

A Seed Planted

“You’re not like the others,” he told me in a quiet but serious voice.

“In what way?” I asked cautiously. I was well aware I wasn’t like the others of my Sabbat hunting group. What I didn’t know was which aspect or aspects he was referring to.

“Let’s back up a moment,” the Malkavian vampire said with a small smile.

“Be my guest.”

“There are many things that drive people,” he explained in a quiet, analytical voice. “And by people I mean vampires, werewolves, and the humans from which we sprang. Each of us has a reason for doing what we do. A primary motivating force. Desires drive and shape this reason. Be it ambition, addiction, the tastes of the flesh, or any of a nigh infinite number of other impulses, it’s form is important. But even more important is the strength with which a person’s motivations are driven.”

He turned in his seat and gestured towards some people walking by our sidewalk table. A table in a nice, neutral public setting where it seemed unlikely either of us would cause a fuss. Well, less likely anyway. “These people have a reason for being out tonight. Greater reasons and lesser. A good example of the lesser reason might be to get food and drink. Moving up the scale there could be some item they need for their house. It may be that they’re hoping for sex later. It is even possible that they are looking for a mate and or perhaps children from the actions they will take this evening.

“Boring, everyday concerns.” He turned back to me and continued, “You and I have some of the same drives. We want to feed. Both of us want a safe, protected haven that is stocked with what we need. Sometimes we even want to create childer, young vampires, green as limes.”

“You’re pushing the limits of my attention span,” I told him deadpan. He wasn’t exactly my favorite person in the world and he was already wearing on my nerves. This man no longer bore the name Raymond Bihd or Rabid has he had been more widely known. Instead, he now went by the name of Lee Johnn. Even as we sat, the word continued to spread through the Sabbat that Legion was stepping in to fill the power vacuum left by Rabid’s demise.

“Then I will get on to the point,” he replied smoothly.

“That would be nice.”

“One of your group has fully embraced the Camarilla. He swims in their politics and lies much like a shark swims through the sea. He is smarter than most of his caste and realizes that there are different kinds of power and he seeks as many of them as he feels he can master.” That definitely sounded like the pudgy Ventrue known as Samuel G. Martin.

“Another is driven primarily by vengeance. Retribution comes first. Sanely or not, he has widened this thirst for blood to include all Sabbat. His fashionable club and other desires lay far behind this driving need. I’m sure you are well aware that the rage is not entirely sane. And that insanity is a source of strength to him.” While I knew he was talking about Robert, I wasn’t sure if I agreed with his assessment or not.

“Two Ravnos in your group,” he stated with what was almost a smirk before his face returned to the bland, professional mask he apparently wore most of the time. “Obviously, they were meant to die. Neither has... which means they’ve grown stronger. That will not be allowed to stand for long because they will not remain ‘controllable’ for long. Still, for the length of their

allotted time, they will continue to move in and out of Camarilla society like fish jumping in and out of a river.” Randal and Kegger. Randal I could work with. He had his uses. Kegger... not so much. I’d considered bleeding him out for my experiments a time or two but decided that was too dark a path even for me. I’d also considered getting someone else to do it for me but that amounted to walking the same path and there were still a few things my conscience objected to. Probably for the best.

I rather pointedly glanced down at my watch.

He continued on as though he hadn’t noticed my gesture.

“The Brujah is only infrequently used with your group. He’s found worth in the eyes of his primogen... for better or worse. That fellow’s unstable enough he could almost be a mistaken for a Malkavian. Push the right buttons and he goes off like one of the explosives he holds so dear. Which is exactly how his masters like him.”

“But I’m different,” I prompted, hoping he’d get on with whatever it was he had to say. I had things to do and people to see. Or things to see and people to do, depending on one’s perspective.

“Yes,” he agreed with a single, controlled nod. “You are outside the system. Always have been in truth. Caitiff are not accepted in Camarilla society. They are given a placeholder berth within the fringes and expected to stay there like good, lower-class vampires. And unlike the others, you know this. Feel it.” I narrowed my eyes and felt my lips compress slightly as the Malkavian continued to get on my nerves.

