

Rat Killing

Why hadn't Rabid tried to kill the others? He'd tried to blow me up by means of using my own people to do the dirty deed. Why hadn't he tried the same for all of my little Sabbat-hunting group? Hmm. It occurred to me that he actually had made an effort. When Robert's club had been blown up, most of us had been in it. But then the Malkavian bastard had made a special effort to take me out.

Why?

For that matter, why had he tried to blow up Karl and not Letty? Again, I thought of my own answer to that. Letty the Wolf was well named. She frequently turned into a wolf and patrolled around out in the country looking for werewolves. The rumors that she was friends with some of these werewolves were an interesting spice to the story but didn't really seem relevant. The fact that she followed almost no pattern in her wanderings and turned up at odd times and in strange places did. Hard to blow someone up when you don't know where they'll be or when they'll be there.

Bilious and I seemed to get along well enough. Maybe I should go talk to him some more. I needed new leads. The trail leading back to Rabid was turning cold fast and it never had been exactly 'hot' to start with.

However, before I got a chance to signal a meeting with him, my cell phone rang. "It's me," Samuel declared. "We have a mission. We meet in the Sheriff's office at eleven."

"Alright, I'll..." The connection dropped. Asshole had hung up on me. Hardly surprising but aggravating nonetheless.

Walking to my Lexus, I considered some of the recent developments in my life. Rather reluctantly, I'd told Karl about accidentally diabloring the Sabbat Bishop Sang. He'd demanded a more detailed explanation and I'd given him one. He'd then gotten on the phone and had called the prince himself. And good to his word, the prince had pardoned me. That had been something of a relief.

Driving to the sheriff's office, I continued thinking. I now had a panel van. Having to replace the trunk lining of the Lexus because of all the blood in it had been enough to convince me to keep a nice plastic covering within said trunk. It had also finally won me over to the idea that I needed something else for hauling stuff around. Particularly should that something be bleeding. Therefore, I'd found a big van from a cleaning company and had presented the owner of the van and the company with thirty large in cash for the van and the title. Having a big van that read, 'It's All About Cleaning' on the side might not be terribly macho, but it did give me a good reason to be out and about at night. And in my line of work, the cleaning instruments and supplies that came with the van were bound to come in handy.

Speaking of bloody messes in my trunk, I now had a dog. Sang, which turned out to be French for 'blood', changed into a ghoul rather than a vampire. 'Sang' being what I'd named the beast. Seemed fitting. Every morning he got a pound of hamburger meat mixed with a little dog food and a few drops of my blood for breakfast. One of my guys took him for a walk two or three times a day. A dog made them seem that much more ordinary. And now the fire station had a guard dog.

Neither of these things were earthshaking but both seemed like good additions. And speaking of additions, I needed additional money and a new source for vampire blood. Maybe it

was time for me to go do some solitary hunting. It had been a while since I'd gone into hostile territory solo. Maybe it was time to knock some of the rust off. Of course, Karl had said that we could have extra blood as one of the additional resources he'd allotted to us. Maybe I should just take him up on that. Action and anonymity versus convenience and the big Brujah's curiosity. Tough decision.

However, for the moment we had a mission.

Arriving at the sheriff's office, I joined everyone in the big conference room. Kegger still wasn't here but he seemed to be the only one. We chatted for a bit and eventually our alternate Ravnos showed up. As he began sitting down, Karl's people closed the doors and the Brujah sheriff stood up.

"This is going to be a joint strike with Letty's people." Dead silence greeted this. "Don't go throwin' all that hostility my way," he frowned. "It's not what you think. Letty doesn't know what's going on. I just asked her to pound some of the Arlington-side, Fort Worth watch stations flat. That's the entirety of their participation in this mission."

"Are we actually going into Fort Worth?" I asked.

"Yes, indeed you are."

"Then she and her people know too much," I replied. Most of the crew nodded their agreement.

"Give me some credit," the big, black vampire grinned evilly. "It's a distraction. You'll actually enter Fort Worth coming south from Denton. I've got a semi already loaded up with your armored car hidden safely inside." Well, that didn't sound too bad.

"Sounds pretty good," Randal admitted.

"Yeah, I've also got a fellow who's going to try rocketing bishop Vengeful's car. They're most likely to assume that the attack on the watch stations was clearing the way for the rocket attack."

"That *does* sound pretty good," Robert told him with a feral grin.

"So who's our target?" Kegger asked.

"The Sabbat Nosferatu nest under the Lake Worth power station on the far west side of Fort Worth," he replied. "We suspect the Sabbat Nosferatu are a big source of the enemy's information about us. That ends tonight." Wow. That wasn't going to be easy. He proceeded to show us various blue prints of the area as well as known guard points. "Now that I've told you about the hard part, I've got some special weapons for you that will make your mission a lot easier. The army is still playing around with these," he said, pulling a cover off a side table, revealing a number of assault rifles. "These are X-M8s. The 'X' is for experimental. They have integrated camera systems and that's why we have them. As you may or may not know, the Nosferatu talent of Obfuscation only works on people and some animals. Cameras are unaffected by it. I've run these through the prince's master gunsmith. He's made a few minor changes and they're now more reliable than ninety nine point nine nine percent of the weapons you'll ever find." With a gesture, he indicated we should go check them out. We did so. They were nice.

"I read about these a while back," Randal stated. "Aren't there supposed to be twenty millimeter grenade launchers on them?"

"Sorry, they got lost somewhere along the line."

"We should go down and fire a few hundred rounds through them," Samuel stated. "It is most unwise to enter battle with a weapon one is not completely familiar with." Despite the fact that we evidently weren't going to get to play with grenade launchers, we all agreed and

gathering the weapons and assorted gear, we trooped downstairs and did just as he suggested.

