

# FEALTY

## S. Andrew Swann

S. Andrew Swann is a long-time resident of Cleveland, Ohio, who has been writing professionally for the past fourteen years. He has published over sixteen novels under various pseudonyms, and this is his fourth short story publication.

**T**HE HALL WAS long, dark, and cold. Stone vaults arched overhead, and windows high on the walls let in no light. A circle of black candles cast an unsteady light around the armored figure of Rossal de Molay. He knelt inside the circle, head down before the pommel of his sword, which he held cruciform before him. His armor creaked as he raised his head from his sword, to face the two men in front of him.

One man was dressed in the rich robes of nobility. Jewels on his doublet glinted in the candlelight, and a smile emerged from a beard that was full, greasy, and black. The other was old and hairless and wore the plain black robes of a monk.

“Exceptional,” said the noble. He took a step forward. “And, please tell, what is your name?”

De Molay paused, searching his memory for a response. Smile frozen, the man in the doublet cast a sidelong glance at the monk.

“I am Rossal de Molay, recently returned from Antioch.” A strange slowness seemed to infect his mind. Too long in the heat of the desert, too long marching through the mountains, too long without enough food and water. Better men than himself had gone mad on the journey to the Holy Land....

“And do you know who I am?” The noble’s question broke the fragile chain of memory. Again de Molay had to pause, to think.

The monk muttered something too softly for de Molay to hear. Almost in response to the utterance, recognition came. “Of course, you are Robert, Duke of Normandy, heir to the Crown of England, my lord and master.”

De Molay’s lord and master shook his head and turned toward the monk. “You have surpassed my expectations.”

The monk smiled as well and his eyes glinted like polished stones. “I am here to serve you. Lord...Robert.” He turned toward de Molay. “And now that we have called him, so is he.”

“Come forward.” The noble gestured to de Molay.

De Molay stood, and stepped out of the circle. When his foot crossed the ring of candles, he had the briefest confusion. How come I to be here? When was it I returned from the siege of Antioch?

Doubt, however, was overcome by duty when Robert, Duke of Normandy, told him of a heresy brewing in their own lands. Robert, the Pope, and God were calling de Molay to service again.

The night was dark and moonless, the air still and cold. On the path ahead of him lay the town. Home to an evil as vile and godless as the Saracens that had claimed the Holy Land, as dangerous as anything he had fought in Antioch.

The villagers, to a child, held to the Cathar heresy.

To de Molay, Catharism was a novel sin. A doctrine that denied the Trinity, denied the physical presence of Christ on earth, and not only denied the divinity of the God of Moses, but equated Him with the Devil.

The Pope himself had called a new Crusade to wipe this abomination from the earth. And it was de Molay's duty to serve his Lord Robert, the Pope, and God.

He did not question the wisdom of sending one man against a whole village. Nor did he question his ability to do what he was called upon to do. He had seen what God's will could move men to do. He had, with his own eyes, seen a humble monk bear the spear that had pierced the side of Christ, and lead a few dozen starved and starving knights to defeat a fresh force that outnumbered them tenfold.

He had seen that battle, the last one at Antioch.

Anything was possible to someone touched by the hand of God. And after praying with Lord Robert's monk, de Molay knew he was carried in the palm of God, here to wipe the Cathar stain from the land.

He walked the snow-covered road, toward the village. As he walked, his boots melted the snow.

Small wisps of steam rose from his footprints.

De Molay quietly pushed in the door of the first house. Inside, a family slept, a man, a woman, a boy, an infant. He slew the infant first, to keep its cries from waking the others.

Only the woman managed to make a sound, a shocked intake of breath as de Molay's sword pierced her chest. She never exhaled.

De Molay's footprints smoldered as he left the small house. Where he touched the door on the way out, the bloody imprint of his gauntlet began to smoke.

He did not turn as the house erupted into flame.

De Molay could remember Antioch, the glorious awful day when the siege broke the walls, when thousands of Christian men, half-mad from months of heat and hunger, stormed through the streets of the city that had been home to the first Christian church. Knights slew men, women, children...

De Molay had slain, men, women, children...

By dawn, the walls had glistened with the blood of the slain. No one could walk except to step over corpses.

Cathars fell to de Molay's sword, three and five at a time. Buildings burned at his touch. As he

passed, livestock fell to the ground, dead. His sword arm glistened with the blood of the wicked. He was all the plagues of Pharaoh, the Wrath of God personified. The population ran from him, and he followed, unhurried.

He laughed when he saw the women and children retreat to their unholy church, as if their false god could protect them from the sword of the righteous.

