

The Devouring House

Brian Evenson

From set *Innistrad: Crimson Vow*

Strefan Maurer had been lucky in his fall: any one of the wooden stakes lining the pit could have pierced him—could have killed him. But he had been bent down looking for the next set of tracks, his cloak gathered around him, and when he'd landed, he'd struck several stakes at once, nearly simultaneously. His cloak was ruined, pierced and torn, and he had a wound in his side, another on his thigh, a third, shallower, along his arm. He was in pain, but at least he hadn't been speared wriggling like an insect on a pin. Yes, he'd been very lucky.

Panting and groaning, he forced his way up and off the stakes. He pushed at the stakes closest to him until they broke or bent to the side and he had a safe place to stand. Up above, he could hear Brandt scurrying about, setting angelic symbols at each corner of the pit. These were clumsily repaired, the stone cemented back together, but they had been blessed: Strefan could feel that. Despite the angel's absence from this Plane, they still made him feel a hint of the old paralyzing fear. But Brandt should have known enough to realize no angel would lend him succor. Not anymore.



Strefan, Maurer Progenitor | Art by: Chris Rallis

The fool, thought Strefan contemptuously. The vampire hunter could simply have rushed the pit the moment Strefan fell in and jabbed at him with a long spear from above until he was dead. But Brandt's faith in his own trap was too great, and his faith in the holy was even greater.

"You're mine, fiend!" snarled Brandt leaning over the edge of the pit, his last symbol in place. "At last!"

“Fiend?” Strefan said, talking to buy time. He groped blindly behind him and began to worry the stake there, slowly working it free from the ground. “I’m a better sort of man, Brandt, one who has outrun death. Compared to me, you’re a mere beast. Surely you can’t believe you could defeat me so easily.”

He had the stake loose now. He brought it around, just as Brandt drew back a hand containing a gleaming object and threw it at him. Strefan, more out of reflex than anything else, batted it away with the stake. The glass vial that had been speeding for his head shattered, and he was spattered with the blessed water it contained.

Even without the angel, the water still held some power. He screamed as he felt his exposed skin burn. As he tried desperately to wipe the fluid away, he could smell his flesh cooking. Had the vial hit him squarely, had it not been largely deflected by the stake, he would be writhing, close to death, an easy target.

Despite the pain, he still had the presence of mind to hurl his stake hard at Brandt like a spear, and he was pleased to hear the hunter bellow as it connected and see him vanish from view.

Quickly, Strefan struggled to the pit’s edge, snapping stakes, and with one mighty heave, clambered free. No mere symbols could hold him, not in these times.

Brandt was gone, but the stake lay on the frost-bitten leaves, its sharp tip slick with blood. He licked it clean.

He could smell blood in the air, could hear the galloping of Brandt’s horse. Bloodlust rising, he rose into the air and rushed in pursuit.

Twice as Brandt rode along the path, Strefan lunged at him to knock him from his horse. The first time, Brandt managed to shake him off and swing him into a passing tree. The second, Strefan sunk his claws into Brandt’s arm and lunged for his neck when the man thrust a dirk into his bicep and he was forced to fall back. But Brandt’s horse was tiring and so, clearly, was Brandt. Strefan grinned. Brandt was an old man now, shackled to mortal flesh in a way that Strefan no longer was. *Be patient*, Strefan reminded himself, *hunt wisely and hunt well, and soon you’ll have your prey*.

Without warning, they reached the edge of the forest. Brandt pounded across the barren, snow-crusting steppe. It was as if the man had experienced a new burst of energy, and Strefan struggled to keep up. Brandt whipped his horse and shouted, and now Strefan could smell the blood of both beast and man as, hell for leather, they barreled ahead.

The horse stumbled and nearly went down but managed somehow to retain its footing. Brandt kept madly whipping it, didn’t even slow.

On the other side of the plain was a pile of rocks. Brandt seemed to be making for this. Strefan kept as close as he could, watching for his opening. Brandt was running his horse as fast as it would go, cutting its sides now with the little dirk he had jabbed Strefan with. If he rode much farther, the horse would be dead.

Not just a heap of rocks, Strefan had just enough time to notice as they came very close indeed: *a ruin*. And then the horse stumbled and went down for good, throwing Brandt. He rolled when he hit and was, almost immediately, up and running, his feet crunching through the snow. Hissing with pleasure, Strefan rushed after him.

