

An Unexpected Meeting

“I got a call earlier tonight,” Robert told me as we were touring his new club. The renovations seemed to be coming along well and a great deal of progress had been made since my last visit. “It’s a Nosferatu who’s heard about my search for my sire. Fellow says he has a lead. I’m meeting him tonight at midnight.”

“He give a name or give any other information?” I asked, looking down through the floor at the level below. Why anyone would want one-way glass floors in a club was simply beyond me.

“Nope. Told me he needed cash for a project he wanted to finance; otherwise said he wouldn’t risk the fellow’s wrath.”

“The *fellow*’s wrath? That’s a strange way of... Wait a minute. You don’t even know his name?”

“Nope,” he growled again, his anger and frustration plain to see. “I used to be a highly paid and much sought after fashion model. The bastard jumped me after a photo shoot in New York. I guess he hated that I was such a good-looking man and he wasn’t. Now I’m not either and I’m still royally pissed about it. Pissed enough that I’m going to rip his arms off. After that, things are likely to turn unpleasant.”

“I suppose we both have unresolved issues with our sires,” I replied. “And why in the hell would you want to turn a perfectly good building into an upside down pyramid?”

“Because this is going to be the coolest club in town. And I’m going to get it turned into an elysium. For that to happen it has to be distinct. Outstanding. A cut above.”

“Run by a crazy person?” I suggested.

“That probably won’t hurt,” he grinned.

“Take care with your meet. If you run into trouble, give me a yell.”

“Oh, you can count on that. Now get the hell out of my club. You’re already pulling the atmosphere down. I’m gonna put up a sign that says ‘No Riffraff’.”

“I’d be hurt if that wasn’t so true and I actually gave a rat’s ass,” I replied with a grin. He laughed and I left go get on with my busy schedule.

Gloria Parks. Now I actually knew her full name. Considering why we were here, it seemed appropriate that I remember her name. “Well. I’m here. As agreed,” she stated with a frown, walking into the hotel room.

“Good,” I replied with a faint smile. “I thought you’d uphold your end of the bargain. You struck me as the type to keep her word.”

“Yeah,” she agreed without enthusiasm, closing the door behind her.

“Come sit. Have some blood. It’s a nice human blood, heated to perfection.”

“I’m not thirsty.”

“Well, come sit anyway and take off the mask,” I told her, referring to the gauzy scarf that had been wrapped several times around her lower face.

“I’d rather not,” she said quietly, sitting across from me at the small table.

“Please.”

With obvious reluctance she began unwinding the scarf.

Midnight found me back in my haven. I stood in the midst of my lab equipment busily decanting some of the werewolf blood I'd received into both a concentrated fluid and a much diluted liquid. Once this process was finished, I would continue on to the next steps I had in mind for this series of experiments. My ringing phone startled me out of the happy place the lab work had taken me to.

Putting the damned thing on speaker, I impatiently demanded with a scowl, "What?" Just a few more minutes and my decanting would be complete.

"Dmetri, it's Robert. Something's up. The fellow's here but he keeps ghosting around. He's here, he's there, and he keeps ignoring my calls. I've been obfuscating around myself trying to find him but he's better at ghosting than I am."

"Well... crap, that does sound weird. Want me to bring in the others? After all, if the guy knows your sire, he's probably a Sabbat himself."

"Yeah, that's a good excuse. Call 'em in. I wanna catch this scum. He has information I need. Hell, he might even have information the group can use too. There he is! I gotta go!" And with that he was gone.

It took several minutes to call the others and send them heading towards Robert's location. Conveniently, by the time the calling was finished, I'd also completed my decanting. With everything quickly but properly stored, I ran out, jumped on my motorcycle, and screamed away towards the warehouse district where Robert had been meeting his contact.

Samuel and I arrived at the same time. A pile of bricks turned out to be Kegger hiding behind one of his illusions.

"You guys aren't going to like what I've found," the Ravnos told us.

