

*Everyone who comes here has a story, some reason they need us. We'll have some time, and talking can help you relax, help you sleep. So what's yours?*

I need help. I'm in so much pain all the time and I'm too scared to even end it.

*Well, I might be able to help. But first, of course, we'll need a contract. I'm no charity.*

*There, all signed and sealed. Now you just lie back and relax. And when you wake up, it'll all seem like it'd been just a bad dream...*

I awoke in the hospital, fully healed. The nurses jokingly called it a miracle, then praised me for having such a tough immune system, fighting it all off. The infections that had been running rampant died off so quickly. It would make a lawsuit against the school harder, of course, because toxic shock syndrome isn't as intimidating to laymen and the lazy when I healed up practically overnight. That dream, though, with the man in the wheelchair, his eyes bandaged... He frightened me, and I could see his grizzled visage behind my eyelids when I blinked. He'd felt mostly benevolent, sure, but something about him was wrong, evil. I couldn't even remember what this "contract" was that I'd supposedly signed. Had I been rescued by some sort of cape who'd eventually come to collect a payment owed?

My next sleep brought more questions. It was a sort of sleep-paralysis nightmare. The hospital bed had transformed into a gurney with thick leather straps holding me down. The room was different as well, thick with musty odor and the tang of dangerous chemicals, ancient gaslights in the walls. The place was dark, decrepit, dank with mold. Slowly the scents were replaced and I could downright taste the horrible odor of wet dog and the sting of iron from so much blood. Heavy, moist breaths from a mouth framed by far too many teeth. My entire body froze, locked up in terror. I didn't want to look. I didn't want to know. It was getting closer, the room shaking slightly from such heavy steps. The wood floor ripped and tore. I turned my head, and couldn't even scream.

A massive creature, a wolf but not. It squatted with limbs wide, more like a lizard. I'd seen things like bearded dragons and horned toads, with the feet splayed out and the belly nearly touching the ground. At first I thought the shaggy beast was utterly covered in blood but, no, it was *made* of blood. Nothing but blood and bone, even the milky eyes were actually spheres of bone. Huge claws gouged the floor. It raised a paw and trailed the back of a claw across my face, almost tenderly. But even with its false eyes, I could see the cruelty in its inhuman features. This abomination was amused by my horror.

And then it burst into flame, shrieking in agony. The heat licked at my cheek and I could finally scream from the burn. Something different happened now, as I felt dull fingers gripping at my body. Tiny creatures began crawling up from the floor, hauling themselves up the gurney with their hands as they had no legs. They were deformed, nightmarish in their own way. Empty eye sockets and gaping, mutilated mouths. Some of them reminded me of H.R. Giger's art in the worst way, their split mouths or shaped bodies like some disturbed parody of sexual organs. They were stark white like bleach and glowed with an inner light. The flopping bodies crawled up and over me, squirming like eels, clumsy like newborns. Faces slapped against my chest, my cheeks, my forehead as they were too heavy for their necks to support. They smothered me, fingers probing my ears, eyes, nose, hands pushing into my mouth. I smelled moonlight. I tasted curiosity. I heard the texture of bandages. And then I felt no more.

I awoke shooting bolt-upright in the hospital bed, breathing heavily and dripping with sweat. I wanted to do something, to call someone. I was too tired. My body gave out, I hit the pillow, and did not dream.

Several more days passed with me under observation until I was discharged. I dreamt no further and was ready to dismiss it all as side effects from the medicine. Until Dad took me home. That night, settled in upstairs and tucked into my own bed, I dreamed. Or, I thought I dreamed. I wouldn't learn until much later that this particular dream was much closer to reality...or at least close to *a* reality.

I awoke, or at least that's how it felt, curled up in a corner against a set of shelves loaded with books and medical equipment – old medical equipment, like in the wheelchair man's setup. My body was in agony from sleeping in such a strange position and I had to spend several minutes just stretching to get the kinks out. After my last encounters in a place like this, I wasn't going out unprepared. There wasn't anything that stood out as a weapon, so I grabbed a (hopefully clean) bedpan so I could at least bonk somebody.

Stairs led up and down. Up went to another small landing with an elaborate door. Stained glass and something like a mailbox or library book drop-off. I tried the handle. Locked. I raised a hand to knock, then thought better about it. I went down the stairs, feeling thoroughly nervous. The stairs creaked, but the entire place creaked. It was falling apart, seams pulling away from one another, shelves covered in thin layers of dust. The stairs opened into a clinic. Was this the wheelchair man's clinic? Old gurneys were scattered around, IVs beside them. The cushions were split, some burst with age while others looked torn or cut – as if someone had gone on a rampage. There was no blood, though...but I could hear something breathing.

Every hair on my body stood on end. I swear even my hair tried to stick out like a hedgehog. Primal terror surged through me: *I know that breathing*. It was the wolf, the blood monster. I don't know what convinced me to peek through the clinic to the entryway, but I stuck to the edge of the aperture. On one side was a little desk, likely to check in patients. More gurneys and IV tubes, and the desk was squished off into a corner. Had they needed so many beds they'd turned the entry into just more space for patients? The breathing came from the other side, however. I knew I shouldn't look, knew it would probably see me too. But I had to know. I had to understand what threatened me.

