

# A War Beyond War, and I Am the Only Soldier

by Joe Follansbee

writing as Anden Sharp

I begin this chronicle on St. Gilles' Day, September 1, in the Year of Our Lord 1269, the 43rd year of our sovereign Louis Capet, to record the circumstances of the singular transformation of our dear brother Dominic de la Traversée on Wednesday last just before Vespers. Father Abbot François Benoît, leader of this abbey a day's ride north of Paris, directed me, Brother Denis de Nîmes, his secretary, to write down these events, a task I undertake with trepidation.

Dominic, a monk of about 22 years and a resident here since he was orphaned at age 15, came to the abbot's house one afternoon about seven weeks ago while I was working on our vineyard accounts at my desk. Carrying a straw hat to keep off the sun, he looked pale and weak.

"Is Father Abbot here?" he said.

"No, he's at the chapel," I said. "Can I help you, brother Dominic?"

"I wanted permission to rest," Dominic said. "I don't feel well."

A deferential servant of God who never shirked a duty or complained about his obligations, Dominic stood before me, sweat soaking his woolen habit, hat in his hands. His right forefinger was missing; I had removed it after a farming accident many years before. I often perform medical duties here. "I'm sure he won't mind if you lie down for a while," I said. "Summer is fully fledged, and it is very hot today. I'll let the abbot know you were here."

I did not see the abbot the rest of the day, and a few hours later, at the evening meal, Dominic did not appear. Monks may not miss a meal without permission. Father Benoît noticed, and I feared he would punish Dominic for my forgetfulness.

“Father, forgive me,” I said, bowing slightly, “but I neglected to tell you that Brother Dominic went to his cell ill. I was about to check on him before the next office.”

“I see,” the abbot said. “Let’s visit him together.”

We found him in his cell, sitting on his pallet. His eyes were wide and sweat trickled from his hair; his tonsure was freshly shaven. He didn’t stir at our approach, and I touched his forehead. It was cool. Then he awoke from his trance, and gazed at us with eyes that will now forever haunt me. He had the rare trait of eyes which had different colors. In this case, his left eye was the color of a clear summer sky, while the other was of the finest white granite.

“Are you alright, Brother Dominic?” Father Benoît said, his manner dispassionate.

“I was having a vision,” Dominic said.

“Daydreaming, more like it,” the abbot said, ungraciously. “Or the heat has gone to your head.”

“Dominic said he was ill,” I said, defending the young man. “He did not look well when he came to your house.”

Father Benoît was a pious man who guided the abbey firmly, though he allowed debate on important matters from brothers he respects, including myself. He has been abbot here for five years, and a monk for nearly 30 years. “Dominic, go to bed,” he said. “You can skip Vespers and Compline.”

“We need you healthy and you need a good night’s sleep,” I added, putting my hand on his shoulder as the abbot and I departed.

Dominic returned to his duties the next day as if nothing had happened. A week later, in the second watch of the night, I was returning from the privy when I heard a moan from Dominic’s cell. I knocked on the door and entered, and I found Dominic on his pallet against the wall, his knees drawn up to his chin, and his hands covering his face.

“Dominic, what’s wrong?” I said, whispering.

“It is a war beyond war, and I am the only soldier,” he said. Tears filled his eyes. Alarm rose in my throat. “Dominic, what are you talking about?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head as if waking from a dream. “I don’t know.” He wiped his eyes and lay down, and he was instantly asleep.

I informed Father Benoît of the incident, and he asked me to watch poor Dominic.

Again, Dominic appeared completely normal the next day, and for nearly two weeks thereafter. I had begun to think that his malady had passed. Then, late one evening, I passed Dominic’s cell. A pitiful moan came from beneath the door. I entered, and he was kneeling on his prie dieu, below the crucifix. I first thought he was praying to Our Lord, but his head was bent down in an odd way. I touched him.

“Brother Dominic, I apologize if I’m interrupting, but I was worried...”

He didn’t stir, and I gently turned him to see his face, and his haunting eyes were open, staring into nothingness. His mouth was also open, his body rigid. I was able to move him to his pallet, and I ran for Father Benoît.

When the abbot and I returned, Dominic was still in his trance, his eyes unblinking. Father Benoît crossed himself and stepped back in fear. “I have read of this,” he said. “The Greeks call it *epilepsia*, and I fear the Evil One has taken hold of our brother.”

