

Flash of Crimson
By Danny Cove

It was early morning when the first quakes began. They were small at first, a barely perceptible quivering of the furniture, a ripple in the bottle of water, a distant groan as of a giant waking from its deathly slumber beyond the horizon. And then the groan became a rumbling vibration that moved among the floorboards and echoed out among the walls. I scarcely had room to look around before the walls had begun to buckle inward and splinter, the ribs cracking as the house seemed to come down on top of me. I couldn't see, couldn't hear anything but the roar of a home falling to pieces, taking even the air away from me. I could barely even move.

Suddenly a light shone on me and I could hear distant voices calling my name. I don't know how long I had been trapped before they called for me, but I scrambled and shoved and pushed my way toward the voices, following the light through a hole in the debris until at last I could feel the cool air upon my face and hands grabbed at me, pulling me toward freedom. I still had trouble breathing until someone slapped me on the back and I choked out dust into the air. With shaky legs, I stood among my friends beside the remains of my old home.

I walked with them to the edge of town, following the great vehicles that trailed their way across the sky. Something was happening, something new and terrible. The rumbling came again, and this time I heard the sirens, loud at first and then tapering off, only to return again moments later. "What's happening?" I cried out to the others, but no one knew and so no one tried to answer. Together, we stared at the horizon, toward the rising sun where the airplanes were headed. The rumble picked up and some of the feeble fell to the ground, unsteady and disheveled. There was the pungent smell of gasoline and

sulfur, and then the horizon exploded in an erratic show of white and gray. Clouds formed like a wall of pillars, rising up and out, the sky darkening in response. There were screams as some people fell to the ground, clutching their dead eyes, some irises now a sickly shade of white or yellow. The sirens continued to wail as the fires continued to erupt, coming closer and closer before stopping upon a nearby mountain, the dark gray response flowing down into its valley like a waterfall of deathly fog.

We began to back away, further into town, only to find the clouds erupting along the horizon all the way around us. Everywhere we turned, flashes and rumbles and blindness followed. I moved with the large group like a drone, no one knowing where we were going but just following the mindless nature of the collective. Above us, an airplane stalled and fell downward into a house, which exploded outward with a shower of shrapnel, wings, wood and engine parts that left nothing behind but bloodied stains on the granite. The group became smaller and factious, one group braving the only road out of town while the rest of us gathered together at the courthouse, which seemed to be the only thing remaining.

The wounded were laid on bed mats, coats, tables and on any flat surface that could be found. They cried and they screamed while the rest of us scrambled to help them, though none of us knew what to do. As the hours passed on, places to sleep became more readily available. Luckily, my wounds were only superficial.

I watched everyone from a nearby window, watched as everyone moved and worked together, as if they were one, enormous, disconnected organism trying to stay alive and heal itself. But the changing colors in the distance told of such vanity: as the hours passed and the cries and moans passed away, a crimson hue appeared along the mountains

beyond the borders of our town, marching its way along the trees and into the mountain passes toward our town. The forests were turning red, as if the fires were the harbingers of an early autumn. But this red was deeper, and the change much faster. Soon the mountains and valleys appeared to be aflame, a sea of ebbing blood that moved in upon us from all sides. The others began to take notice and watch the approaching plague, but it eventually tapered off close to the village, the few trees on our border retaining their green, though even this seemed sickly and pale.

Days passed while we waited, huddled in the courthouse. Nothing was heard in the distance, no more rumbles, no quakes or bright flashes on the horizon. No planes flew overhead and even the factories seemed to be motionless and silent, waiting like ageless sentinels for a purpose long-forgotten, the last organs of the human frame becoming merely vestigial. No one ventured outside, not even to gather water from the wells or to check that the water still flowed in the nearby river. We gathered what we could inside the courthouse, but there was not enough to care for all, even with the rations, which were meager. But we were used to meager; this was just...less.

I kept a silent watch through my window on the upper floor. I was not always alone, however, for the sick and injured would often join me, watching as the leaves fell from the trees within our town, the bark splintering and cracking even in the oldest ones. The old people were the first to sleep each night, and less of them would wake each morning. The groans of straining muscles grew quieter but deeper, and the once watchful eyes of the townsfolk became cold and glassy as we waited, waited for...we didn't know. Help, maybe. A sign that it was safe to venture outside. All things were wearing out, turning to

rust and dust to be devoured by our age. And even my bones began to hurt.