He laughed...

And stopped.

Something was wrong.

The church was the only stone building in the village. It was also the only building not yet burning. De Molay faced the church, a wall of flames at his back, his bloodstained mail steaming in the heat. His shadow danced ahead of him, across the graveyard, to paint the church's doorway with darkness.

The church was like nothing he had seen before. Peaked arches enclosed the doorways, and a circular window of colored glass glowed red above the entrance. Grotesque statues, monsters and skeletons, covered the exterior. Surely, this was a cathedral of hell itself!

But a statue of Christ and his apostles stood above the entrance.

A false Cathar Christ.

De Molay shook his head. When did someone build such a church? He was looking at decades of work. Could it take so long to suppress a heresy?

Yes. It could. The Infidel held Jerusalem for centuries before the Pope called for its liberation. The Pope was not God. The Pope could be fallible.

"No," de Molay whispered in a puff of fog. Such doubts were a direct assault on his faith. It was faith that kept him in motion, allowed him to act God's terrible will....

God's will.

His memory was a fog. He had been in Antioch. How come he to be here, back in Normandy? His last memory before this evening was the miraculous charge from the gates of Antioch, led by the Holy Lance. He was there when the Saracen reinforcements were defeated. They had felt his sword.

He had felt theirs...

"How long?"

When did he return from battle?

Wrapped in the smell of smoke and blood, de Molay walked across the graveyard and knelt down at a marker. Heat from the fire had melted the snow from its surface. It was not ornate, the stone barely legible.

De Molay could read the name "Rachel" and the words "Year of our Lord 1205."

No, it was some pagan numbering. He knew he had charged from the gates of Antioch on June 28, Year of our Lord 1098.

He walked over and brushed the snow from another marker.

1357.

Another.

1419.

He came upon the largest tomb, over which lay the worn stone figure of a knight set to rest in his armor. De Molay knew the arms carved into the petrified knight's shield, but he brushed the snow away enough to read "Rossal de Molay. d. June 28, 1098."

At his bellow, birds fell dead from the sky, the cross fell from the church's steeple, de Molay's tomb cracked in half, and the knight's statue crumbled.

Barred and locked, the doors to the church crumbled with one kick from his boot. The entry disintegrated in a cloud of smoke, brimstone, and falling embers. As he walked toward the altar, frescos of Christ and the stations of the cross turned black, paint and plaster bubbling and releasing the odor of burned hair and rancid oil.

Above the altar was an image of Christ more dire and horrifying than any he had seen before. Emaciated, like his comrades at Antioch, Christ's body was twisted in agony as blood flowed from the wounds. In the agonized face of Christ, de Molay could see the weight of his own sins.

This wasn't the Christ of a sect that did not believe Our Lord had actually walked the earth as a man.

Crowded at the altar, under the suffering figure of Christ, were two dozen people. A priest stood before the frightened mob, holding a crucifix before him.

De Molay's armor burned and pulled at his body. He glanced at his hand and saw his fingers. They were long, black, and taloned, his mail gauntlet little more than tattered remnants.

"Begone, demon." The priest spoke in Latin. "The power of Christ compels you."

De Molay looked up at the priest. "And what Christ is it you refer to?" he answered, speaking church Latin himself.

The priest stared. Either he was surprised at de Molay's Latin, or surprised he spoke at all.

De Molay reached up and tore free the remnants of armor binding his chest. Underneath, his skin was scaled and black. "Do you speak of Christ, son of man and God? Born of Mary? Or is it the false Christ of the Cathars you implore?"

"Cathars?" the priest looked confused. "No Cathars have walked the earth for a hundred years."

"You acknowledge the Trinity, the God of Moses, and the Pope?"

The priest nodded.

De Molay removed his helmet, revealing a horned, goat-shaped head. "And Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy?"

The priest shook his head, not understanding.

“Robert, who traveled to free the Holy Land.”

“I don’t know what you ask.” The priest stammered in French and seemed on the verge of tears.

“Do you acknowledge fealty to Robert Duke of Normandy?”

One of the others from the village spoke, “Demon, we pledge allegiance to Phillip the Good, Duke of Burgandy.”

“What crown does he serve?”

“Duke Phillip is allied with the English King Henry,” the priest said.

“King Henry?” De Molay shook his head. His mind was a confusion of images, one set from a crusading knight whose only purpose was to serve his Lord and his God. The other set came from something much darker.

He could feel enormous leathery wings unfurl from his back and thought again, how come I to be here?