"Hold off a sec," I told him with a nod back behind us. "I think yonder lights are probably Randal."

"Someone's got Robert chained up to a column in a destroyed warehouse just over there," Kegger declared in a rush. "I think they're using him as bait to get the rest of us."

"Not very good at holding, are you?" I asked drolly.

"I'm impetuous. Sue me."

The lights did belong to Randal's Humvee. Soon we'd explained the situation to him in as much detail as we had.

"This'll help," he said, pulling one of the modified XM-8 assault rifles out of the back of his vehicle. "Simply the best weapon for Nosferatu hunting known to man."

"Karl was wondering what happened to that," Samuel stated as Randal loaded the weapon and powered up the electronics on it.

"And he'll keep on wondering... right?"

"Why yes," Samuel said with a peculiar smile. "He will." It was a smile that said that now I wasn't the only person in the group who owed Samuel Martin. Randal frowned and then nodded. Evidently, he'd gotten the same impression. However, a wicked smile soon replaced his frown and Samuel's smile slipped away. There was a damned good reason Ravnos were

considered trouble incarnate. Samuel would do well to re-evaluate whether he really wanted to press this little issue into becoming a marker. Regardless of how this turned out for them, I certainly hoped this wouldn't get in the way of things until later. Preferably much later.

"Okay, I'll sneak ahead and try to free Robert," I told the others in a whisper as we began heading towards the area Kegger had told us about. "With a little luck I'll free him. Otherwise, I'll act as further bait and we'll see who comes out to play."

"Good enough," Samuel agreed. "Stay in radio contact."

"Wait!" Randal commanded. He then began a peculiar pantomime. Eventually we figured out that he wanted us to change to the backup frequency for the radios. Smart thinking since we didn't know what had happened with Robert's headset yet. It was entirely possible that he hadn't brought it. But one less potential problem was worth a few seconds fiddling.

After a quick comm check, I took off, sneaking and obfuscating my way through the light industrial complex. Robert was right where Kegger had described him. There stood a single, broken cement pillar on a concrete pad that had once been a warehouse. Around it was a lot of open space which was loosely surrounded on all four sides by warehouses. I say 'loosely' because there were sizable alleyways and areas of grass separating the buildings from one another. Walking a quick perimeter around the inside area, I found no one other than Robert. He'd been pretty badly beaten and had several large and apparently deep cuts on him. I pulled out my first whisky flask, the one filled with super-potent blood, and poured it all into his mouth. He didn't stir which I took to be a bad sign.

Looking around behind him, I found the heavy chains were bound together by a large padlock. Despite what television shows portray, most quality locks cannot be opened by shooting them. Quite the opposite, shooting them with small bore ammunition tends to lock them down tight. The hammer might break it... but it might not either. And regardless, the incendiary ammunition I carried would almost certainly make it too hot to work with. "Randal," I whispered into the mike, "Can you open a lock?"

"What is it?" came the very quiet reply.

"It's a big, expensive padlock on the back side of the column."

"Yeah, I'm on my way. Keep the bad guys off of me."

"I'll do my best."

A few seconds later Randal came running up. Twenty feet away from me he stopped and fired at me. Throwing myself to the side I heard bullets impacting on something behind me. A glance showed me a big Nosferatu, who wasn't Robert, staggering back. Another sound drew my attention back to Randal just in time to see him bounce off another column. His rifle had been cut in half and he was bleeding from his mouth. Where he'd been just a moment ago now stood a muscular, arab-looking fellow holding a large sword.

As I reached down to draw the hammer, powerful Nosferatu hands clamped down on me. I felt myself being lifted, slammed into Robert's pillar, and then thrown across the clearing to smash into and partly through a sheet metal warehouse wall.

"I'm hideous now," she sighed, dropping the scarf into her purse.

"That's not what I see," I replied quietly, draining the last of the blood from my glass.

"Then you are blind," the scarred woman stated with some asperity.

"Perhaps. Sure you don't want any blood?"