“I have read of this, too,” I said. “It’s called by some the ‘Holy Illness,’ because it can be sent by God.”

Then Dominic’s head slumped down, and he blinked, taking a deep gasping breath. He looked up. “Father Abbot, Brother Denis, why are you here?”

“You have been ill, my son,” the abbot said. “We fear for your soul.”

“I had another vision,” Dominic said.

Father Benoît gulped. “What did you see? What did the devils look like?”

“Were they possibly angels?” I said. “The saints?”

Dominic shook his head, wiping his eyes with his fists. “I don’t know if I saw angels or devils,” he said. “I was saying a prayer before sleeping, and then I was in another place, surrounded by light and dark, merged into one. There was a gate, and I was before it. Beings were gathering on the other side, trying to force their way through. I could see and feel where they came from, and it was frightening.”

Dominic shook with terror. “Calm down, Dominic,” I said, “You are safe here.”

“No, I am not!” he said, pleading before the abbot and I. “None of us are! I know. The beings drew me into their world, and it was a deviant place. It had an up and a down, right and left, backward and forward, and, and...” He drew his hands out, as if measuring something, but dropped them helplessly. “...more that I cannot understand or name. No, they are neither devils nor angels. But they are dreadful and dangerous. They mean to annihilate us! We are like candles to them to be snuffed out. I was fighting them. I don’t remember anything else, except...”

“Go on,” Father Benoît said.

“A great sense of purpose,” Dominic said.

“As if you were a soldier? With a duty?” I said.

Dominic nodded.

“Did they speak?” Father Benoît said.

“No,” he said. “But other beings on my side of the gate did speak.” He cocked his head as if hearing their voices again. “They said that I had been chosen for a work even more important than Our Lord’s. What does this mean, Father? How could anything be more important than saving mankind from sin?”

Father Benoît said nothing. Dominic pushed his hands through his own dark hair, and recalled more. “I felt they were comrades, these spirits surrounding me. They gave me strange names. They called me the Unifier of the Four Winds with the Great Calm, the Defender of the Allied Real and Unreal, the Marshal of the Opposites Against the Elsewhere. They compared me to King Louis’ flag on the battlefield, like a rallying point.”

The recollection of these bizarre titles and analogies visibly upset Dominic. “They said I would know what to do,” he said. “I don’t understand at all. I don’t want this work. I’m to do something, but what? And what if they’re wrong? I’m only a monk. I’m afraid!” He slumped in my arms and cried like a small child. Completely spent, he closed his eyes and fell asleep. I eased him down to his palette and covered him with the woolen blanket.

Father Benoît and I were transfixed by Dominic’s story, though we were unsure whether to believe it. Later, in my cell, I said a prayer, asking God to comfort the young man’s troubled soul. Clearly, he was experiencing something beyond our ordinary world. The nature of that place was beyond his comprehension.

The next morning, I found Father Benoît in his study, reading. God has blessed our abbey with thirty-nine volumes, some the latest on medicine and theology, and the abbot looked up from one of the books. “Here, Galen of Rome says the disease of epilepsy arises from the brain,” he said, pointing to a page from a work on medicine. “And the Gospel of Mark says that Our Lord was shown a possessed boy whose body became rigid. Jesus drove out a demon to cure him.”

I was familiar with the passage. “The boy also foamed at the mouth, and I have heard of other cases like this. Brother Dominic does not show this symptom.”

“Alexandros of Tralleis,” Father Benoît continued, turning to another page, “says epilepsy begins as a stomach ache, and the patient feels the episode coming. It’s called the aura.”

“I know these texts, Father,” I said. “Nothing about Dominic fits their descriptions. We cannot be sure it is epilepsy.”

“His story makes no sense to me,” Father Benoît said, frustrated. “It doesn’t fit anything we know. And why would *he* be chosen, and not you or the butcher or even a leper?”

“It’s always a mystery why a certain man or woman sees visions or becomes a saint,” I said. “Many saints say they were chosen by God against their will before they accepted their fate.”

Father Benoît nodded.