He reached Brandt just as the man darted into the ruin itself. When Strefan groped for him, Brandt turned and slashed again with the dirk. Strefan dodged that slash, only to realize belatedly that it had

been a ruse: there was another, longer blade in Brandt's other hand, and this blade tore through his shirt and slashed the muscles of his chest. Strefan cursed and, dizzy with pain, fell back.

He expected Brandt to press his advantage, but instead, the hunter did something entirely unexpected. Smiling all the while, he turned the dirk's blade toward himself and slit his own throat from ear to ear.

Brandt collapsed to the ground, blood gushing from his neck, leaving Strefan appalled. He felt that something had been stolen from him: this should have been *his* kill. He shook his head, uneasy. It was incomprehensible for Brandt to do this. Why had he?



Depraved Harvester | Art by: Valera Lutfullina

Now that the battle was over, Strefan began to feel the full extent of his wounds. Carefully, he tore his cloak into strips and bound his side, his thigh, his arm. Then he took stock. He needed blood, and he needed it quickly.

As the vampire hunter's blood pooled on the floor, Strefan fell to his knees and desperately lapped at it. Or at least he tried: something very strange was happening. The blood was no longer pooling; it was vanishing into the stones of the ruin, almost as if being swallowed. Soon, not a drop remained. Stranger still, where before there had been the disordered stones of a collapsed ruin, now walls had sprung up around him. He found himself in a mansion that felt vibrant and alive. Rich tapestries covered the walls, a dining table dressed with a rich feast occupied the center of the room, torches danced with a flickering light in their sconces. It looked vaguely familiar to him. Had he been here before?

He thrust the question aside. Slowly, Strefan backed away from the now white and bloodless corpse. Brandt must have been leading him here the whole time. The pit trap must have been a mere waypoint, a means of coaxing Strefan to pursue him to this place without arousing suspicion. This had been Brandt's real trap, his final one.

And Strefan had fallen deeply into it.

He stared at the house that had risen around him. *This is not real*, he told himself, *this is not real*. And yet, it *felt* real. He could feel it around him, palpable and solid.

He did not know what was happening. This was nothing he knew or understood. Brandt must have made some sort of bargain with a demon, or with the house, or with both, and had sealed that bargain

with his own blood. What sort of forbidden arts had Brandt delved into, what sort of damnation had he condemned himself to, all so as to wreak vengeance on Strefan? Could this be a blood magic more arcane than anything Strefan himself knew?

He approached the door and reached for its handle. It was there, palpable in his grip, but he couldn't make it turn. He tried, but something held it firmly closed. *No*, he told himself, *this is an illusion: there is no door here at all*. And yet it felt like there *was* a door. When he pushed on it, he heard the wood creak and groan in protest. He pushed harder, then harder still, and then, abruptly, his hands slipped through as if passing through empty air. He fell through the door and into a gray, empty mist, and then found himself lying on the floor of the dining hall, back where he had started.

He stood and approached the door again. This time he braced himself as he pushed, increasing the pressure until once again his hands slipped through and he was engulfed in that same gray mist. He walked tentatively through this, seeing nothing, unable to see even his own hands, until he glimpsed a distant light. He hurried toward this. A moment later, he was back in the dining hall, the door to his back, as if he had just walked in.

He was trapped. Brandt had finally managed it. He stared at the corpse on the floor. What had the hunter's obsession with him been? Why had he pursued Strefan for so many years? There was so much he didn't know about the hunter, so much shrouded in mystery.

Strefan's first encounter with Brandt had come decades before while he was masquerading as human, passing casually through a village searching for prey. He had hardly spared the tow-headed young man watching him a second glance—returning anyone's gaze too avidly would only weaken the power of his glamer. But suddenly, the young man began hollering that there was a vampire in their midst and rushed Strefan with a spear made of fire-hardened ash. It was a clumsy attack, and easily parried, but now other villagers were staring as well, reaching for weapons or grasping their damaged holy symbols. Strefan, irritated, had swiped at Brandt, tearing free part of his ear, marking him, but there were too many villagers, and he had no choice but to flee. Not only was his night's hunt ruined: the village remained on alert and unapproachable for months after.