“Yes.”

“If you change your mind, I’ll heat you some. In the meantime, please take off your clothes.”

For a long time she looked into my eyes. I’m not sure what she looked for nor what she found there. Sometime later she stood up and began taking off her clothing. And one piece at a time the story of just how badly she’d been injured unfolded before me. Approximately half her body was covered in white scar tissue. Some of it was thin and almost transparent, nearly healed. Other parts were thicker, showing where she’d sustained a huge amount of damage. Some by fire, some by the initial explosion that had destroyed her apartment building.

“There, now you can see just what a poor bargain you’ve struck,” she stated, carefully not looking at me. “My clan saw less than you and that was all it took for them to drop me to the lowest of their ranks. I am barely tolerated now when once I walked in power.”

“Toreador are fools,” I replied, feeling the first stirrings of anger. Why I should feel anything for this woman who’d shot me was beyond me. Perhaps it was because I’d been downtrodden before and I didn’t like seeing anyone else in that position. Maybe it was just because she made me horny. “Let me tell you what I see. I see strength.” Moving to sit on the edge of the table right in front of her, I took her hand and then ran my other hand gently over her much scarred arm. “I see an incredible strength of body and spirit to have survived so much damage. To not only survive but to begin picking up where your life left off after such a very short time. Your burden of healing is heavy enough without bearing the opinions of fools on your shoulders as well.”

She tried to pull away from me but gave up almost as soon as she started. “They are my people and there is a power in the blood of Toreador. The same blood flows through all our clan’s veins. It is within our very core being to seek out beauty. I am now only a seeker when once I was also sought.”

“Perhaps. But in them the strength of their blood must be very watered down because I’ve met many Toreador and I have yet to see any but the smallest portion of the strength I see within you in any of them. Turn around, please.” She frowned at me but did so, adjusting her positioning a bit when I didn’t release her hand.

Running my hand down the scars on her back, I whispered, “The forces of death and destruction struck you a terrible blow. But you’re still here. Standing on your own two feet. And though you came to me looking for your pistol, you should probably know that I originally kept the pistol so we’d meet again.” Well, that was a lie. I’d actually been looking for a war trophy. However, it sounded good and it was quite possible the lie carried a core of truth to it. From all the fights I’d been in, I had less than half a dozen trophies. Perhaps my subconscious had been a step ahead. “So I did seek you out. And now that I’ve found you, you’ll notice I’m not sending you away. They say there is beauty in everyone. To me the beauty in you is plain to see. No, I think you were wrong earlier. Despite your clan’s blood talent of Auspex which allows them to see better than others, I think I see clearly and it is the Toreador who are the blind ones.”

Apparently, I’d only been unconscious for a moment. My right eye seemed to be swollen shut and my right shoulder had become dislocated somewhere during the previous unpleasantness. With a grimace, I popped the shoulder back into place, sent some blood around

to do some healing, and checked out just what was happening.

A fog had sprung up in the area. It was fairly thick, swirling for no apparent reason here and there, and visibility had plunged because of it. There was a ritual that could call up a fog. It was limited in scope but the quarter mile area it covered would certainly be more than enough to cover the area we were in. That meant someone studied in the arts had conjured it up. Unlike many rituals, that one could be started quickly and the castor could then move on to other matters. That's why I'd heard about it in the first place. It was a quick cast compared to most rituals and the person I'd been speaking with had been looking for ways to carry that same speed into other rituals.

Dammit. This wasn't good at all.

"Anyone there?" I asked into the radio as I began obfuscating again.

"Kegger's down," Samuel replied, equally quiet. "I'm going to try to get a shot at Robert's chain or the lock with my shotgun. The Assamite is wearing armor under his clothing. I hit him twice, damaging the armor but not the man. And he is extremely fast with that sword."

"That's for damn sure," Randal whispered over the radio. "I'm down to my backup pistol."

"The Nosferatu is almost certainly obfuscating," I told them quietly. "Probably hunting either or both of you. I'm going to try to find either of the bad guys and will light up their nights when I do."

