

Bloodloss

A red-tinted photograph of a long, narrow hallway with a series of arched doorways receding into the distance. The perspective is from the end of the hallway, looking down its length. The walls and ceiling are made of stone or concrete, and the floor is also visible. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights, creating a sense of depth and mystery. The overall mood is somber and eerie.

By Evander L. Fragoso

Prologue

Oh how things change overtime. I laugh at those who speak of life as a stagnant thing. People used to tell me that a person can never change their ways. I wonder what they'd say if they saw me now, for tonight I am reborn. -Diary of A Crimson Fiend

The trees shook from the downpour as thunder cracked the sky. Streaks of lightning shot across the clouds like veins of the gods. A wolf howled within the woods. It's soaked fur sent drops of water all about as it set its legs into motion. The wolf dashed around the trees until it came to a small patch of earth that seemed to have been dug up and covered over recently. The soft soil was muddied from the downpour.

The wolf stood on a rock over the brown patch and began to growl. It scraped at the rock with its claws as it bared its teeth, its eyes alight with fury. A pale hand reached out of the ground.

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Part 1

Night Devoid of Red

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Streetlights came to life as the sky grew darker. Kate pulled into her driveway and began unloading groceries from her jeep.

"Could I get a little help here," she said with a smile, tossing the bags in her hands at Calvin as she entered the house.

"What's wrong, getting too old, Katey," he retorted and stuck his tongue out as he caught the shopping bags. Kate's cheeks flushed.

"Hey now, my birthday is around the corner, but don't forget that you're three years older!" She followed Calvin into the kitchen where they began to put things away. Elbows brushing against each other, Kate chuckled and hip-bumped Calvin.

"Woah there," Calvin said as he wrapped his arms around Kate's waist, "are you trying to start something here?" He gave her a gentle peck on the lips. Kate wrapped her arms around Calvin's neck and kissed him harder.

"Maybe I am, big man." Kate winked, exaggerating the gesture like a young child. She kissed him again, pulling him down to her level. "Did you take care of the garage," she asked in a whisper.

"That can wait," Calvin replied, going in for another kiss, but Kate pulled away.

"Are you kidding me? I was out for a few hours with the girls, then got a little something to hold us over for this week, and you haven't done shit!" Calvin sighed and looked away.

"I said I'll take care of it later, so I'll take care of it later."

"That's what you said yesterday," Kate went back to putting away the rest of the groceries.

"Oh come on babe," Calvin said, hugging her from behind, but Kate wiggled out of his hold.

"I'm going up to bed, don't bother joining me," Kate growled, storming off. Calvin rubbed his knuckles into his forehead out of frustration as Kate disappeared up the stairs. He grumbled to himself then headed to the garage to clean up the mess it'd become in the past few months.

Try to tell me that monsters aren't real, and I will concede. On the outside I'll agree, because I am aware of the disquiet that would brew from opposing your view, I understand that you would begin to think of me as some sort of loon, but inside I know know the truth, for I have seen them in the night, and I have slain them with my own two hands. One cannot unsee the horrors that my eyes have beheld. For that reason, I will continue to lessen the horrors that others see. -Joshua Kaenda, The Night Feller

The click-clack of Joshua's boots echoed throughout the church as he followed Father Gascoigne. The church was dimly lit by the fading light of the setting sun. A flash of lightning brightened the church, and for a moment Gascoigne's shadow looked like that of a beast.

"Do you feel it, Joshua? The thing that comes hither?" Gascoigne slowed his pace as they reached the podium at the head of the church. "Something wicked this way comes."

Joshua kept his silence and followed Gascoigne's gaze to the large statue behind the podium. A pillar with grooves and lumps like a tree, it reached up to the ceiling. A snake wrapped itself around the pillar, its gaping maw displayed a set of large fangs and flames that ran halfway up the pillar. People sat on the snake in varying increments. The rest of the pillar was decorated with angels.

"We are the angels that must fight back the snake. While others sit idly by or are controlled by its bite, we resist. That is what it means to be a hunter. We answer to the call, and I can hear it now, Joshua. That is why you were summoned to this location. You may use this place as your base of operations. Hopefully you will be able to slay the beast upon its arrival tonight instead of needing to linger. My instincts tell me that we will need you elsewhere soon

enough." Father Gascoigne turned to Joshua. "I don't need to go on about the importance of speed, efficiency, and secrecy."

Joshua nodded his understanding, looking into the abysmal eyes of the gruff man.