He'd been pursued by Brandt in the years that had followed until, suddenly, two years ago, Brandt had disappeared—perhaps killed by another vampire, Strefan had guessed. But tonight, when he had taken his usual turn through the village of Shadowgrange, he had heard a clattering of hooves. A moment later, a rider rushed past on a dark, slaving steed, its eyes red and rolling. The few people still on the streets at that hour leaped out of its path. Horse and rider were there just for a moment and then gone, but in that brief instant, the rider turned and caught Strefan's eye. It was a face he was all too familiar with. That gnarled lump of ear, that cruel mien: Brandt.

He tensed, expecting Brandt to rein up and come after him, but the man just galloped on. Either Brandt hadn't seen him or he had somewhere more important to be, someone else to pursue.

It was probably a trap, Strefan knew. It did not pay to underestimate the man. But for the vampire hunter to vanish for several years and then suddenly reappear in this way, as if by chance? This would be his best opportunity in years to do away with Brandt once and for all. He couldn't resist.

Feeling the thrill of the hunt, Strefan had set off in pursuit.



Path of Peril | Art by: Kasia 'Kafis' Zielińska

He shuddered. How long had he been standing in the house's foyer? It felt like mere seconds, but he felt weaker, as if hours had passed, as if some vital force had seeped out of him. He needed to feed. He needed, above all, to *leave*.

He was jolted from these reflections when he thought he saw Brandt's fingers twitch. Not much, just barely, just enough to make him mistrust that he was seeing it. It could just be his imagination. Was it?

He stared, kept his eyes locked on the fingers. Yes, there it was again, unmistakable this time, they *had* moved. He was sure of it.

Or, at least, almost sure

He shook his head. *Impossible*, he told himself. The vampire hunter had been bled dry: he was dead.

He was still thinking this when the body lurched to its feet.

Alarmed, confused, Strefan turned to flee, but the door still wouldn't open for him. There was nowhere to go.

Swaying, Brandt stumbled clumsily toward him. He favored one leg and dragged the other, as if he wasn't entirely adept at operating his body anymore. His eyes, too, darted independently in their sockets. It seemed that Brandt could see him—caught hints of his movements anyway—but his eyes wouldn't focus. With a simple feint, Strefan easily avoided him.

At least at first. After a few turns around the great hall, Brandt was becoming more coordinated, as if he had learned how his body worked again, and became harder to escape.

Finally, Brandt's eyes did focus. He met Strefan's gaze, and Strefan saw that the light in them was all wrong. This wasn't Brandt anymore, but something else. Something worse.

"Who are you?" he found himself asking, before he could stop himself.

At first Brandt didn't answer. The pair continued their idle shuffle. Then Brandt parted his lips and pursued him with his mouth gaping. Sounds began to leak out, but they weren't words at all. They were the sounds that animals made: the whining of a dog, the squealing of a boar, the yipping of a wolf, the childlike screams of a dying rabbit. All sounds of animals in pain and dying, their last cry. *Where has it collected such cries?* Strefan wondered, and then realized he knew, could feel it radiating from the walls that had sprung up around him. These were the sounds of the creatures that this thing, whatever it was, had lured to this place. The beings it had trapped and fed upon.

Just like him.

"Who are you?" Strefan asked again. He was, suddenly, more frightened than he'd been in centuries.

The body opened its mouth again, but this time there were no animal cries. He heard instead the scream of a baby abandoned to die in the cold. The voice deepened, slowed, became less a scream than a moan, and then faded and dropped to become the voice of an adult male. But it was not Brandt's voice at all: it was the wrong timbre, the wrong tone. The sound was enough to make Strefan's skin prickle, despite all he had seen over the years, despite all he had done.

"Please!" cried the voice, just barely human. "Don't kill me! I'll do anything for you, anything you want!"

And then the voice descended into the gurgles of a throat filling with blood. A dying man.

The body was coming closer now, nearly catching him at each revolution. Strefan had to be very careful. He kept the table between them, and for a time, they circled it, and then the creature simply waded through the wood as if the table wasn't there at all. It came directly for him. Strefan scurried out of the way.

How long could he keep evading it? Would it never grow tired?

"Who are you?" he cried for the third time. Though, he realized, perhaps a better question was not who but *what*.

This time dead not-Brandt stopped stock-still. He then lifted his left hand and brought it to his chest and, in a way Strefan could not understand, forced the hand deep enough into his own chest to touch his heart.

He brought out a finger slick with thick arterial blood and began to write on the wall beside him. *Hlad* he wrote, and then reached back inside for more blood *vora*, he finished. *Hladvora*.

