long as he could. The cold water brought him back to himself and he gritted his teeth to bear the pain of cleaning his wounds. With each stroke of his hand against his punished skin, he cried out first in tears, but eventually in anger, directing his pain at the men who had flayed his skin. No, not them, though they, too, would pay for what they had done to him some day. It was at the headman, the one in charge of the village, the one who sometimes decided who ate and who starved, the one who decided who did right and who did wrong that he aimed his pain. Who was he to decide for others? It was his daughter, who enticed him with her looks and body in the fields, who abandoned him and led him to the lashing. It was they who would feel his wrath. He had been too weak to protect himself then. He would not be weak again.

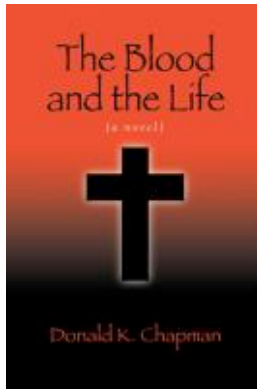
With his wounds clean and stinging and with his clothes in tatters about him, he walked past the stream to where the path brought him to another village. Dusk was misting the air and he crept into a hiding place at the edge of the dwellings where he waited and watched. When he deemed it safe to continue, he stole quietly to a pig shack near one of the fields and found a place to sleep, resting for the first time since the lashing in something approaching comfort.

*

The next day when the people of the village went out to work the fields, he stole into a house and rummaged until he found a shirt that fit him. Keeping to the shadows and back ways, he returned to the pig shack at the edge of the village. He coaxed a nursing sow to the feeding trough with food he found nearby in a bucket. When the sow was busy eating, he returned to the piglets. Quickly, he snatched one from the straw-covered pen and broke its neck. He looked back at the sow and waited for it to scream at him, but its attention was on the slop. Heading back to the stream, he followed it up into the hills until it disappeared into a rock face. When he found a small cave, he took the pig there and cooked it, savoring the moist meat. He was more careful now than he had been with the chickens and stored some of the meat deep in the cave. It wouldn't be difficult, he thought, to live in the cave for a while. The villagers wouldn't know what was happening if he were careful, for the cave was a far enough distance from the village that he would be able to lose anyone trying to follow him, if they ever saw him taking whatever he wanted from them.

And he would take whatever he wanted from them. He would no longer exist on an empty belly or with his head bowed before others. He would not yearn for what only one other could offer him, only to have it ripped from him at the last moment. How many boys had she done that to, he wondered. It didn't matter; she wouldn't do it to him again. No woman would. He spat into the dark recesses of the cave, sending his feelings with his spittle. He was through with her.

He was through working for others. The headman had taught him well, he thought. Whatever he needed, he would now simply take. He had learned well the lesson of being the strongest, the most ruthless, the most uncaring. If others wept or starved because of what he took from them, he would not care. They were lesser than he and so deserved whatever he did to them. Compassion was weakness.



Rejected by his family, his village, and those he thought of as his brothers, a broken young man makes a desperate gamble and drinks the blood of Jesus as Christ dies on the cross. Transformed into a creature of the night with powers that elevate him to god-like status, Feranos pursues fulfillment of the empty space within himself as he grapples with what he has become and who he needs to be.

The Blood and the Life

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