

AB: The Beginning

by Graham Guy

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Pete was terrified. Crouching low behind a pile of discarded building materials and clutching a chrome plated torch in both hands as if his life depended upon it he had just seen the impossible, the stuff of nightmares. He was one of two security guards for a construction site, their job consisting of walking round the building a few times every night and checking that everything was where it should have been. If they saw anything unusual, his boss had told them, they were to get back to the hut and telephone for the police immediately and not to try anything heroic. A good plan, Pete had agreed, but now he had no hut, no telephone, and it was looking unlikely he would make it through the night alive.

There was a crunch in the gravel a few yards away, and Pete had to fight every primal urge in his body to stop himself from leaping up and trying to run to safety. He had seen the speed of his attacker the first time, and he knew he could never move fast enough to get away. Instead he tried to make himself small and insignificant enough to be overlooked, silent, immobile. His mind refused to accept what he had just seen, instead taking him back to his first day on the job. If only, he thought, he had gone to work somewhere else.

In the no-man's land where houses and shops faded into the countryside, the ruins of an old gothic mansion had stood untouched for thirty years. The skeletal remains of the walls and fragments of the roof reached to the sky in permanent memorial to the flames that had consumed the building when a bomb fell there during the last few months of the second world war. The building had been believed to be damaged beyond repair but no-one quite had the courage to finish the job and pull it down, and so it was used as a playground for the local children until their parents found out and stopped them, and for drug dealers and addicts to meet and do business until the police found out and stopped them.

But in the late 1970s the site was bought by an unknown developer and they immediately set about rebuilding it to its former glory. The new owners avoided the public eye with ease and much of the work seemed to be done at night, but they were considerate and the building was far outside the busy parts of the town and so other than some general curiosity the locals let the new owners just get on with it.

The renovation work took longer than anyone had expected as the structure of the building had taken significant hidden damage when the bomb hit, but after nearly three years of work the project was nearing completion. Most of the builders had left, and although the site was still surrounded by high metal fences and had a security station by the main gate it was a construction site in name only. Within a few short weeks it was expected to open for business, although it was far from clear as to what that business might be.

Pete had known almost nothing about the project when he had applied to be their security guard, but a job was a job and he needed the money. Almost a year later however he still knew almost nothing and it was starting to concern him. The owners were reclusive to the point of being secretive, and none of the builders involved knew anything other than their own specific task. It was almost as if the work had been deliberately split up to avoid giving any one group too much information. There was much speculation in the village about government departments that might be setting the place up as a listening base to spy on the Russians, or that perhaps it was even the Russians setting up a base to spy on the British. But Pete had seen the owners twice and they did not look like government agents to him. Of course since his only experience of government agents had been through the novels of John Le

Carre he could hardly be considered an expert, but he was convinced in his own mind that whatever this was it was not a secret government project.

During his year guarding the building every night almost nothing exciting had happened. In the summer months he would watch the foxes and the badgers foraging for food in the grounds behind the house. In the winter he would stay in his hut by the entrance to the site with the heater on full trying to stay warm, and only making the trip around the perimeter when he absolutely had to. In short, the job had been completely uneventful, the ideal position. If only he had known then what he would be facing he would have chosen differently. The supermarket had been recruiting at the same time as this place, and although the pay had not been quite as good, the worst he could have expected to face was armed robbery. After the nightmare, the horror of what he had just seen there was nothing he could not face. He almost laughed at the thought; what would he give to be only facing a man with a gun?

A feral snarl from only a few feet away brought Pete back to the moment with a jolt and this time he jumped before he could stop himself. He heard the footsteps behind him, so fast that they almost blended together, and flinging the torch over his shoulder in a desperate attempt to slow down his pursuer he sprinted for a nearby outbuilding used for storing tools. The door was open and Pete put his head down and ran as fast as he could.

He reached the doorway and just for a moment thought he was safe. But as he grabbed the door to slam it shut something hit him from behind and he was thrown violently to the ground. Dazed he rolled over to look up at his attacker and for the first time since he had stumbled upon the intruder trying to force a petrol bomb in through the rear window they were face to face.

The intruder stood silhouetted in the doorway, hands by his sides, unarmed. Relief flooded through Pete as he realised he had been a fool. There were no monsters. The other guard, Dean, would be around somewhere and would have raised the alarm. The police would be on their way in moments. All he had to do was to stay alive for the next few minutes and he would be safe. He started pushing himself back along the floor deeper into the barn to where the tools were stored, hoping that he would find something he could use as a weapon.