"Hladvora?" said Strefan aloud. It was not a word he knew, suggested nothing to him. But hearing its name, if a name was what it was, the creature leaped at him, its mouth suddenly filled with row upon row of sharp, needlelike teeth. It was still slightly awkward in this body, but less so now: it was transforming the flesh to make it something it wanted to inhabit. The legs had stretched, becoming more birdlike, the mouth had changed, the face itself had broadened, the eyes drifting to the sides.

Strefan drove it back. He chopped it in the throat and nearly lost fingers to its teeth. It came at him again, and he flung a chair at it, and the chair, solid as it had been when Strefan touched it, passed through the creature as if chair or creature or both did not exist.

The creature stalked him, coming closer, trying to corner him. And then it struck, narrowly missing him and losing its balance, shambling forward. He sidestepped it and hammered it on the back of the head with both fists, bringing it crashing down. He was on top of it now, his hands wrapped around its throat, the creature still gnashing its many rows of teeth, trying to bite his hands, as he held on tightly and tried to strangle the life out of it.

And then, as suddenly as it had sprung to life, it went slack. The eyes were dead and staring and didn't blink. For a moment, Strefan kept choking it, feeling this must be some kind of trick, but it was like choking a slab of meat.

With a quick, sharp movement, he snapped its neck and then let go.

The body just lay there. He prodded it with his foot, but it didn't move. Whatever had been in there before, whatever a Hladvora was, it had abandoned this body.

He struggled to his feet. His arm hurt, his side as well. Blood had started to soak through his bindings. He needed to feed, and sooner rather than later.

He tried the door again, again pushed his way through and experienced the same dizzying sensation that brought him back to where he'd started. This wouldn't be the way out. He would have to search for another exit.

As if responding to his thoughts, a door suddenly appeared in the wall at the far end of the great hall, inviting him to move deeper in.

He traversed the length of the great hall, moving toward the door at its end. Halfway there everything seemed to tilt a little, and he had to dig in his heels to keep his balance and stop from sliding through the door. Legs braced, he trundled through. Suddenly, the floor was level again, and because his legs were still braced, he almost fell over.

He was in a parlor now, and again, he felt like there was something he should remember. From behind him, he heard a screech, perhaps a baby, perhaps a crow, but when he turned, there was nothing there. The door through which he had entered was gone, only bare wall in its place. He ran his hands over the wall, but found no crack or join, no way back.

He heard a warbling sound and saw that the wallpaper on the far wall of the room had begun to move and swirl and clump together, puckering and rising to form a lump.



Dread Fugue | Art by: Rovina Cai

There was something about the lump that struck him as familiar. Fascinated, he moved cautiously forward.

As it further gathered, it was, he saw, a face, but whose? He could almost make it out, but not quite. He drew closer, and closer, brows furrowed, peering.

He was just reaching out to touch it when the face opened its eyes and grimaced.

He scrambled back, shocked.

Hello, darling, the face said. It spoke in a rustling whisper that was not human at all, not remotely, and yet in it, he could still recognize his mother's cadences. He hadn't seen her for millennia, but hearing that voice and seeing that face mimicking hers made the memories come rushing back.

He felt he was a child again. He could smell his mother's perfume, the sweet smell of her breath. As he experienced this, the design of the wallpaper drained from the face and left its surface as white as porcelain.

And then the rest of his mother pushed her way out of the wall, on impossibly long legs and with impossibly long fingers. He could see that, however much her face seemed to suggest otherwise, this was not his mother.

He fled as fast as his little legs could carry him. He was screaming now—what had they done to his real mother? Who and what was this other, false mother?

Strefan, the papery voice whispered. *Come here. Mother needs you.*

He fled to a corner of the room, and then, as she teetered toward him on those impossibly long legs, to another corner, and then to a third. His mother gave a tittering laugh.

There, I have you now, child.

And indeed, she did. She sidled toward him and spread her hands out wide, fingers outstretched to prevent his escape. He tried to press his head deep into the corner, tried to ignore his fear, ignore her, but he could still feel her coming, closer and closer. Screaming, he turned to face her and saw his chance—he rushed forward, right at her, and as she swiped at him he dove through her legs. He scrambled back up and ran for the door, even though part of him, very deep down was thinking: *Was there a door here before? I don't think there was a door there before.* Behind him, he heard her tittering laughter—she was enjoying this game, she was enjoying scaring him: his own mother! Only, he reminded himself, she *wasn't* his mother, she was something else, what was it again? It was on the tip of his tongue, why couldn't he remember? La, La, Hla—

And then he was through the door and everything changed. He was no longer a child: he was himself again, thousands of years older. The memory of his fear was still incandescent. He felt exhausted.

