

## Dances with Bums

Looking around the nearly empty, formerly abandoned house I was currently calling home, I couldn't help but think that I needed to make some changes. Neither the poor condition of the house nor the low quality of the neighborhood inhabitants were a big concern for me. I was used to both. I knew them all too well.

Which brought up a fairly serious security concern.

No one was likely to come rummaging around looking for valuables. One look at the exterior was enough for even the dumbest crackhead to figure out there were greener pastures elsewhere. However, there was a remote chance that said crackhead might decide to use my little haven to light up. And that brought with it the inherent risk that the scumbag might burn my house down. The house itself I wasn't worried about. Such places were a dime a dozen. It was the books I had stored under the floorboards I was fretting over. Gilch's last gift to me. Well, that and the fact that I might be asleep in the house during the day. The books and I both deserved a better place to stay.

What I needed was a new haven. However, until I found one, I required a security force. Hmm. Some regular volunteer blood donors would be handy as well. Perhaps I could double up on this.

Walking the neighborhood, I was pondering this and not so coincidentally looking over some of the varied homeless people, who called the area home, when I received a call from Robert. He wanted me to meet him at the dive he called a club. Said he was calling the others in as well. Agreeing to meet him there, I walked a few blocks away and found a drug dealer on a corner. He was new to the area. I introduced my pistol to him and he was so pleased to meet it that he gave me the keys to his car. All his money too.

Sometimes the generosity of people simply amazes me.

Robert's club really wasn't a dive. It just tended to cater to the yuppie crowd which I usually associate with a lower species of vermin. The building stood two stories, constructed of brick and stone. He'd bought the place and turned it into a club a couple of months ago. Said he'd needed a new source of income. Evidently, he'd been a model back in the day. Having been turned into a Nosferatu, he damned sure couldn't do that anymore. His Nosferatu gift of ugliness was scaled skin. Perhaps that was one of the reasons he hated the Sabbat so much. A Sabbat Nosferatu had remade him in this new image.

Lascivious, as he called the place, was upscale enough that Samuel didn't mind visiting. Despite Robert's obvious efforts at turning it into a nice place, I didn't really care for it and tended to dress down even further than usual when visiting.

The big Nosferatu's ghoul assistant, Rose, was waiting just inside the door. Robert would have told her we were having a meeting. Being the smart, able woman she was, she would therefore be staying by the door to make sure the bouncers didn't give Fred or me an excuse to beat the crap out of them. Kind of a shame really.

"Evenin' Rose," I greeted the rather cute ghoul. Ghoul was a such a terrible name. She looked Swedish rather than ghoulish.

"Good evening Dmetri," she responded with a sigh. "Would it kill you to dress up a little?"

"Probably not but why take the chance?" I responded as I breezed on, giving her a wink as I passed by. Behind me, I heard her warning the two bouncers about me as I walked over to the closed, back stairs door. Looking up at the camera, I flashed my fangs in a big smile. The door

buzzed open immediately. Upstairs, I wandered into Robert's office.

Robert sat behind a big desk that was covered in paperwork. Samuel sat in a chair across from him dressed in an incredibly expensive suit while Robert's clothing was merely pricey and stylish. I wandered over the fridge built into the wall and pulled out a packet of blood. Robert sighed which brought a smile to my lips.

"So? What's up?" I asked just before draining the packet.

"Make yourself at home Dmetri," Robert told me with a half frown.

"I always do, don't I?"

"I suppose you do at that," he with a small smile as he shook his head. "So far as news goes, I'm afraid we're not going to be seeing Fred for a while. Seems his primogen, that's the person locally in charge of his clan, had need of his services and managed to wrangle him away from our group for a while." He looked at the surveillance monitor on his desk and sighed again. "Hopefully, it won't last long. Brujah are handy to have around in combat." Walking halfway around his desk so I could see the appropriate screen, I found a view of the front door which currently featured Rose taking Kegger's stick away. It appeared that she wasn't having any luck getting him to give up the skates though. As I watched, Randal came walking up. He and Kegger shook hands and together they entered the club.

"Do you think the Brujah primogen, whoever it is, might be susceptible to bribery?" I suggested.

"His name is Josef Axis," Samuel informed me in his usual, clipped tone. "And while I'm sure he's susceptible to many things, you'd have to find the currency that best moves him."

"It was a joke," I replied a bit exasperated, rolling my eyes to Robert, who grinned.