"Here are a few things that should help," Gascoigne said as he reached into his trench coat. "To keep up appearances, here is a pendent in the shape of a cross. Touch these parts in this manner and a blinding beam of light will be emitted from the center of the cross. These vials look as though they could be holy water for a traveling man of the church, but chuck them against any surface and they will burst, emitting an extremely strong odor that would make a normal human fall under a horrendous dizzy spell, let alone a creature whose senses are highly superior to our own." Gascoigne handed over a set of throwing knives.

"And these," Joshua asked, pulling out a knife, looking it over.

"That's just a throwing knife. You grab one, and you chuck it at your target."

Joshua rolled his eyes as Gascoigne laughed. He stowed the knives away in one of the many pockets of his long coat.

"Is there anything else I should know about my prey, Father?"

"You will be hunting a Crimson Fiend tonight," Gascoigne began to walk around the podium and behind the giant statue. "It should only strike at night, as daylight is quite a hindrance to them. We are unaware of the level of the creature's turn-rate, but being that it has just awoken it is certain that it will strike tonight. We don't know for how long the Fiend has slept for or the extent of any of its abilities really, so I would advise keeping a trick up your sleeve

in case your initial attack isn't enough to fell the beast. By all means, do your best to keep it from feeding at all. It is sure to be starving, and allowing it to have just a little trickle could prove troublesome. It would also be nice not to require much in the way of memory wiping."

"Is there anyway to figure out who its first target would be," Joshua asked as followed around the pillar. He picked up his pace trying to keep Father Gascoigne in sight, but Gascoigne seemed to move faster and faster without quickening his legs.

"Just trust your senses, Joshua. And good luck."

Joshua almost broke out into a run as Gascoigne escaped his sight behind the pillar, but turned around instead and walked the other way only to find that no one was there at all. He stepped away from the pillar and podium and looked around.

"Smug bastard," Joshua whispered to himself. "I'll surpass you one day, father."

Joshua walked back towards the entrance, twirling a knife between his fingers. His shadow began to blend in with the rest of the place as clouds began to roll in. The pitter-patter of rain joined in with Joshua's footfalls.

Even as people fear them, there is no doubt that they have the desire to become one of them. The increase in strength and the resistance of the body, the boost to all of the senses and the calm that would seem to come with becoming one of the creatures of the night, not being afraid of the darkness, calling it home instead. To say that there weren't those who wanted to join the ranks of the Crimson Fiends would be a blatant lie. The purpose of the serpent is to draw us away from the established parameters placed upon mankind, and all these things are a lure. When their fangs sink in it is not to deliver a gift, it is to pour the venom of the beast into your very soul. We must not forget this. We hunt only so that we may not be the hunted.

-Father Gascoigne

The clothes he wore was badly tattered. The rain came down harder, making it difficult to see far ahead. This didn't slow Zackatel as he followed the wolf through the woods. The paleness of his skin implied death, so it made sense that the cold of the rain didn't stir a shiver or goosebumps on his skin. The wolf never slowed or looked back at him. It didn't have to. It could feel Zackatel in his mind. Zackatel followed the wolf for half an hour before they came to a break in the trees.

"Ah, I see," Zackatel said as he looked down the highway, then turned to look the other way. "This is how they travel in this time then. Thank you, friend." He reached out and pet the wolf's muzzle, "you may go now."

Zackatel began to walk down the long road. The wolf stood a while and watched, then disappeared into the woods.

“So, let me get this straight.” Officer Pennel looked at his notepad while Keith sat in the bed of his rig, looking down at the ground. The blood was drained from Keith’s face. He held onto the truck-bed to try to still his body, but he was very visibly shaken. “You were heading home late when you noticed something on the road. You swerved to avoid hitting it, almost flipping over in the process. Pulled over and got out to check what you’d found.”

“Yes,” Keith said, running his hands through his hair, “I thought it was a doe or somethin’ when I almost hit it, but as soon as I stepped onto the road I could see that the shape was all wrong. So I got up close, it was hard to make it out clear with it being so late and the rain. Nearly had a heart attack when I realized what I found. What could have done such a thing? Think he was mugged? They took the clothes right off his back!”

“I don’t know, but we’ll look into it and make sure the son-of-a-bitch that did this gets there’s, you can count on that. Now you get on home, maybe take a little something to calm your nerves, and try to get some rest.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll do that,” Keith nodded as he made his way to the driver’s seat. As he sped away, Officer Pennel made his way to the crime scene. An examiner was crouched beside the body, looking it over.