"That should suffice as an attack signal," Samuel stated. "Alright, I'm moving in. Do try not to shoot me or fry me." Randal and I both chose not to reply to this.

Obfuscating to the best of my ability, I moved quickly back towards the column where Robert helplessly waited. Samuel moved slowly and silently up from my right side. And then he quietly moved up from my left side as well. This caused me to do quite the double take. Then a voice from the fog declared, "This exercise has been entertaining but it is now time to complete my commission. You have none of you fought honorably nor particularly well. Prepare yourself for what afterlife awaits you." A ghostly figure came gliding quickly through the mist to swing a sword at the Samuel on my right. At the same time, the Samuel on my left continued moving quietly up close to the pillar. The Samuel on my right ducked the sword strike and fired from point blank range... and missed. The arab-looking Assamite vampire moved quick as a Brujah.

The entire Assamite clan hired themselves out as assassins. High-priced assassins at that. To have one after us was consider to be an honor... perhaps our last.

All things being equal, I'd rather have gotten a wall plaque or maybe an engraved watch.

Was it my imagination or was the fog already dispersing some? It seemed thinner now than it initially had. Quick to cast, quick to fade evidently.

A hint of movement from the corner of my eye drew my attention back to the other Samuel and the pillar. Except it hadn't been Samuel that had drawn my attention. It had been just a shimmer of motion. Whipping the hammer around, I switched to auto and blazed at the invisible Nosferatu hiding in ambush on top of Robert's column.

With a shriek, he fell, becoming visible as he awkwardly struck the ground and his concentration broke. Samuel, already near the post (apparently the real Samuel as opposed to the illusory one battling the Assamite), fired two shots in quick succession at the back to the pillar. Robert fell forward as the chains binding him dropped away. Except he didn't exactly fall, he more seemed to pounce on the wounded Nosferatu before him. Guess Robert had been paying 'possum since he couldn't do much else.

As this, Samuel ran off to join his illusionary twin fighting the Assamite, Robert plunged

his suddenly dagger-like claws in his victim's arms and latched onto the fellow's throat with his fangs. I rather strongly suspected we wouldn't have to worry about that particular Sabbat agent again.

Turning my attention back to the Assamite, I found that Samuel had joined in the fighting as had five more illusionary versions of himself. Seven of them moved around shooting and interchanging positions as the Assamite wheeled and whirled like a dervish, his sword seeming to be everywhere at once. Unfortunately, all this motion made it difficult for me to line up a shot. Obfuscating again, I moved in closer.

Suddenly the Assamite dropped his sword. One of the shotgun blasts had been real and had shattered the fellow's left arm. The whirling and spinning suddenly stopped giving me a clear shot. A three round burst to his right knee, his good shoulder, and then to his chest. Down he went.

Samuel jumped over and grabbed the sides of his head, forcing the Assamite's eyelids up with his thumbs so that he had no choice but to look the Ventrue in the eyes. "Be still! Now, tell me who sent you!" he commanded. The wounded man groaned and clenched his teeth. "Tell me who sent you!" Samuel commanded again. All of a sudden, Randal was there holding the handle of a dagger. A dagger now transfixing the Assamite's temples.

In a rage, Samuel jumped up and yelled, "Why the hell did you do that you stupid bastard! He was about to break and tell me everything!" However, there was something the angry Ventrue had failed to notice.

With cold eyes, Randal leaned over and plucked a wicked-looking knife out of the Assamite's hand. "No," he stated icily. "It was *you* who was about to be broken." He then flung the knife down to stick in the ground right between Samuel's feet. Turning on his heel, he stalked over and picked up the Assamite's sword, which looked old. Very old in fact. Nodding to himself, he looked it over before turning and walking off through the rapidly dispersing fog towards his Humvee. Samuel stood staring at the knife while I went looking for Kegger. It didn't take me long to find him.