"No," Samuel responded with a frown. "Your statement was not. Jokes are by definition funny." This set Robert to laughing so hard he had to try twice to buzz in Randal and Kegger. I even smiled at that, though the well-to-do Ventrue did not.

"Good evening gentlemen. And Dmetri," Randal said by way of greeting as the two of them walked into the office.

"Now that was a joke," Robert said, still laughing from Samuel's declaration.

"That was the truth," Samuel countered.

"We miss somethin'?" Kegger asked as he rolled over to a chair and sat.

"Just a little discussion on humor," I replied, frowning at Robert. "Nothing worth repeating though."

"Okay then," Randal said as he sat next to the younger looking vampire. "Here we are. Now just why are we here?"

"Yes, Robert. Why are we here?" I seconded.

"Remember the motorcycle group that hit the Elysium?" Robert asked, sobering up almost instantly. At mine and Samuel's nods he continued. "Karl's been doing some investigating. Turns out that the bunch that hit the club were only half the gang. The other half is still around. They're under the control of a Sabbat Brujah by the name of Jack Kiesel. They've been sticking pretty deep within Fort Worth but they're still rattling around."

"Heard about the Elysium hit," Kegger declared. "Way not cool." Randal nodded his agreement.

"Anyway, Samuel's people have also gotten a couple of hits off the cell phones we collected from the apartment complex fiasco. Seems a couple of the group leaders had the same number. One of them even had it written down on a piece of paper in the wallet. It's through that fellow that we know a new name: Rabid."

“Rabbit?” I asked.

“Ra-bid,” Robert corrected. “As in a mad dog.”

“Do we know anything about him?” Randal asked quickly before I could make another comment.

Robert nodded. “Samuel and I have been asking some quiet questions. Turns out Rabid is fairly well known within Sabbat circles. They say he’s the worst sort of crazy Malkavian.”

“Malkavians are all crazy,” I said with a frown. “Literally. How can one be worse than any other?”

“He’s a shrink,” Robert explained seriously. “A psychiatrist. And he’s suppose to be an expert in the use of the Malkavian talent of Demetation. That means he can make you just as crazy as he is.

“Like that’s a stretch,” Kegger muttered.

“Interesting,” I replied, ignoring the young-looking Ravnos. “This brings us up to date?” At his nod, I asked, “So did you just call everyone in for a chat or are we gonna do something?”

“I’ve managed to acquire the location of a bar the bikers are hanging out at tonight,” Samuel replied. “Two of the phones we recovered had the numbers for members of the gang. My people managed to triangulate the signals. I thought it might be nice to take the battle to them.”

“Now you’re talking,” I smiled.

“I thought you might appreciate it,” he replied in a tone that was just flirting with being insulting.

“Let’s move,” Robert said, throwing a frown Samuel’s way and a quick, worried glance towards me as he led us out of the office and down the back stairs. We followed him out the back where we found a new, armored SUV. The last one was evidently still out for repairs. “Everyone got your gear?”

“Rose has my stick,” Kegger replied.

“Try a gun,” Robert suggested. “There’s a couple of shotguns in the back. Careful, they’re loaded.”

“I don’t like guns.”

“Neither do I. Get one anyway,” he ordered in a no-nonsense voice as he climbed into the driver’s seat. Kegger frowned but did so anyway. Robert could be quite intimidating when he wanted to be.

“So, what’s the plan?” Randal asked after we’d been on the road for a few minutes.

“Dmetri’s going to scout the place out and find our boy Jack. He’ll be the one in charge. Once Dmetri finds him, we’re going to go in and sweep the place clean... except for Jack. Him we want to talk to. I suppose if we were to take in a few other prisoners, no one would complain.”

“I would,” Kegger declared immediately. “There’s not much room back here.”

“I always wanted a motorcycle,” I declared. “I’ll ride back on a donated one and you can share the back seat with our prisoners.”

“Gee, thanks,” he replied, pulling out some brass knuckles and sounding happy as could be. Strange kid.

Now this place really was a dive. Robert occasionally despaired because I lived in the hood but this place made my neighborhood look good. It resembled nothing more than a series of rundown tin buildings attached together by a series of ramshackle doorways and halls. To my eyes it appeared

that a good wind would blow the whole thing over. There were probably forty motorcycles parked in front as well as a few cars. Robert and the others were parked almost half a mile down the road. Not going to be a lot of good to me if I ran into trouble. As usual, I was relying on myself.

Obfuscating my way around back, I found a couple of employee entrances. One led me into a back storeroom. I went ahead and poured a bottle of whiskey over the rest of their high octane stock.