A great trickery it was. Even though he thought himself de Molay, even that part of his muddled mind knew it false. De Molay was dust outside the gates of Antioch, and whatever was of him was now in heaven or in hell, remembered only by the wrecked stone cenotaph outside this church. The false shreds of de Molay were falling off his mind just as the remnants of his armor fell from his distorted body.

“We have committed a great sin,” he whispered. “Priest, you will hear my confession.”

The priest shook his head, backing away, his face white.

The thing that had been de Molay for one long bloody night, knelt before the priest so its gore-stained shaggy face was even with the priest’s own. Its breath stank of an abattoir and its blood-red tongue left a trail of slime across its jagged teeth.

The thing reached and took the crucifix from the priest with a long-taloned hand. “Hear my confession, speak the mass, give communion. Do this because it is your duty as a servant of Christ.”

“But—”

“Hurry, I must be shriven,” the demon pushed the priest toward the altar. Women screamed, and the villagers scrambled toward the doors. The demon ignored everyone but the priest.

The priest pushed himself up, next to the altar.

“Please,” said the demon, “I beseech you in the name of God, while I can still claim de Molay’s repentance as my own.”

After a moment, the priest approached the altar and, with shaking hands, reached for the host and the wine.

Below the great vaults, the high windows began to show a ruddy light. “Dawn is approaching,” spoke the nobleman with the jeweled doublet and the greasy beard.

“Worry not,” responded his monk. “It will be compelled to return, just as it was compelled to serve you.”

“Is it enough time?”

“For what? To destroy a single Burgundian village? We are talking of a sergeant from the deepest circle of hell. Less than a heartbeat and your traitorous peasants are less than ash.”

“Then why hasn’t it returned?”

“It walks with the pace of a man now.”

The nobleman shook his head and turned to face the circle inscribed on the floor before them. “If I hadn’t seen such with my own eyes, I would not credit such a thing.”

“You are troubled.”

“Would you count me sane if I was not?”

“Do you doubt the rightness of your cause?”

The noble glared at the monk, “Was it not you who first told me that God himself had taken a lowly farm girl and led her to break the English siege of Orlèans?” He shook his head. “When such forces walk the land, how can I but solidify my service to the French crown?”

“You are on the side of God, My Lord.”

The noble shook his head, “Our servant was not from God.”

“Wasn’t he? The demon is but a vessel.”

“But how can a centuries-dead knight control such a being?”

“The same way demons have possessed men for millennia.”

“But a man possessing a demon?” he looked up at the dawn light in the windows. “What if the spell is broken? What if this sergeant of hell throws off our yoke?”

“Only faith can break such bondage. Whose faith could free such a beast? Whose faith would?”

At the monk’s word, the great doors to the hall blew open with a crash. The candles around the circle blew out. The monk and the nobleman turned to face the doors. Sunlight streamed in, causing both men to squint at the silhouette in the doorway.

“Who’s there?”

A deep voice seemed to come from everywhere. “Whose faith indeed?”

The nobleman took a step back, knocking over a candle. “Who are you?”

“You called me Rossal de Molay.”

The nobleman shook his head and grabbed his dark-cloaked companion. He pushed the monk out in front of him. “No, take him. It was his doing. He bewitched me.”

The old man fell to the ground. As he pushed himself up, he spat. “Bewitched by your own desire

for power, more like it.”

The silhouette walked into the hall, its wings broad and golden. Its skin emitted a white light that hurt the two men to look at. He reached down and cupped the monk’s chin.

“I am not the one you should fear,” it said.

The nobleman shook his head and the glowing apparition lifted the monk to his feet.

“I had fallen, turned from God, cast into the lake of fire with my Master.” The apparition reached out a glowing hand and caressed the nobleman’s cheek. “You gave me enough of a soul that I could truly repent and pledge my fealty to God.”

Both men stood in the circle, shaking.

“I offer you the same chance you gave me.” The apparition waited, but both men stared, speechless. When no response was forthcoming, the apparition turned to leave.

“How could this happen?” the nobleman whispered, breaking his stunned silence.

“Perhaps a splinter of de Molay’s faith touched it,” the monk shook his head, “if a demon can lead a man astray...”

The nobleman gasped as a ring of fire erupted from the circle. He spun around, patting his clothes, which were beginning to smoke. “What, you said that we had nothing to fear—”

The apparition did not turn around. “You have nothing to fear from me. I might have shriven you, if you had possessed the faith to ask.” The men began to scream as the flames began to lap at their flesh. “My former master is the one you pledge fealty to now. And he did not care to lose my service.”

The angel, awash with a light white and terrible in its brightness, walked away from the pyre.