Four days after the explosions, someone came wandering back into town, stumbling across the now-pink leaves of formerly crimson trees. I was the first to see him and the second to cry out. The man moved slowly, stiffly, unsteadily toward the courthouse following the awestruck voices of my comrades. We burst through the doors and rushed toward him, but Stepan - a local physician - stood in the way, holding the rest of us away from the man. "Don't touch him!" Stepan cried out to the crowd. "Stay away! He's poisoned!"

We held back, watching the man. He looked like an ancient man, over a hundred years old, but with no beard. His head was bald above his deep, dark eyes. His skin hung loose with patches of gray that threatened to fall from his heavy bones. "It's Nikolai!" a woman cried out. "Nikolai, my neighbor, poor Nikolai, what's happened to him?"

Stepan's eyes grew wide as he backed away, watching as the emaciated man collapsed to the ground, small traces of blood dripping from his open jaw. His eyes closed and his chest became motionless. "Do you know him, Stepan?" I asked.

"He was my friend," Stepan stammered quietly. "He...he...how? He was just under thirty years old...what has happened to him?"

"Like you said, Stepan, he's been poisoned." I took his arm and led him to his wife, who guided him inside. His face had hardened to stone before he even stepped through the doors. I looked at the man, Nikolai, as the crowd surrounded him. *They would never listen to me*, I told myself before I turned and went inside to join Stepan.

I was in my window later that night when Stepan came to me, his face as frozen as

before. I said nothing as he looked out into the dark emptiness beyond the courthouse. “His body is still down there,” Stepan told me. “He was a gentle man, and now his body is more poisonous than anything I can think of.” I said nothing as I looked at the man, silent but feeling the empathy roll over me like the rumbling before my house had fallen. “How many of them might have touched him?” Stepan asked. “Do you think they’re spreading it down there?”

“It’s why I’m up here,” I said.

“No, it’s not,” he contradicted me. “You were up here long before Nikolai came. You were the first to see him.”

“True.”

“Why didn’t you call out when you saw him? I saw you: you noticed him but you waited for someone else to point him out.”

“I didn’t want to start a panic,” I explained. “I wanted to make sure it was safe. But when someone else called out first, I had no choice but to join in.”

“Otherwise the people wouldn’t trust you.”

“They already don’t trust me.” I stayed silent for a bit after that. “I’m sorry for your friend,” I told him.

“I’m not broken by my friend,” Stepan said. His voice dropped low as he moved closer to me, barely even a whisper. “My daughter is pregnant.” He sighed heavily after that and I said nothing; I didn’t know whether to congratulate or console him. “The world is at its end and a child is still on the way. The last of my line. What chance does it honestly have when things are like this?”

“You’re afraid of the poison,” I surmised.

“And you’re afraid of tact,” he responded.

“I have been accused of that.” I looked down at the floor as I considered my words. Uncomfortable with the conversation as it was, I reached out and held his shoulder. “It’s going to be fine, Stepan. She’ll give birth to the baby and it will be strong. It will live past all of this.”

“How can you know that?” he asked, his head snapping up, his eyes intense.

“We have no choice but to believe that,” I told him. “If we give up, that child will have no future. Your daughter will have no future. If we give in to the darkness, then there will be no chance for them. Even if it’s a lie, you have to believe it for their sakes.”

Stepan said nothing, but stared at the floor as he walked away. I turned back to my window, keeping watch for the one thing I yearned more than anything to see, though I wished more than anything that it would never come to pass.

That night, I dreamed for the first time since the explosions. And she was there. Her dark hair waited beyond the trees, and she looked at me, her eyes great and green, as she pulled a dark jacket over her shoulders. A smile quivered on her lips and she disappeared among the trees. I tried to follow, but Nikolai blocked my way. After a moment, he vanished into the dawn mist and I could again see her, far away. I awoke with a start and looked out the window at the cool mist that floated above the fallen leaves.