“And did you hear the titles he gave? ‘Unifier’ and ‘Marshal’ and the comparison with the king’s flag? These are people or objects that bring people together, bring forces together to achieve great things. Perhaps he has some quality of spiritual leadership we don’t understand. But I’m only guessing. God’s mind, even when it is revealed to us, is always enigmatic.”

“Brother Denis,” the abbot said, pulling out his rosary from beneath his robe. “I have prayed for guidance. I am worried about our brother. But I am also worried about our abbey’s reputation, and its standing with the archbishop.”

“I understand,” I said. The archbishop was an exacting and dogmatic superior.

“It’s clear that Dominic is experiencing something profound, perhaps sent by God, perhaps not,” Father Benoît said. “It would be easily misinterpreted by outsiders. What have the other brothers said?”

“None seem to be aware of what’s happening,” I said. “I have not spoken of it.”

“Good,” he said. “We must wait discreetly. Perhaps the issue will resolve itself.”

Several weeks passed without another instance of Dominic’s affliction, but, against our hopes, it came back for a final time. On Wednesday last, in the early afternoon, I was again in the abbot’s house, assisting Father Benoît with a difficult report. The day was stifling hot. Brother Dominic appeared at the door, obviously ill. Father Benoît and I looked at each other, and the abbot sent Dominic to his cell. After a moment, the abbot and I followed. All the other monks were out of doors, away from the dormitory.

We approached Dominic’s cell. He had not closed his door, and we saw him sitting on the edge of his palette, body rigid, his mouth open, his eyes open, gazing up to Heaven. His trembling arms were outstretched, his hands fisted. He was having another vision, but this one was far more powerful than the others we had witnessed. I sat next to

him while Father Benoît stood over the stricken man. I touched Dominic's arm and the abbot touched his shoulder. Suddenly, the world disappeared.

Father Benoît and I stood together, almost embracing, surrounded by a white-gray eeriness, as if light and dark coexisted in the same place and time. A tremendous noise filled our ears, like a powerful wind from a thunderstorm, but we saw no lightning and felt no rain. Brother Dominic was two paces ahead of us, his arms outstretched, his sandaled feet planted firmly, in front of a discernable arched shape in the indefinable distance. I saw movement beyond it and sensed a pressure, as if something were trying to break down the gate. Then I became aware of flying shadows all around the abbot and myself. The shadows were sometimes light, sometimes dark, behaving like swallows skimming the fields around our monastery in search of insects. The shadows passed through Father Benoît and myself; when a light shadow passed, I briefly felt a consummate peace; when a dark shadow entered and exited my body, I sensed the deepest malevolence.

At first, the shapes swirled around aimlessly, then they converged on our afflicted brother. "Dominic," I called out, "they are attacking you!" But he didn't move; instead he called out in a language that resembled nothing I had ever heard. He opened his fisted hands, showing his palms to the gateway. Then the white shapes flowed through his right arm and hand, faster and faster, like a torrent in a mill race, thousands upon thousands toward the gateway. The roar in my ears intensified, and the abbot and I covered our ears with our hands. Uncountable darker shapes flowed through his left arm and hand. The parallel lines of lights and shadows, like arrows fired in rapid succession, faster than any archer, converged to a point hidden within the gate. The white and black shapes, whom I understand now as separate, living, non-human entities, good and evil, joined to repel whatever was in the aperture. Calling out again, in a voice louder than a lightning strike, Dominic stepped forward, pushing the pulsing entities before him, urging them on like a mounted knight would urge on foot soldiers. Dominic disappeared into the gateway, and the roaring rose to such a pitch that I cried out in pain. I tore at my hair and Father Benoît was screaming.

And then, nothingness.

Slowly, the walls of Dominic's cell took shape. The monk kneeled on his prie dieu.

"Dominic!" I said. "Dominic, what happened?"

Dominic turned to me and Father Benoît, and I saw in the young man's face a look of deep calm and triumph. The doubts and the terror of the earlier visions had dissipated, as if he had passed through a portal and survived what no other human could ever survive.

"It was a battle, was it not?" I said. "The war beyond war?"

"Yes, God was with us, and Satan stood at our side, and we were victorious against the invaders," he said.

"This is blasphemy!" the abbot said. "God and the Devil, side by side?"

"Who was the enemy?" I said.

"I have no word for them, but they did not belong here, they came from outside all we see and can never see, and we pushed them back, and destroyed the gate," he said.