The intruder stepped forwards following Pete, but as he moved away from the door and further into the room moonlight shining through a skylight fell on his face. It was the face from a horror film, violet eyes boring through the dark, blood slowly drying on the chin and the shirt below, teeth elongated and savage, ready to rip flesh from bone.

Pete could feel the scream starting deep within him and could do nothing to stop it, but suddenly there was a snarl, a rush of movement, then nothing. He had been watching unable to tear his eyes from the sight before him, but he knew he must have blinked because he saw nothing. One moment a vision from hell was standing right in front of him, and the next the room was empty. He rubbed his eyes and looked around again, but there was nothing.

He carefully and quietly pushed himself to his feet and crept over to the door. The lock had been damaged in the earlier scuffle and it would not close securely, and so Pete carefully pushed it almost closed and through the crack looked outside at the deserted garden in front of him. The moon was strong and cast deep shadows under the bushes and at the sides of the house itself. Anything could be hiding in these pools of blackness ready to attack as soon as he left the shelter of the building.

The memory of what he had seen was terrifyingly clear, burned into his mind in perfect detail and impossible to shake. He ran through it all once more to see what he could have missed, the one clue to prove that this was all fake. It had all started with his normal patrol, ordinary enough until he had come round the far corner of the building to find someone dressed in black holding a lit petrol bomb and about to throw it in through the back window of the building. He had yelled, and the intruder had turned to stare at him, and that was the moment when he had looked into the face of Hell.

He had tried to radio for Dean but there had been no answer. The radios only worked locally so he had to get back to his hut to use the phone, but the intruder had sprinted past him, cutting him off despite Pete having a huge head start. There had been a stand-off for a few seconds as Pete and the intruder faced each other across the piece of muddy land that would eventually become the front lawn, and then he had thrown the petrol bomb straight into the front of the guard hut. There had been a flash, and in seconds the hut was fiercely ablaze, the only phone for at least a mile in any direction completely destroyed. Then coldly and deliberately the intruder had turned to face Pete, and snarled, a low animal sound that turned Pete's blood to ice water as he ran for cover.

He knew that he would remember that moment for the rest of his life. He knew it had to be a mask or stage make-up, he knew the snarl had to be a tape recording although there was no obvious sign of equipment to play it back. But there was something about the way that the intruder had moved that suggested it was impossibly and incredibly real. No make-up would move like that. But, real or not, the intruder might have a second petrol bomb or a gun, and so Pete knew he had to get away as soon as possible.

He looked out of the doorway again, assessing his chances. The road was several hundred yards away, and even when he got to it he had at least a mile to run before the next accessible telephone. The odds were not good, but he had to try. He stood up, readied himself, and started for the gate.

About halfway between the house and the gate was another pile of waste building materials, and Pete had to run past it to get out, but something looked wrong with it and against his own better judgement he slowed down to see what had caught his eye.

There was a shadow on the side of the heap that had not been there earlier, and Pete crept up to it, wishing he still had the torch. The moon, briefly obscured by a small cloud chose that moment to shine again, and in the sudden blue light Pete saw what was laying in front of him. It was a body, twisted in impossible angles and without a head.

He stepped back in shock, hand going to his mouth subconsciously as his brain started working at double speed. At first he thought that it was Dean, the second guard, lying there. But the clothes were wrong, and he realised that it was the intruder, still with a pocket bulging from a second bottle of petrol. Pete breathed a sigh of relief.

“Mr Walker.”

The voice was strong but quiet, made more menacing by its lack of threat than any shout or yell. Pete stopped moving, willing himself to be invisible.

“Mr Walker. I am sorry that you had to witness that.”

Slowly Pete turned to see a man walking slowly up to the far side of the waste pile. An ordinary man, wearing a business suit and carrying a stick casually in his left hand. A man, Pete realised, that he vaguely recognized. “I know you,” he said, almost to himself, but the man nodded.

“Matthias... Levenson,” He hesitated over the surname almost as if he had to consciously remember it. “I own this building.”

Pete nodded, remembering. “I saw you here last month.” He glanced down at the body on the pile. “What just happened?” It took a supreme effort of willpower, but Pete managed to keep his emotions, his terror, in check. Levenson would not understand; the body looked normal now and there was nothing to explain what he had seen.