Just in case.

The other entrance led me to a short hallway with a cramped but empty little office to the side. I breezed on past it and continued on to where the hallway ended, which was behind the bar. This was their main bar and looked out over their tables in the main room.

And without question, it was most definitely a Sabbath bar.

I knew this immediately from the three human bikers that were hanging from the ceiling. Dangling over a number of pitchers, their legs had been taped together and their ankles slit. All three were quite dead but two of them were still dripping. The one who was no longer dripping was now providing entertainment by acting the part of knife target. Sabbath from all around the room were throwing everything from pocket knives to machetes at the body. There was also a large velvet Elvis picture in here which I decided had to be the ultimate in bad taste.

After a while, I figured out which thug Jack was. There was a real looker sitting on his lap. Only truly good-looking piece of tail in the place. However, the really big giveaway seemed to be all the people who kept calling him Jack. He also seemed pretty free with the order giving which further suggested he was the correct Jack.

Using the new, hands-free radio, I explained to the others how many I'd seen and where they were in relation to our main target as I slowly walked back outside. Looking over the assembled bikes out front, I eventually found one that I liked. It was a Harley of some sort. What can I say, I'm not a big motorcycle or car guy. Anyway, having chosen my new ride, I began pushing it well away from the others as I waited for the other members of my squad to put in an appearance.

Putting the kick stand back down, I heard a click from behind me. "You're not too smart, are you fellow?"

Turning slowly, I found a biker. "Evidently not," I agreed. "Who's that behind you?"

"You're not going to fool me with a simple trick like that," he informed me just before Robert twisted his head around to the musical sound of breaking bones.

"Looks like you're finally making some progress on your Obfuscating," I replied. "And your timing too. Most excellent." I found it incredibly ironic that I was teaching a Nosferatu how to sneak around.

"Right. You've been inside. What do you suggest for going in?"

"I think we should do the old Nosferatu-in-the-bathroom gag," I replied.

"What?" he asked, obviously never having heard of it.

"It's easy. We sneak you around into the bathroom. Then, as the punks come around, you kill them."

"Dmetri, you said they're pretty much all vampires. Vampires don't have much use for bathrooms."

"True enough," I agreed, "But the same idea applies to any room. We just have to choose the one that the thugs are likely to visit one or two at a time. And if all else fails, I'll start leading folks to you."

"Sounds reasonable. We can have Samuel waiting by the back entrance. I'll have Randal remove all the fuel caps from the bikes. When things start, he can start a domino fall and light 'em

up. That sort of thing always seems to distract bikers.”

“What about Kegger?” I asked with a sigh, making sure my mike was off for the moment.

“On my signal, he’s going to drive the truck into the bar through the side wall. He said he doesn’t drive well, but if he can just manage to hit the building, he’ll create on hell of a distraction.”

“Good enough,” I agreed with a grin. “Let’s get started.”

Later, as I wandered aimlessly across my hunting territory, I decided to mostly stick with the low-key assistants. Bums would work just fine for now. And, as it turned out, I had a new case of whiskey that I hadn’t needed to set on fire after all. Top-grade wino bait. Each bottle I’d liberally laced with my blood. A few doses of that and they’d be every bit as much ghouls as Rose. Just lower class. And inexperienced. And not as good looking. Alright, so they wouldn’t be much like Rose. Still, they’d follow me. I had no doubt about that. And likely provide all sorts of useful information. At least I hoped so anyway.

Tonight’s haul had been pretty good. We’d gotten Jack Kiesel. He’d been shot up a little more than expected but he was still kicking. The girlfriend got away but I had the license plate number for her car and her phone number off Jack’s cell. We’d have an address for her soon enough.

Sometime soon we were going to run out of luck. We were succeeding so far largely due to the element of surprise. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t always be on our side.

I didn’t think I was really going to like the motorcycle. I’d probably trade it to Karl for some cash and maybe a spare pistol or some grenades. Probably go ahead and pick up my bounty money while I was at it. Hmm, speaking of guns, if the ghouls worked out, I might teach a couple of them to shoot and let them stay at the house. Worth thinking about I supposed. Sometime soon I was going to have to seriously look into finding a better place to stay. This one had been barely adequate for a quick find, but it didn’t live up to my standards of durability.

Across the way I spotted a fellow I’d seen around the neighborhood before. For a homeless guy, he dressed pretty well. With a smile on my face I walked over to him. Ghoul number one, coming right up.