I prepared to leave immediately. Some of my elders tried to stop me. “You’ll die out there,” they said, over and over. “The world is ended, my son. We must simply wait to be collected.” But I rebuffed them. They may have been right, but I would rather die trying to find her than live a little while longer alone.

As I opened the front door, two of my friends came up behind me, packs on their shoulders as well. Zhaison and Geremiah had heard my claims that she was out there, waiting for me. Liza. My fiancée. I walked out to the border of the red leaves and gave one look back at the courthouse, its windows filled with people just waiting to die. But there was hope in there. They still had Stepan.

We walked past the body of Nikolai, dried and motionless, untouched in the street with a pink color around his mouth. There were no birds to claim the body, and no worms beneath our feet. We held our breath and bowed our heads as we walked past.

We briefly held our breath as we passed the border into the red zone. By now, most of the leaves had fallen from the trees and were crumbling beneath our feet, crunching softly, weakly. One look at the trees showed signs of wear, of fatigue in the motionless sentinels that seemed to blow listlessly in the cold wind, showing no resistance. “The trees have been sapped of life,” Zhaison said as we walked past one that had fallen over, its roots torn from the ground. Geremiah and I humored him with a slight chuckle, though we were still trying to breathe only sparingly.

Soon the red began to fade away into a seemingly endless gray, liked we’d walked into the empty set of an old talkie. The trees became less common; the few that remained standing were black and obviously dead, for no living tree was as dark as those. They almost seemed burned and scorched in some places.

Geremiah had his own reasons for joining our expedition. He, too, had a flame in a nearby village, Katya by name. The two of them had maintained a relationship for years, with no distance ever seeming capable of dampening their joy when they were together.

But Zhaison, on the other hand...we had no idea why he joined us. But I, for one, was not one to object to his help. Yet even without their help, I would have persevered. I knew my Liza was waiting for me, and I had to find her, even if only to get one glance, just to know that she was safe, just to know that she wasn't trapped and left to die like the survivors of my own town. I had to trust that there was something out there, with a mind and a heart and a power unknown, that would take care of my Liza. There had to be something there.

On the second day of the gray stillness, we came upon a small lake, no longer obscured and protected by trees and life but now left bare and cold. No sounds emanated from anywhere around it, no fish swimming near the surface, no birds swooping down to take a meal, not even flies or insects. It was as if the lake had been sterilized and then frozen in time. A few rays of sunlight pierced through the overcast of dust that seemed to float above us, and Zhaison saw something floating in the water. Instinctively, he reached out and grabbed for it, only to drop it when he realized he was holding the dead carcass of a fish. He backed away from the shore and toward me and Geremiah. We began to notice more fish floating on the surface, a whole, dead school that had drifted aimlessly toward us while we watched. The fish were as gray as the land, their eyes red and their scales dull and faded. We left that lake thirsty. None of us had risked putting it into our canteens.

It was only a day later when we saw the sign for *Angelarsk*, the city where Liza lived. The signpost directed us along a path around a mountain, a rocky path that was often used for single travelers going from Angelarsk to our village. I had seen that sign often in my travels, and so I knew we were about halfway there. But before dawn of that day,

Zhaison had developed a painful-sounding cough, and he'd begun to taste copper in his mouth. About an hour after we saw the sign, the first of his hair began to fall out, and his skin had started to become patchy and gray.

By evening he was laying beside our fire, gasping for air. His eyes had grown dull and each breath was raspy and strained. But he didn't struggle. Instead, he seemed to welcome the slow wind-down. We all knew what was happening and there was no denying it. As the last of the embers in our fire were ebbing away, Zhaison's breathing began to slow down and Geremiah and I sat close by him, trying to keep him comfortable. "I'm sorry I can't help you find her," Zhaison said slowly. "I feel like I only slowed you down."

"No," I told him. "You saved my life. But...why did you come?"

Zhaison smiled faintly and closed his eyes. "You're my friend. Plus...I had to know that something's out there, too. Now I know there is."

"How?" Geremiah asked, his curiosity outweighing his wisdom.

"It's here," Zhaison said. "The end is here, and it's warm, so warm. Like a blanket." He opened his eyes up and squinted at me. "It's there for her, too." And with that, Zhaison closed his eyes and went to sleep.