No, not just exhausted, he realized: drained. The Hladvora had been feeding on him, drawing on his fear. *He* was the provender this time, the cattle.

And now the creature had drawn him deeper into this accursed place. It was using things from his own mind, twisting them in order to terrify him. Finally, he understood why this place seemed so familiar.

And now it wanted him to believe he was in his father's study, a place that had largely been forbidden him as a boy—he was only allowed to enter if accompanied by his father. Though he had, at times, sneaked in on his own, and had been clever enough not to be caught. He felt the pull on him to believe himself a child again, but steeled himself to resist.

Was it really Brandt I pursued to this place? He wondered. Perhaps Brandt had stumbled here on his own, months back, and had fallen victim to the creature. If the creature had toyed with Brandt's mem-

ories, it would have discovered Brandt's obsession with him. Perhaps it had taken charge of the husk that was Brandt's body, filled it with its own blood, and gone in search of Strefan.

He looked around the false room. What form would the creature take next? How would it come for him? Would it appear in the tapestries this time? The grain of the wooden floor? Would he open the drawer of his father's desk and find it folded within?

He cautiously stepped forward, his eyes darting over all his father's things: the cabinet of curiosities, the well-appointed desk, the stacks of his books, his ivory-headed cane. He reminded himself it wasn't real, that the creature could be anywhere.

He took another step, still careful, still attentive, still cautious, and then yet another. Or, rather, would have if he hadn't fallen through what appeared to be solid floor.

He fell only a short distance but struck very hard, on his same side as in the pit, his injuries blazing out again. He cried out and, hissing, scrambled to his feet, ready to defend himself from the attack he was sure was coming.

But there was no attack. At least not of the sort he had come to expect.

He took stock of his surroundings. He was in a bedroom. At first he told himself it was supposed to be his childhood bedroom, but this was only because he did not want to see the room for what it really was. Only because he did not want to look too closely, did not want to recognize the dark hangings that signified mourning, above all, did not want to see what was on the bed.

The body lay with its hands crossed over its stomach, just as Strefan had left it. He had washed the corpse, had anointed it with oils, had dressed it in its finest raiment and then laid it out in state upon the bed before leaving it and this house behind forever. Overwhelmed with fear and grief, this death, the pain of it, was what had caused him to make the decision never to die.

"Father," he whispered.

It's not real, he told himself. *He's not real*. *It's all in my mind*.

And yet his father seemed real. Strefan felt overwhelmed by that same sadness and hopelessness he had felt the day his father had died. It was as if the death had just happened. He stared, terrified at the corpse, feeling profoundly helpless that he had been able to do nothing to save his father. He had failed his father.

Beneath his gaze, his father stirred and began to open his eyes.

For one brief moment, Strefan experienced a deep and abiding joy: his father was still alive! He had not died after all! But then his father met his gaze, and he sensed vaguely there was something wrong. He had seen those eyes before. They were familiar, true, but they did not belong to his father.

He shook his head, tried to clear it, but felt as if he were in a fog.

His father sat up slowly and beckoned to him, calling him forward. It was all that Strefan could do to resist going. But the eyes: something about them still nagged at him. They were the wrong eyes.

He clung to that. *Wrong eyes*, he told himself, *wrong eyes*, reciting the words like a chant. And as he did so, he began to see more wrongness as well. His father's skin was not quite right. Certainly, the face was right, the bones in the right place, the shape right, but the skin on the rest of the body was less precisely deployed. It was loose and flopping on one arm and too tight on the other. As if his father had too hastily slipped it on.

Slipped it on? Strefan thought.

He was ensorcelled, he could glimpse that now. *Cling to the wrongness*, he told himself, and each time the eyes tried to masquerade as his father's eyes, each time the skin tried to smooth itself out, he recalled what he had already seen that was wrong and saw it again.

Strefan, his father said, his voice little more than a whisper. *Be my good boy and come here.*



Ghostly Mimicry | Art by: Justine Cruz

Again, he felt his body drawn forward, again, he felt the years draining away, but he struggled, resisted. The being in the bed seemed less and less like his father every minute. And here in this chamber, too, he saw in a brief flash as the illusion slipped, the discarded and drained husks of insects, birds, mice, rabbits, a wolf, even a man—it was a den.