I looked at his face, and could not shake the feeling that something was different about Dominic.

“We are all safe now,” he said. “our brethren, the village, the monastery, the heavens, even the Evil One. God is safe, too.”

“Brother Dominic,” Father Benoît said. “Your hand!”

The abbot took Dominic’s right hand, and I drew in a breath. The forefinger, which I had amputated myself, had returned, fully formed.

“This is proof!” Father Benoît said, kneeling down. “Proof of your miracle! I am in the presence of a saint!”

“Wait a moment,” I said. “Dominic, show me your left hand.” He raised it, and the left forefinger was gone, the ragged scar a mirror image of the one on his right hand before Dominic’s strange transmutation.

Then I studied his face, and saw that the colors of his eyes had switched places; his right eye now blue, his left eye grey.

“Dominic, I am concerned about your health,” I said, swallowing my growing anxiety. “May I listen to your heart?”

The young brother nodded, and I placed my ear against his chest just to the left of his breastbone, which was covered by his woolen habit. I heard his breath, but my own breathing stopped.

“Brother Denis, what is it?” Father Benoît said. “You’ve gone pale.”

I ignored the abbot, and as imperceptibly as I could, I moved my ear to the right side of Dominic’s breastbone. It was there that I heard the familiar *lub-dub* of his heart.

“Dominic, your heart,” I said, shaking. “It beats on the right side, not the left, as in all men.”

Father Benoît crossed himself against evil. Brother Dominic did nothing and seemed not to care.

“Brother, tell me your name,” I said to him.

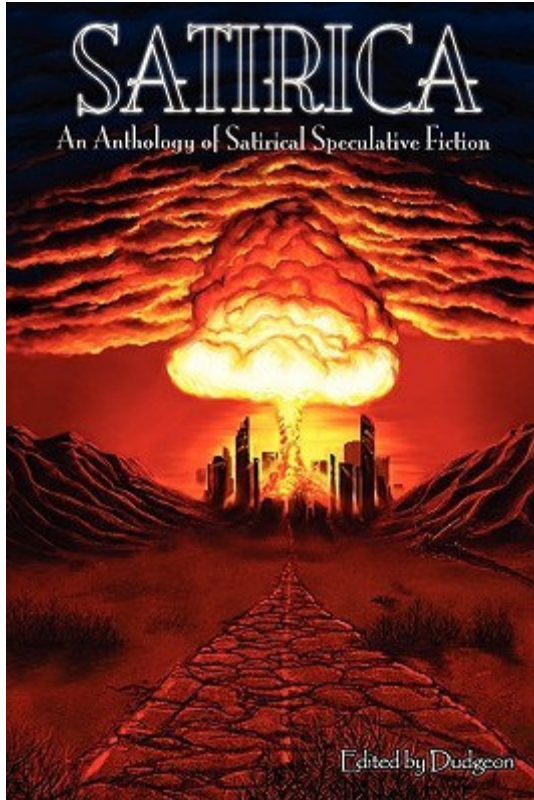
“I am Dominic de la Traversée,” he said. “Dominic of the Crossing.”

“And whence comest thou?” I said.

Dominic opened his mouth as if to speak, but did not, almost could not, as if the word in his mind could not be spoken by a human voice. Even as I write this, he cannot speak that name.

I now end this chronicle, for this antipodal Dominic could not explain his transformation. I can only say that he was not the same mild young man whom we once knew. In addition to the physical changes, his personality showed more fortitude. At times, he even resisted the abbot’s orders, though in the end, he obeyed. Father Benoît, concerned as always about the abbey’s standing with the archbishop, chose not to report our observations and Dominic’s experience, fearing an inquiry. Dominic has not threatened us, but we fear him nonetheless. I wonder how long the abbot’s forbearance will last.

This Dominic is no saint, but neither is he demon, yet he is odd, a strangeness underscored daily by his reversed eyes, which frighten me. He does not belong here. We have no way to send him back and retrieve our Dominic. I fear for the young monk, who has crossed over into some other place that is not death, but not our world. And I do not know whether to trust this new Dominic’s words about our safety. Father Benoît and myself believe the visions are gone, and we pray that God, by allowing this new Dominic to be in our midst, knows what He is doing.



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