In the morning, we left him leaning against the tree with the cold coals of the fire beside him. We were afraid there may have been poison in the dirt, so we couldn't bury him. But that was okay; he wasn't even there anymore.

We wandered for another day before I began to feel sick. At first it was an itch, then a cough, and finally I began to feel drained. We were, of course, using our rations sparingly, but my weakness was more than that. The wasteland grew worse, cold and

muddy, with less trees around to make it anything other than the wastes it had become. The mud was gray and bland, in most places submerging us up to our ankles. I hated this world, what it had become. It was taking my home, and now my friends, maybe even my Liza. Perhaps I would welcome death when he came for me, grateful to be taken away from this place, this lethal realm.

As we struggled on, I began to notice how Jeremiah had begun to take on the same gray hue that covered the landscape around us. His eyes became deep and dark, and I suspected mine didn't look much better. Eventually, my legs gave out and I collapsed to the mire, my hands falling below the surface and disappearing. "Come on," Jeremiah urged, but I only shook my head in response. "Come along," he repeated.

"I can't," I replied. "I don't have it in me. This is where my journey ends, my friend."

"No, it's not," Jeremiah said and, before I had a chance to respond, he'd reached an arm around my back and put my own arm around his neck. With a grunt and a strain, he lifted me off the ground and began dragging me beside him.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "I'm not strong enough."

"You're not supposed to be," he told me stoically. "This is why I'm here. Come on, I'm not letting you give up that easily."

"It's my choice when to die--"

"I'm not letting you give in," he cut me off. "I'm not letting you talk yourself into this. You're going to make it, my friend. You're going to see Liza again, even if only for a moment."

My legs began to work a little after that, though most of the strength was still in

Geremiah. We continued on for what felt like hours before he had us stop. He'd heard something. He set me beside one of the dead trees and I held a branch for support while he moved a few feet ahead, listening cautiously.

A cloud of mud and broken branches erupted nearby and a great, mangy beast rammed Geremiah in the side, tackling him. He screamed as the mud continued to be kicked around by massive claws and a great maw clamped down on his chest, drawing blood instantly. Without even thinking, I broke the branch off of the tree I was holding onto and ran after the creature with a new vigor. I swung with all my might and hit the creature in the head, catching it by surprise. It slid sideways, off of Geremiah, and then snarled at me with a hairless snout and dark, black and red eyes. A stream of blood oozed out of its nose, painting its gray skin that seemed to have once been covered in fur. It opened a mouth lined with yellowed teeth and leapt at me.

I dropped to the ground and the creature went over me, landing in the mud and sinking for a moment before pulling itself back out. I now stood between the creature and the bleeding Geremiah. It came again and again I smacked it in the face with the surprisingly strong branch of the tree. It hunched down in an attack position and I dove to the side, but this time it came low, catching me on the side, tearing my shirt and cutting a shallow gash in my flesh with one of its claws. A rumble issued from its throat as I began to back away from the tree, screaming at and enraging it. As I'd hoped, it ignored Geremiah and came after me, running slowly through the mud, following in my wake.

I came to an abrupt stop at the edge of a cliff, which stood nearly forty feet high. I turned around to find the creature leaping, its teeth bared, its claws extended. With all the strength I could muster, I swung the branch and caught the beast in the ribs, veering its

course off the edge of the cliff. It came so close I could smell its breath and see the bloody saliva that dripped from its jaws. Then its jaws clamped shut as it fell from the precipice. I peered down, seeing the hulking frame as it descended to the muck below. I couldn't hear it hit, but I saw it stop moving for a minute before slowly picking itself up. It shambled away slowly into the wasteland, letting out a single, mournful howl of rotted vocal cords.

I dropped the branch and stumbled back to Geremiah, who had pulled himself over to the tree and was now sitting with his back against it. His shirt was a dark crimson, soaked by the wound beneath its tattered remnants. "Did you get it?" he asked quietly, his eyes only half-open.

I nodded and motioned toward the cliff. "I threw it off the ledge over there."

"Pity," he said. "It was just like us."

I leaned down to inspect his wound, but he waved me away. "Don't waste your time," he said. I backed away but he grabbed my shirt and held me close, repeating himself. "Don't waste your time. We both have very little of it left, though you have more than I do. Use it wisely. Find her."