But this ruined den was also in the exact shape of his father's room. With horror, he realized for the first time that what was happening to him was more than just the creature plundering his mind and twisting his memories: he really *was* in the ruins of his family manor. Brandt had brought him back here, to this haunted place, where Strefan was most vulnerable.

Where were the twins? He had placed them here as guards to prevent just this. Had they been consumed by the creature, too? If so, if it could take the twins, he was in even more trouble than he had thought.

And then he blinked, and the husks were gone, the stately deathbed returned. But his father's skin—wait, was it his father? No, no it wasn't, he had to remember this. The skin of that *father-like thing* was becoming more and more translucent. He could see, now, that there was something folded within it, another creature entirely, inhuman. Which was why the skin did not fit.

Be a good boy and come here, the false father said again.

The tug was not quite so strong now, now that he had started to see through the enchantment, but Strefan pretended it was. He took a dreamy step forward, a false smile frozen on his face. Then another. And then his hands darted out and caught hold of his father's skin. Weeping, with all his strength, he tore his father open.

There was a great rush of fetid air and fluid. Whatever had been living inside the false father slid off the bed and spilled onto the floor.

At first, he thought it was a wolf, but wolf wasn't exactly the right word—it only looked that way if glimpsed briefly from the right (the wrong?) angle. A werewolf perhaps, caught mid-transformation as it shed its human skin to reveal itself as hairy on the inside? But no, that wasn't quite right either: nothing was quite right.

The creature was red and damp, as if lacking an outer skin. As it struggled to its feet, it left bloody pawprints behind. It seemed malformed, or better yet, half-formed: as if whatever it had been in the process of becoming had been interrupted when Strefan tore its chrysalis open.

It opened its mouth. A chill ran through Strefan as he saw the same many rows of sharp teeth that he had seen in Brandt's mouth. It hissed at him like a snake, then barked like a dog, then sprang.

It knocked him off his feet and was quickly on top of him. He protected his face with his arms and it bit, taking a good chunk out of one forearm. It was very strong. He punched it hard in the side of the head, his fist making a squelching sound, then landed another punch, making the creature rear back just enough for him to lock his hands around its throat.

He choked it, blood oozing through his fingers, as it snapped and hoarsely snarled and tried to get at him. It was nearly impossible to hold onto. He slid backward on his back, still keeping a tight grip on its throat, while it scrabbled at him with its mangled paws, scratching his arms, his chest. A little further, a little further, his arms tired now, and then he was close enough to the wall behind him to ram the thing's head into it.

But nothing happened. The creature's head passed into the wall without harm, though his hands were stopped by it and couldn't go through. Strefan remembered the table in the dining hall, how Brandt had passed right through it. *It's not real, it's not a real wall.* Slamming the creature into it wouldn't hurt it at all.

With a tremendous effort, he threw the creature from him and then scrambled to his feet. This time when it lunged for him, he was ready, stepping slightly to one side and then falling onto it. It scrabbled and bit and tried to get away, but at last, he had his hands tight around its throat, and this time, he squeezed very tight indeed, pressed his full weight down on it, and held desperately on.

Strefan choked it and choked it, until, suddenly, he could feel the Hladvora weakening, its limbs slowing. He squeezed further, his hands sinking deeper and deeper into its flesh.

And then suddenly it burst into a torrent of blood within his hands. He lunged after the blood, trying to slurp it up, but as before it flowed into the cracks of the floor and was abruptly gone, as if it had never been there at all. He was left hungry, starving.

The walls changed, too, becoming first translucent and then, in the blink of an eye, simply absent. Strefan found himself alone again, at night, in the cold, in the ruins of his family's manor house, in what had once been his father's bedroom.

He struggled to his feet. He had to leave. He had to get out. Weaving, he picked his way through the stones.

He stumbled away, falling face first into the snow as soon as he was clear of the ruin. He lay there a moment, waiting for his heart to slow, and then regained his feet and, limping, began to walk.

He was alive. But he wouldn't remain so for long if he didn't feed soon. Too tired to manage to fly, he stumbled on. Perhaps he would encounter a lost traveler and be able to feed. If he did, perhaps he would recover, would live to fight another day.

Or then again—he admitted to himself a little later, lost now in the forest, swaying, barely able to keep on his feet, increasingly aware that he might not have escaped his own mortality after all, that even now, death seemed to be snapping at his heels—*perhaps I won't*.