“Any idea on what happened here,” Pennel asked, standing over the other side of the corpse, looking down at the examiner’s prodding.

“Honestly,” the examiner, Carl, looked up at Pennel, “I’m really unsure. There are no signs of a struggle, no abrasions, cuts or scrapes. But this man appears to have had all of the

blood drained from his body." Carl circled a spot on the victim's neck. "The only thing that seems out of place, other than his clothing," Carl smiled, "is this discoloration here. All of his body is drained of color except for this dark red splotch, that looks like some sort of blood clot just below the skin."

"And..." Officer Pennel waved a hand towards himself as if to say *give me more*, "what does that mean? How would someone do that?"

"I'm really not sure," Carl said, bracing her knees as she stood up. "But someone did this somehow. Maybe with some weird tool? There's no sign of a struggle, so they would have been incapacitated before they were ever drained." Carl looked around the road. "No vehicle, huh?"

"No," Pennel said. He waved his hand at the skid marks on the ground, "whoever did this must have jumped out of the woods, causing our naked friend to come to an abrupt halt. I take it at that moment he left his vehicle to look into the person, or persons, that he nearly hit, and that's when he was knocked out. If there's no sign of a struggle he must have been injected with something. We'll have to get the guys at the lab to look into that."

The sound of a twig snapping amongst the chirping of crickets caught the Officer's attention. He flashed his light in the direction of the woods but saw nothing in the trees. He nodded at Deputy Carano as he approached.

"Let's extend the perimeter a bit, just in case our assailant came back to the scene of the crime, to see what we think of his dirty work," he said under his breath, bringing his flashlight down. "I'm gonna tell dispatch to put everyone on high alert for suspicious persons coming to and from town. We can hope this is an isolated incident, but you never know." Officer Pennel walked back to his car as his deputy and a few others began to spread out into the woods.

Joshua listened in as Officer Pennel went over the witness' testimony with Keith. He also heard the conversation between the officer and the examiner, despite his distance from both. He learned how to hone in on voices over a good distance through his training as a hunter. The ability, once learned and developed, came in handy in situations like these, when information was to be gathered while staying under the radar.

Joshua took a step forward then froze as a branch snapped under his foot. He quickly crouched and twisted his body, spreading his limbs, to blend in with the trees and bushes around him, as a beam of light swooped up to where he stood. He held his breath.

"Let's extend the perimeter," Officer Pennel said in the distance. The beam of light retreated. Joshua waited until he heard the Officer's footsteps to retreat into the trees and vanish.

The Order is an age old organization that sees itself as an essential part of the world. When things go bump in the night, they descend like a shadow to bring back a sense of quiet and peace. Remember those nights as a kid when you felt the presence of something not of this world, of something sinister meaning to crawl out from underneath your bed, or out of the closet, to suck the very life out of you? What if I told you that this feeling comes from a part of the mind often overlooked, a part that still remembers how to sense the oncoming night crawlers? Would you believe me? In this so called enlightened age it's hard to differentiate between fact and fiction. But the Order, and what they fight, what we hunt, is very real.

-Joshua Kaenda, The Night Feller

A low murmur came from the tv in the living room. The football game from the night before was on. With a fifteen point lead, even if the game wasn't from the day before, it didn't take a genius to figure out who was going to win this one. If you really concentrated you could hear the commentator going on about how there was no chance of winning with all of the key players unable to play because of some recent incident. This didn't matter to Calvin. The game was only on as a distraction, something to watch as he guzzled down a few cold ones on the couch, grumbling curses under his breath at Kate, who was fast asleep up in their bedroom. Calvin was also knocked out, he crashed about a half hour after cracking open his first beer. He sat back on the couch, a bottle gripped in an outstretched hand. His head was tilted back. Some drool ran down the side of his mouth.

All was quiet except for the barely audible dribble from the tv, the steady breath of Calvin as he slept on the couch, and the low moaning that came from the bedroom.

Brendan was the only person on the road. This part of town was quiet. He could hear the low rumblings of a garage band in the distance. He rounded a corner and continued until he the sound of the drums blended in with the crickets. Brendan parked and looked at the dash, 10:24 it read. He cut off the engine, the headlights were already down, he'd been driving for a while with them off. His phone buzzed.