"You're coming with me," I said, my resolve renewed.

"No," he said.

"But you-"

"It was different," he said. "I'm hurt too bad." He grunted and coughed up a good deal of blood, which painted his mouth the same dark red as his shirt. "There's a difference between giving up and being realistic. I only have a few more minutes."

"Not if you let me dress the wound," I said.

"I don't want you to. You don't need me anymore." Another grunt and he closed his

eyes, trying to fight off the power of whatever was coming for him. He weakly placed one arm on my shoulder. “You can find her, find her for me, friend.”

“Katya?” I asked.

“Liza.”

“But what about Katya?” I pressed. “You can find her-”

“Katya’s dead,” he said, holding his eyes shut as he spoke the words. Small tears formed at the corners of his eyes. “Her town was in the red zone. If it was still there, we would have seen it.”

I bowed my head and touched my forehead to his, trying to hold back the empathy for my friend. “Then why did you come?” I asked at last.

“To help you.” He let out a groan and then relaxed, a smile creeping upon his face. “If I die, I get to see her again. I’d rather die helping you than be eaten away in that courthouse.” He shifted slightly and his breathing started to slow. “You’re wasting time. Go on ahead. I’ll see you soon.”

“Where will I see you again?”

“It doesn’t matter. But you will.”

With that, I gave a faint smile, turned and walked slowly away until Geremiah and his tree had disappeared into the gray emptiness of the wasteland.

It felt like an eternity as I walked slowly, steadily through the muck. I rarely saw my feet, which were always buried in the gray mud. I moved unsteadily, falling often, never wanting to get back up but forcing myself to keep going. She was ahead of me, safe, my Liza was safe, she had to be. If I could only see her for a moment, if I could only know

that she would be well, then I could succumb in peace and wait for her where my friends now waited for me. My head swam and I coughed, always a dark red that I spat into the mud, the only color for miles around.

As I walked and saw the blackened trees rotting away, my anger at the wasteland began to change. I began to remember and see what once had been, the lush green trees, the bushes, the grass. I could imagine all the animals that made it their home, now buried beneath the mud or burned away by the explosions. My anger swelled into a pity, a despondent remorse for what had been done to this world. We had done this to the world, burned it, poisoned it, torn it apart. And now there was nothing left to keep us alive, nothing to hold us together, nothing but the burned trees and endless sea of miry bog.

There was something up ahead, something different than the wasteland: a tree. Not just another dead tree, but one with dark brown leaves, one with brown bark and what seemed to be...strength. Resilience. As I slowly walked, more and more trees like this began to show up, and some of them even had green in their leaves. I smiled imperceptibly, though there was no one to perceive it anyhow. Eventually, the mud hardened and I found myself walking on top of it, and then green patches of grass started to sprout up within it.

I kept walking, though I no longer knew where I was going. My legs were moving automatically now, as if guided by something beyond myself, drawing me like a magnet toward the goal of my journey. Houses appeared out of the mists, and I could hear voices, children's voices. The faces of men and women came out of the houses, staring at me, the mothers holding their children close.

“Mommy, that man has no hair.”

“Mommy, why is that man gray?”

“Mommy, is that man sick?”

“Get in the house, children,” were the mother’s responses, and door after door slamming announced my presence. But I kept moving.

Up ahead, there was a field, with green grass and trees, and a group of men and women gathered together. I could hear words of comfort and encouragement, and I knew what was happening: everyone with family and friends in other towns were here, gathered to pray and mourn and hope. And in the middle of the group, I saw a woman with dark hair and piercing green eyes rise slowly, warily. I smiled as I collapsed onto the grass, and the others came over to see me. I held my hands up, no longer able to speak; I didn’t want to hurt any of them, didn’t want to poison them. I had become Nikolai, a danger to all I touched. With much difficulty, I leaned against the nearest tree and felt my breathing grow shallower. I could feel myself growing dim, could taste the copper in my mouth, could hear the worlds muffled and clear simultaneously, swirling together in a confusing mix of chaos and peace.

But through it all, I could still see her, could see that she was safe, that she was cared for, this dark-haired woman with the piercing green eyes. And with that thought on my mind, I smiled, closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.