“Think about it Dmetri,” he told me, his use of my name furthering my annoyance. “The Camarilla is nothing more than a machine that takes immortality and turns it into a bureaucratic nightmare. This is how you must eat. Break the rules and we kill you. This is how you must act. Break the rules and we kill you. Want to reproduce? Fill out this form in triplicate and then do enough favors for someone from one of their ‘true’ clans to decide if you have earned the right to reproduce... and thus put yourself hugely in their debt by their generosity in allowing you to do what should come naturally. Oh, and if you reproduce without that permission, they consider this another broken rule then kill both you and your progeny.” These were indeed some of the big problems I had with the Camarilla.

As he’d hinted, these rules were not a problem for Samuel. He played the rules and the bureaucratic red tape like a professional musician playing his favorite instrument. I’d sometimes envied his ability to get things done and done in a timely manner.

Robert wasn’t interested in any of that. The Nosferatu had his vengeance and when he wasn’t pursuing it, he had his fancy club. His ghoul Rose took care of the red tape for him.

The two Ravnos were fringe dwellers too. But they weren’t a permanent fixture. Sooner or later they’d move on. In fact, Randal was out of the country now. Probably stealing something from a museum in some exotic corner of the world. It seemed quite likely that one or both of them would eventually have permanent accidents. The establishment did not care for Ravnos and their need to break laws and rules.

“You cannot drink the blood of vampires unless they are younger than yourself,” Legion continued quietly. “Kind of ensures that no one will go out looking to diablerize one of the elder vampires. And the old blood tastes *so* much better. Stronger, more potent... everything else is as unto water by comparison. You know this to be true as well for the blood of Bishop Sang now runs through your veins. The leadership protects themselves with stacks of rules and doctrine so that they need not use their wits and power. They have become weak and indolent hiding behind their sacred laws. The base upon which the Camarilla has been built grows ever weaker. You

can't build a mountain starting over a chasm."

"Is this your long-winded, roundabout way of saying I should switch sides?" I asked with just an edge of incredulity tinging my voice.

"It is," he replied with a smile that actually looked genuine. "You've only seen the one side. You should check out both sides before setting up permanently with one of them. Think about this: what are the Camarilla to you? They are not family. They are not friends.

Leaning back he asked, "So just what is the Camarilla to you?"

"You're a big hero now," Gloria told me with a smile as she sat down, holding a goblet of blood for each of us.

I accepted mine with an answering smile and took a much needed drink as I slid in beside her on the couch. "I suppose so. For whatever that's worth."

"I understand there was a ceremony or something?" she asked with an artfully raised eyebrow. Her eyebrows had re-grown but she was keeping a close eye on them to make sure they remained exquisitely artful in appearance. "Your group has been lucky... and I'll admit they're good. You've taken down a Sabbat bishop, crippled their Nosferatu, avenged the elysium slaughter, and now you've added Rabid as a feather in your cap. So tell me, what did our prince give you by way of reward? What did all of you get for that matter?"

"Well," I began as I set the empty goblet down and started kissing her arm, "Samuel got permission to create three childer. He also got some sort of behind-the-scenes business arrangement but I don't know the details of that." With a smile, I slowly pulled her into my lap and continued kissing my way around her shoulder, pulling the strap of her dress aside when it got in the way. "Robert received permission to diablerize a Sabbat. Also, his club has also been put on the short list of possibilities to receive elysium status."

"Really?" she asked, pulling her hair out of my way. "The elysium thing doesn't surprise me, Lascivious is a pretty cool place even by Toreador standards. But the diablerie part. That's just weird." I didn't tell her that it was basically to cover Robert's ass. He'd accidentally diablerized a Sabbat Nosferatu a while back. This was the prince's way of retroactively making it okay without breaking any rules. Whether Robert or Samuel or even Rose had arranged this, I didn't know and probably wouldn't ask. Or maybe I would... I hadn't decided yet.

"Randal had some debt with the prince cleared. I'm not sure if that means he'll be staying with us or not. My impression was that he is now free to move on or not. Right now he's out of the country. I suppose I'll find out one way or another if he returns."