He was still alive but this fight had not been kind to him, leaving him with large, deep cuts across his torso, left arm, and both his thighs. Pouring the contents of my other flask into him (normal vampire blood), I carried the unconscious fellow back to the vehicles where Randal was preparing to leave.

"He still with us?" the Ravnos asked.

"Yeah. Could you take him... wherever the hell it is he goes when he's not killing Sabbat with us?"

"Sure. He and I get along pretty well. He's welcome to stay at my place 'til he's up and about. Which I suspect will be tomorrow night."

"I think you're right," I agreed. "And well done."

"Thanks," he nodded. "I'll see you later." And with that he started his Humvee and drove away with Kegger laid out across his back seat.

Returning to the scene of the ambush, I found only a few stray wisps of fog remaining. In the distance I could see Robert sitting with his back against the pillar that had so recently imprisoned him. Still standing next to the dead Assamite was Samuel.

As I walked past him on my way to see how Robert was faring, the Ventrue said, "I'm damned good with my powers of Command. His attention should have been entirely focused on me. He should not have been able to look away or otherwise move. Yet he did. He was a stronger vampire than us but not so much so that he could have defended himself against my

commands.”

“Rabid,” I stated quietly before continuing on to see how Robert was doing. The Ventrue didn’t reply.

Robert seemed to be dazed but otherwise completely healthy. All the cuts and bruises he’d gathered were already healed. The other Nosferatu was undoubtedly dead. Bled dry. In fact, he was almost certainly bled too dry. Putting two and two together, it certainly looked like Robert had diablORIZED the fellow. Crap, that wasn’t good. It could end up getting Robert a death sentence. My own particular episode of diablerie had been forgiven as it had involved killing a Sabbat bishop. They were on the ‘kill at any cost’ list. Were those who assisted Assamites or Rabid on the same list? I somehow doubted it.

They say that the only way another can know that someone’s committed diablerie is by examining said person’s aura. Would that happen with Robert? He was wanting to turn his club into an elysium. The Toreador controlled that process. And the Toreador were one of those clans who had unnaturally sharp eyes. Not a combination that boded well for the big Nosferatu’s future plans... or, if he wasn’t careful, his very existence.

Not love-making but sex. We began slowly but soon we were both going at it with a wild abandon that reminded me of my living days. Afterwards we lay holding each other. Naked fleshed pressed against naked flesh. Neither of us said a word for a long time.

For myself, It had been a long time since I’d simply held a beautiful woman in my arms. And had been held in return. While I wouldn’t have traded away the sex, I was surprised to find that just being in her arms and holding her in my own meant a great deal to me. I would never have believed that so simple a thing could touch me so.

“You really do find me beautiful, don’t you?” she asked sometime later as she dressed.

“Yes,” I replied quietly.

She stood and looked at me a while before walking over to the door. Halfway into the hall, she turned and said, “I’ll see you tomorrow,” before gently closing the door.

Robert stood up slowly. “That was nice. And I suppose I see why it’s illegal.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“Mmm. Tasty. Do you suppose it’s true that diablORIZING them destroys their soul?” he asked.

“I couldn’t say. I’ve never seen a soul so I wouldn’t know what, if anything, could destroy one.” A sigh came up from nowhere and was quickly gone. “They say it marks your aura for years. At least three but depending on the individual as much as ten.”

“That’s going to complicate things a bit, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I replied with a thoughtful frown. “Yes it is.”

“Samuel,” I called. “We’re about ready to wrap things up here. You done?”

“Yes,” he agreed with a scowl.

“Alright, let’s....”

“What is that?” Robert asked, pointing high up on one of the warehouses.

“I do believe that would be a camera mounted up on the side of that warehouse,” I replied

quietly, looking further afield now. “And another there... and there. All of them pointing in our general direction at that.”

“We’re not done here,” Samuel declared, cocking his shotgun.

Pulling out a fresh magazine, I popped it into the hammer.

“Gentlemen, let’s go hunting.”