“This was, unfortunate.” Pete looked worried at that, but Levenson raised his hands in the universal “It's ok” gesture, a gesture made slightly less convincing as Pete now saw that the stick Levenson was holding was in fact a sheathed Japanese sword. “You have nothing to fear from me. I just meant that it was unfortunate that you were here when this happened.” He held out the sword to one side, and for the first time Pete saw that Levenson was not alone, as a large muscular black man stepped

out of the shadows and took the weapon from him. Levenson stepped around the body to where Pete stood and held his hand out, indicating that Pete should lead the way to the main building.

Pete stayed where he was, looking back towards the house and then out to the road. "Where's Dean?" he asked, afraid of the answer.

Levenson looked puzzled for a moment, but then the large black man shook his head. It was a subtle movement, but Levenson understood immediately. So did Pete. "Please Mr Walker, we should talk inside. This has been a terrible night."

"We should call the police," said Pete.

"In good time. It is a way to the nearest phone and we need to make sure that nothing else will happen before we leave here to call." Levenson started walking towards the house, his associate gesturing that Pete should follow. He shrugged in resignation and did as he was told.

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The door opened with a loud creak and the three men stepped into a grand but tasteful entrance hall. Although there was still evidence all around that this had recently been a building site, the work was almost complete. There was little furniture however and even less decoration, but under a dust sheet near the door was a small pile of stacking chairs. The third man, Levenson's assistant, removed three chairs from the stack and placed them facing each other in the middle of the hall. Levenson gestured for Pete to sit, and then he and the other man joined him.

"First, Mr Walker, we should complete the introductions." He indicated his associate with an open hand. "This is Rick, my driver." Rick extended his hand, and Pete somewhat gingerly shook it, barely taking his eyes off Levenson. "Let me say once again that I'm really sorry you were involved tonight," continued Levenson. "We only received information that something was going to happen a couple of hours ago and we got here as soon as we could."

Pete let the information sink in for a moment. "You knew this would happen?"

"Not the details, no. But we heard rumours that our... that someone would try something here tonight, and so I tried to get Rick in to replace you, or at least give you backup. We were nearly too late." The hesitation in Levenson's explanation was not lost on Pete but he let it pass for the moment. "Mr Walker, can you tell me what it is that happened? Before we got here, that is."

Pete looked between the two men but saw nothing in either of their faces to help him out. They seemed to be genuine, but they could just as easily be a bigger threat than the intruder had been. Pete felt the fear reflex kick in even thinking about the man... the thing... outside earlier but he took some slow forced breaths and kept himself under control.

"What can I say? There was an intruder with a firebomb who blew up my hut and then tried to kill me."

"Was that all?"

Pete was very aware of Rick's gaze boring into him as he answered, but he kept his eyes locked on Levenson. "That was all."

"And yet when you saw the intruder outside so very obviously dead, for a moment you actually seemed relieved. Is that a normal reaction?"

"It is when he tried to kill me." Pete carefully kept his voice neutral. He wasn't sure where this was going but his danger sense was not letting him relax.

"I'm not so sure. I think you saw something that you couldn't explain. Something so unexpected that you were rather it was destroyed than have to face it again."

“It was just a man with a petrol bomb!” Pete was starting to let his emotions slip away from him and his voice was starting to crack.

“You didn't see something like this?” Levenson gestured towards Rick on his left. It took Pete about half a second before he realized what he was happening, but then he saw the violet eyes and the bared fangs, and with a yell he kicked back his chair and tried to put as much distance between himself and the now transformed Rick as possible.

“What the hell are you!??” he screamed. “Leave me alone!!” He was pressed against the wall when he spoke, and for the first time saw that the position Rick had placed the chairs meant that he was effectively boxed in to the room. There was no way out through the back because of the building work, and in order to reach the door he would have to go through Rick and Levenson.

Levenson carefully got to his feet and held his hands up palms open. “I'm sorry Mr Walker,” he started. “That was cruel of me, but necessary I'm afraid. You would never have admitted what you had seen without this little demonstration.”

“What are you??” Pete demanded again, scanning the room looking for a non-existent way out.

“We are vampires Mr Walker.”

There was a stunned pause. “What?” Pete stopped looking around and concentrated on the two men in front of him, searching for the signs that they were insane, deluded, or trying to confuse him.

“Vampires.” Levenson was convincing, Pete would grant him that much. Or maybe he actually believed what he was saying. That did not in itself make it true, however. Pete looked back at Rick who was normal again and shook his head in denial.

“Do you think I'm an idiot? There's no su...”