"Mmm..." she moaned as I began slowly kissing around her neck.

"Kegger has been granted some sort of political favor or something. His aunt was being held in New Orleans. Evidently, she's been released. Not quite sure how that got worked out or why. He's out of state visiting her." Hopefully he'd stay there too.

"And Karl? What did our beloved sheriff get for being your erstwhile leader?"

"Karl is now a count within the court. The title came with control over an entire county as well as a large portion of the income from said county." It paid to hire competent people to kill your boss's enemies for you.

"That's everyone but you," she whispered, giving me a kiss before turning halfway around so she could pull off my shirt.

"Yes, I suppose it is since Fred is out of our group for all intents and purposes. I got a

slight enlargement of my hunting grounds and a hundred thousand dollars.” And a pint of the prince’s blood. It was even stronger than the Sabbat bishop’s had been and was destined for a number of upcoming alchemical experiments.

“Oh,” she said with a moue. “That doesn’t exactly seem on par with childer, diablerie, elysiums or political favors....”

“No it doesn’t,” I agreed, undoing the buttons on her dress with a kiss for every inch of newly exposed skin. “But it’s more than I expected.” Rabid... Lee Johnn’s words came back to me with a certain bitterness. But I ignored them.

For the moment.

I needed blood to continue practicing my blood disciplines. In truth, I needed vampire blood. Other vampires’ blood to be more specific. And while I had the prince’s blood for my alchemical experiments and for creating a few of my blood potions, the little blood I had gotten from him wouldn’t last long. No, I definitely needed more vampire blood.

Lots more.

But the man who’d been providing me with dead Sabbat vampires now numbered himself amongst the dead. Victim of terminal lead poisoning. It seemed that if I wanted vampire blood to play with, I needed to get it myself.

Getting into the Infinity that had replaced the Lexus, I followed Highway 67 south until it met up with Interstate 35. I then followed it north for a while until I was fairly close to Fort Worth. From there, I took back streets until I found myself in the section of Fort Worth I wanted to be in. The main roads within the metroplex were watched and I didn’t care to get into a firefight on the interstate with a bunch of Sabbat lookouts or anyone they might call for backup.

Unlike some of my previous arrangements, I wouldn’t be taking any bodies back. No, I had all the gear I needed in the trunk of the Infinity to carry blood back with me. Much more convenient than hauling around vampire corpses.

Obfuscating, I walked through and across a couple of neighborhoods to reach my target house. Seeing as how this was a poor neighborhood, I felt right at home. So much so that I let myself in through the back door of the house I’d come all this way to visit.

Inside, I found a teenage-looking boy sprawled out on the couch in the living room. A woman who looked the same age but was actually at least fifty years older sat in the kitchen sifting through a stack of bills. Both were vampires.

Sabbat vampires.

“Why are we fighting this stupid war anyway?” the kid asked with a thoughtful frown.

Without looking up from the bills, she replied, “Because we don’t have a choice.”

“Now don’t get me wrong,” he told her quickly. “I enjoy the parties. I like the freedom to do whatever I want to do whenever I want to do it. But why do we have to go on guard duty in a few hours? Aren’t we supposed to have no rules? Do what we want, when we want?”

Putting down the papers, she looked up at him. “My darling, we *are* doing what we want. We’re surviving long enough to become strong enough to make our own rules. In the meantime we help Cedric because helping Cedric makes us useful to him. Which means that Cedric won’t do whatever he wants with *us*. He’ll keep us around because we’re helpful.”

“Survival of the fittest. I get it I suppose. So why *are* we fighting this war with the Camarilla?”

“Because it provides us with someone to test ourselves against. And more importantly, if one side stops fighting and the other doesn’t, the side that stops fighting first dies.” She walked across the floor and ran her hand through his hair. “I don’t want to see that happen to you.” She laughed, a pretty sound to match a pretty face. “I don’t want to see it happen to me either.” He pulled her down and they began kissing.

Unhappy with just how... normal... these particular Sabbath seemed to be, I walked out of the house and back to the car. I would take no blood from here tonight. Damned conscience.

My frown lasted me all the way back to Dallas.