The creature was black, shining grayish in the gaslamps' glow. It was bigger than the blood wolf, yellow milky eyes glowing with a sickly inner light that to me spoke of pain and malice in equal measure. Thick saliva dripped in slow rivulets between its massive teeth. Something in my mind, wishing to be anywhere else, thought back to when I read *The Lord of the Rings* with my parents: Gollum was an evil creature, but Frodo couldn't help pitying him. And something in this beast indeed felt pitiable. I tightened my grip on the doorframe and physically pulled myself back behind the wall, having to force myself to stop looking. It hadn't seen me. I didn't hear it sniffing, didn't feel its heavy footfalls approaching. I watched my step as I sneaked back up the stairs and rapped as lightly on the door as I could. *Please open. Please open...*

“Oh! Is someone there?” The voice on the other end was youthful, probably only a little older than me.

I bit my lip hard enough to draw blood, tears suddenly streaming down my face. “Please,” I whined, trying to whisper. “Please be quiet. There's something downstairs.”

“Oh no,” the woman on the other end replied. She sounded saddened, but unsurprised, even though I'd said ‘something’. It was like she knew. “It's the night of the Hunt, and beasts roam the streets. I was terrified one would make it in: that's why we're shut in here. We- ...Apologies. I am Iosefka, and this is my clinic. I tend to the sick and wounded. This door is reinforced against attack, and many of my

patients have open wounds. In addition, I tell you this in good faith, some beasts have enough humanity to pretend. I have no way of knowing if you are really a person. Much as it pains me, I cannot open this door for you, do you understand?" She was almost pleading at the end.

No, I didn't understand at all. Beasts? Hunt? Humanity? "Not...not really. I don't even know how I got here. I just...can I stay here, in front of your door? I'm too scared to go down and try to get around that thing."

The woman – Iosefka, and what a strange name that was – replied in a gentle, almost motherly tone. "Of course. I'm sorry I can't do more for you, my dear, but this will always be a place of healing. Please, stay as long as you like."

I curled up in a new corner and fell asleep. At some point Iosefka had begun to sing a lullaby.

I awoke in my bed, the barest rays of sunlight peeking through the curtains. Was I going insane? Was I going to a real place? Was I a cape? I had no answers. I moved through my Saturday robotically and eventually fell asleep again, waking up in the corner where I'd passed out the previous night. I knocked on the door. "Iosefka?"

Her reply was immediate. "Oh dear, and here I thought you'd just gotten to sleep."

What did it say that I was more willing to open up to her than to my father? Well, it said that I didn't care as much about her rejecting me or saying I was insane. "From my perspective I slept the whole night. But, uh, that's not important right now. I have absolutely no idea where I am."

"I told you, dear, you're in my clinic." Now she sounded...not condescending, but definitely like someone dealing with a slow child.

"No, I mean where geographically. I fell asleep in my bed and woke up here. And this place is definitely not Brockton Bay."

"Oh my. What a curious phenomenon!" She perked up at that. "People travel far and wide to get here, but never via bed!" She actually giggled. "You are in Yharnam, my dear. Home and birthplace of the Healing Church. Greatest city of all time."

Well, that confirmed that I was no longer on Earth Bet. Was I a cape, teleporting to some other dimension when I slept? What a shitty power, taking me to a place where I was all but guaranteed to be eaten by some nightmare beast. "Yeah, I've never heard of Yharnam or the Healing Church. So I'm a really long way from home. Do, uh, do you have anything that could help me get past that thing downstairs?" I couldn't just stay in the doorway every night, especially if we might eventually draw that monster or others up to the clinic door.

"If you're asking for weapons, then no. This is a place of healing and I am a doctor. I cannot provide anyone with a means to do harm. However, give me but a moment." She was gone for several minutes and then I heard metal squeak. She was opening the back of the box in the door. When the hatch clicked back shut, I heard the lock on my side pop open. I pulled the little hatch open to find five vials rather like hypodermic injectors, filled with blood...blood that swirled on its own.

"...Iosefka, what's this?" I asked, trying to keep the nervousness out of my voice.

“You’re unfamiliar with blood ministration? Oh my poor dear, if you’ve not heard of the Healing Church...” She tutted. “I will keep it simple. This is healing blood. You jab it into a place with good circulation – the leg is best, chest runs the risk of piercing an organ – and your body absorbs it to heal wounds. Bruises fade instantly, cuts close, bullets push back out. It’s not magic, it’s based in miracles and the Church’s thaumaturgy. I’m rather talented at blood ministration,” she remarked with no small amount of pride in her voice, “so you’ll find my vials are rather better at restoring you than your average hedge priest’s vials.”

“What...what about blood type?” I didn’t know exactly what could happen, but I knew that giving the wrong type of blood could kill a person.

“Type? It’s blood. There’s only the one... Oh, this is some cultural thing, yes? I’ve heard of foreigners’ concerns. This blood bonds with yours, subsumes into you. It will not change you or do harm, on that you have my guarantee.”

What else could I say? This woman was playing tour guide to some poor lost girl and we faced a cultural gulf so wide I was amazed we were even speaking the same language. “Do...do you mind if I stay here again? I’m really scared.” I hated sounding so childish, but it was the truth and I couldn’t find a way to make it sound less pathetic.

“I told you, dear. Stay as long as you like,” she replied, a smile evident in her voice.

“Thanks. And, um, my name’s Taylor.”

Iosefka sang me to sleep again. Between falling asleep and waking in my bed, I dreamed of my mother.