"You should be safe to slip in now," he read, the words of the text followed by a winking face. 'Don't worry, I won't keep you waiting,' he replied. He didn't make a sound as he walked down the sidewalk. Well practiced in silence and secrecy, this was nothing for him. The all black attire helped him to blend into the night. There weren't a lot of street lights in the area, making things easier. Head swaying side to side, moving to a tune in his head, he grinned as the images of what he planned to do to his secret lover flashed in his mind. The way he'd run his fingers along her curvaceous form, savouring every inch. And how he'd make her savour every inch of him. His smile widened as his black jeans grew tighter.

"What a wonderful night for some fun," Brendan whispered to himself. The cool night air flicked at his wavy hair as he rounded a corner. After walking down a few blocks he turned down another street, then another.

Brendan stopped walking suddenly, something felt wrong. He looked around but didn't see anyone. The lights of the homes down the street were off for the most part, not that anyone would be able to tell him apart from a shadow in the dark. He shivered. That's what it was. The temperature. It was suddenly awfully cold. His body was covered in goosebumps, and when he let out his breath it was visible. He rubbed his hands together and looked around. He was perfectly fine just moments ago, and there wasn't supposed to be much of a temperature drop

tonight. He shook his head and continued on. It didn't matter, the cold, he had something warm to slip into. He wore a big grin on his face again but then he heard something.

He quickly made for the large bush in front of the house beside him. Crouched behind the bush, he watched the road as a Porsche cruised by.

"That was close," he whispered to himself, waiting for a few seconds before getting back to the sidewalk. After a few more blocks he turned down another street. Just a few houses down was his destination. The blood flowed between his legs again as he picked up his pace, excited for the late-night encounter. It was rare to be able to enjoy the company of this particular girl, considering her circumstance, but he was always left more than satisfied.

"Oh what a wonderful night for a curse," a voice whispered in the dark, turning Brendan's blood to ice. "Those were the words spoken to me on that fateful night, hundreds of years ago. Of course they were said in another tongue entirely, in a very different place."

Brendan slowly turned around to see the person who spoke from so close behind, somehow sneaking up on him despite the quiet. As he turned to see that no one was there he realized just how quiet it really was. The crickets had stopped their chorus without him realizing, and the wind no longer stirred his sand-colored hair.

"Where are you wandering off to, little cricket," said the voice in his ear. Brendan spun around swinging but hit only air. He raised his fists, his eyes darted about, as he searched for the source of the voice. Little cricket? Did the voice read his mind? Or was it just a figment of his imagination entirely? He suddenly wished that he wasn't in the quiet side of town.

"Who's there," Brendan hissed, "show yourself."

“The name is Zackatel.” A figure walked into the light of a street lamp across the street. He wore a dark blue business suit that was a little too short on the sleeves and pants. If it wasn’t for his sudden appearance in the cold of night he would have looked silly, but as it were, Brendan’s heart sank. “And you are?”

Brendan couldn’t speak. He just stood on the sidewalk, staring, shaking in his boots.

“That’s fine,” said Zackatel as he made his way across the street, “I don’t really care about your name, although I’ll end up finding it out either way. You see, this curse of mine does have its benefits. I wouldn’t be alive and well today if it weren’t for that.”

“What do you want,” Brendan finally managed to say. His legs began to feel weak, almost like they were turning into rubber. He bit down on his lip and concentrated on the pain. He learned in his past that sometimes a bit of pain was all you needed, something to concentrate your mind on, in order to get through the toughest of binds. He managed to take a step back and reach into his pocket for the switchblade he always held there.

“Truth be told, there are a few things that I seek,” Zackatel said as he crossed the halfway point of the road. “For one, I seek knowledge. The more you know, the more you grow, is what I like to say. That’s something that works for me, at least. I seek out nourishment, when needed. When you’ve slept as long as I have it only makes sense to have such a thirst.” Zackatel reached the sidewalk. “The most important thing though, what really drives me, is the hunt for something exciting. I really do hope you’ll be able to help me out in that department, little cricket. Being that you’re prowling around in the dead of night I take it that you are up to no good. Whatever mischievous things you’ve got set in motion could make my return to the land of the living a lively one, my friend.”

Brendan's teeth broke skin. With the sour taste of his own blood in his mouth he was able to snap into action. With a flick of his wrist he brought out his blade and slashed at Zackatel. Zackatel leaned back, dodging the wide attack. Brendan stepped forward, taking another horizontal swipe at Zackatel who stepped back, missing the point of the blade by a hair's breath, the front of his suit tearing from the honed edge. In the middle of the attack Brendan let the blade drop from his left hand, caught the handle with his right and thrust the blade at Zackatel's chest.