“No such thing as vampires,” Levenson cut in. “Yes, I've heard that said before, many times in fact.” He sat down again, straightening his suit as he did so. “What would I have to do to convince you I wonder?” He stared at Pete for a moment, then pulling his sleeve up a little he held his arm out to Rick. “A demonstration is in order I think.”

“You sure?” said Rick. Levenson nodded and Rick unsheathed the Japanese sword.

“Wait! Are you crazy?” Pete didn't know whether to leap in to stop him or to back away and hide, but before he could do either Rick had drawn the knife across the exposed skin on Matthias' arm. Pete froze, open mouthed as the skin parted and the blood welled up in the wound. It was deep, serious, and would definitely need stitches, but apart from a look of mild discomfort as the sword bit into him Levenson seemed unconcerned.

“Vampires have been around for hundreds of years. Just over five hundred years to be precise. Oh there are legends going farther back than that and descriptions of supernatural creatures of similar description date back as far as records go. But the first true-blood vampire as we know them now was recorded in middle Europe around the end of the fifteenth century.” Levenson stood up and started moving around the small room as he talked, but he was careful to ensure that the arm with the cut was facing Pete at all times. Pete stared at it, not wanting to blink in case it was a trick but there was definitely something unusual about it. It looked as though it was already starting to shrink, healing visibly as Levenson continued his story. “Those first ones were bloodthirsty. They killed for food and they killed for fun. They mostly hunted humans at first, but then they moved on to killing each other.

“In an effort to slow the bloodshed the great houses were formed, aligning the vampire population under a series of strong leaders. It was a good plan, but it failed. All that happened was that the fight became as formal as the houses.” Levenson sat down again and held his arm out for Pete to see. He wiped off the remaining blood and Pete could see that the cut had gone completely. He leaned in closer, but there was no trace of the wound, just some residual blood.

Levenson pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his arm to stop the blood getting on his suit. "But that's not where it ended," he continued as he rolled down his sleeve. "The houses eventually started to merge, and then a sort of government was formed."

Levenson paused, and Pete stared at him hard, trying to work out if he was lying, but Matthias was deadpan. Either he was the best liar Pete had ever seen, or he was telling the truth as he saw it.

"But... vampires?"

"You saw my arm. Can you heal that quickly?" Pete opened his mouth as if to speak but no words came out. He looked up at Levenson in confusion, but it was Rick that spoke first.

"We are not demons, Mr Walker, we are not supernatural 'creatures of the night'. We may be the next evolutionary stage or simply a mutation, we may be the result of an infection passed from blood to blood, or maybe even an experiment gone wrong. We may never know. But Mr Walker, we are far more alike than we are different."

Rick and Matthias stood up, and Matthias opened the door, standing off to one side so Pete was no longer trapped in the room. Pete started to take the opportunity and move towards it but stopped, confused. "What happens now?"

"The authorities will be called and they will deal with things in the proper fashion. They, and your colleague's family, will be informed that he was regrettably killed by an intruder who was trying to bomb the site, and that the intruder was himself killed in an accident as he fled the scene. You will undoubtedly be questioned, but no-one will be looking for an explanation any more complex than that." He looked Pete straight in the eye, but Pete did not feel threatened. It was more as if Matthias was appealing to him to understand.

"We are building something here that is unprecedented" he continued. "This building will be used for research, to help us try to find out what we are, where we came from. ABR will help us to understand ourselves, and until we do, we cannot afford for our existence to be widely known. There would be panic."

Pete nodded in agreement. "ABR...?"

"'AB Research'. That will be the name of this place when it is finished, and hopefully the name of several other enterprises that are still in the planning stage." Pete still looked confused, so Matthias continued. "About the only thing we know for certain about the first vampires is that they were all blood type AB. It might be relevant or it might not, but that is one of the things we hope to find out." He smiled. "Also there is a convenient Latin phrase that is often associated with vampire legends that starts with those same letters, so it seemed appropriate."

Pete looked at the door, and then back at Matthias. "So I'm free to go?"

"Of course. Please take a week off, take as long as you need. This has been a traumatic evening for you I know and you'll need time to get over it." He pulled out a business card and handed it to Pete. "And please call me if you want to talk about anything you have seen tonight, or anything we've told you."

Pete nodded, pocketed the card and without looking anywhere other than straight ahead he left. He would not be coming back to that place for at least a week, of that he was sure. In fact the job at the supermarket was looking more and more appealing by the minute. He wondered if they were still recruiting.

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