Hands going up on either side of Brendan's wrist, with a jerk of his arms Zackatel snapped Brendan's wrist backwards. Then he snapped Brendan's arm back at the elbow and threw him to the ground, using his own momentum against him, adding a little bit of his own force to the deflection. Brendan cried out in pain, rolling onto his back gripping his broken arm. His nose was broken from the fall, face bloody from the smashed mess.

"I'm sorry, little cricket, but it's all just part of the game, you know," Zackatel crouched and sniffed the air. He let out a sigh of pleasure and grinned. "How I love the scent of a fresh cocktail." He bent down and with his lips beside Brendan's ear he whispered, "let's see what's inside that head of yours, if I can have some fun thanks to your own exploits, my friend."

Brendan screamed and clawed at Zackatel's face but it was like pushing at a marble statue. The agony from his face and his arm were intensified by the cold breath that glided down his ear, to his cheek, to the base of his neck. Here, Zackatel's lips parted into a grin, then opened further.

I fell in love once. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Eyes the brightest blue, light auburn hair that seemed to blaze in the sun, and a smile that would make anyone stop and stare. She was smart, witty, and loved to joke around. Everything I wanted in a life companion. I was young back then and didn't realize what she was doing as she walked through the halls, everyone's heads turning in her directions as if they were magnetized. I couldn't have known how she slipped under covers with guys left and right, jumping from one to the next when she got bored. I was young, dumb, and I took father's teachings for a joke. I didn't realize what she was until she came for me. She was the first fiend I ever slayed.

-Joshua Kaenda, The Night Feller

Joshua sat on the uncomfortable bed, tossing a ball between his hands. The bags under his eyes betrayed his need for sleep, but the eyes themselves were bright with life as they went back and forth, following the ball that he juggled. The red light of a voice recorder blinked in his lap.

"The man in the woods, he was bitten for sure. The authorities haven't figured out his identity yet, there were no belongings at the crime-scene, but they should figure it out soon enough through dental records. I'll be sure to check in on that tomorrow, if I can't manage to get this business taken care of by the end of the night, before another victim turns up.

"Father suggested tapping into something deeper in the soul in order to sense what would come next, where the Crimson Fiend will strike, but truth be told I'm not very good when it comes to that side of things.

"I was however able to slip into the coroner's to take a look at the victim, and I have a receiver here to pick up any police radio chatter. You've gotta stick to what you know sometimes. And me, I know a little bit about being a detective. It's not my best strong suit, but along with my other skills, I get by. It helps that I'm getting better at it.

"Now, about the victim. Completely drained, which was to be expected, really. Who knows how long the Fiend was slumbering for. There are particulars that are interesting though. For one, the nakedness of the victim. This would mean that the Fiend was in the need for clothes. Of course, the Fiend could just have an odd sense of humor. Also, aside from the Fiend's mark, the body was totally unscathed. The Crimson Fiend took great care in draining his victim and setting him gently on the road after declothing him. This may mean that the creature wanted to make a show of his work.

"The fiend's mark. The mark of the Fiend was itself odd. Not a mark was left on the surface of the skin where I would assume the victim had been drained from, instead a red blotch was left on the neck of the victim. I have never read of such a mark, and I'm unsure of its importance. I thought it was worth taking note of though, for future reference.

"After checking on the corpse I decided to head back to the scene of the attack. I figured it wouldn't hurt to take a look at the area myself. There were no tracks left behind to indicate where the Crimson Fiend came from, but I did manage to find bits of torn up fabric.

"Going back to my thoughts earlier, it does in fact appear that the Fiend took the clothes of the victim for itself because of its own tattered rags, and it may have torn them apart further and scattered them in the woods in order to keep whomever would find the body in the dark. I'm not sure if that part means anything, getting rid of what it woke up in, but working in the vein of a sleuth, all should be noted.

“And from there, I go into what I will currently attempt. Father Gascoigne taught me of a way to find someone using any object of theirs. It always seemed crude to me, as it relies on using a little bit of ‘magic’, and I have never been able to totally pinpoint a person using it, as my skills with all spiritual things falls flat in comparison to many, but I could essentially narrow things down into a smaller radius if it works out well.”

Joshua stopped tossing the ball between his hands, squeezing it in his left hand.

“Wish me luck,” he said, then switched off the recorder. He slipped it under the pillow and trained his eyes on the scraps of clothing on the floor in the middle of the room. They were a faded gray, some scraps looked singed. Joshua held the small ball up between finger and thumb.