Very nice.

With fresh magazines and a heavier-than-normal array of body armor, we drove up to Denton. There we walked into the back of a semi and on into the armored SUV parked therein. The drive into hostile territory seemed to take hours. Eventually we stopped and the back door opened. Robert drove us out into the warehouse the truck was now parked in front of and then down a ramp back outside. From here we should theoretically be only a few miles away from our entry point into the Sabbat Nosferatu nest.

Robert and I were the last two to get into position. I spent a few minutes explaining just how a person obfuscating could find another doing the same. Neither the task itself nor explaining were easy but the big Nosferatu was bright and, despite my occasional misgivings, also talented. Soon enough, he'd put it to the test and discover for himself how well he'd learned. And in the meantime he had the rifle with its integrated camera.

As Robert dropped down into the underground tunnel, I closed and locked the pressure door behind him. That done, I took off at a sprint towards my own entrance. Robert and I were the hounds. We'd flush the Sabbat Nosferatu towards the others or simply kill them outright. Either way was good so far as he and I were concerned.

Reaching my entrance, I checked it carefully before stepping inside and closing the door behind me. The camera on the rifle projected a beam of light that wasn't visible to the human eye but the camera picked it up just fine and automatically switched to low-light mode. I didn't think it was original to the setup but didn't honestly care enough to find out. A burst of static came through the headset. Probably the best communications would get until we were much closer together. Still, I took it to be our go signal.

Time to begin the hunt.

With a feral smile I began walking. Along the way I did my damndest to spot any traps I felt sure would be in here. However, before I found a trap, I located my first Nosferatu. Without hesitating, I centered the crosshairs integrated into the camera display over his chest and blazed away. In such a confined space the roar was deafening and he dropped like a rock. No silencers here. No. The best way to flush out one's prey was to leave no doubts that you were coming for them.

Still, all things being equal, I wished I'd brought ear plugs.

A second Nosferatu stuck his head into the corridor to see what was happening. He probably never heard the shots that messed up the wall next to him so badly. Further down the passageway, another one stepped into the hall. Like the other two he moved on to whatever afterlife awaits vampires.

While I reloaded, several more Sabbat entered the corridor from different entry positions. Spotting me, they began quickly converging on me. This is what Boomer, a.k.a. Fred, would have called a target rich environment. With a joyful yell I blazed away at them. Blood sprayed and bodies dropped.

The grenade bouncing into the passageway didn't exactly come as a surprise but it was still unpleasant. With a lunge I dove for a side corridor as I began obfuscating myself. Not quite fast enough; shrapnel caught my right shin. Rolling back after the blast, I sat sideways in the edge of my sheltering corridor as I split my concentration between watching down the main

corridor with the camera display and watching down the cramped little hallway I now occupied for approaching Sabbat. And then there was the chunk of metal in my shin. It began slowly pushing its way out of me as I focused my blood on healing the wound.

“That’s not Nosferatu blood I smell!” a loud, echoing voice declared.

Far down the hall someone stuck their head into the corridor. The crosshairs on the display automatically adjusted for the range and I went ahead and shot the fellow through the temples. This was one nice rifle!

With a tiny clink the shrapnel dropped out of my leg and onto the floor.

From my left I heard the faintest of sounds from the small side hall which I barely occupied. Not wanting to give the enemy any chance to do anything else unpleasant to me, I raised my left hand and summoned forth a small flame. A flickering red-orange fire spring into being in the palm of my hand. A moment later I cut loose with the full force of the inferno and the entirety of what I could see in the small corridor erupted in flames. Flames I knew were rushing away from me very quickly but all I could see was the wall of fire before my eyes and the roaring in my ears. Such beautiful patterns the flames made. Truly awe inspiring.

The realization struck me that I’d been sending out my inferno for too long. Not only was I much lower on blood but I’d also been neglecting the main corridor for several critical seconds. Cutting the fire off, I gave a quick check of the camera which revealed a Nosferatu with a large, old-looking axe not twenty feet away and another with a combat shotgun not far behind him.

Finding they had gotten that close wiped the smile right off my face.

Firing a short burst at the second fellow, I immediately redirected the bullets to the fellow with the axe. And much to my surprise I suddenly found said axe sticking out of the concrete not an inch away from my head. He must have realized what was about to happen when I took out the shotgun guy.

Damn but that had been close.

Walking silently to the corpse, I took a drink from him while keeping an eye on the camera. Once I had enough blood to begin obfuscating again, I did so and moved to the next corpse. Gal, not guy. From her I got enough blood to satisfy my immediate thirst.

Hmm. She had grenades on her belt.

Feeling charitable, I donated them to the various side passages I came across as I hurried down the main corridor. When I ran out of grenades, I took a minute to heal my ears again. Being able to hear was just too useful in circumstances such as these.

From far away I heard the faint echos of more gunfire. Time to get a move on before the others killed all the Sabbat.

While our initial attack lasted an hour and a half, the cleanup took almost seven hours. During the final moments of the initial assault, Randal had been staked while acting the anvil to Robert’s hammer. This left him in torpor, a coma-like state in which he was unconscious and completely helpless. Torpor wasn’t always the result though, sometimes actual death was. Luckily for Randal, not this time. Robert had closed on Randal’s position just in time to prevent the Sabbat who’d staked him from fleeing with the hapless Ravnos. Unstaking a vampire wasn’t particularly difficult. Because of this, staking had actually become a technique sometimes used for transporting relatively low value prisoners you didn’t want to risk causing trouble. However,

Randal would have to wait until later for us to bring him back around.

During the cleanup, Samuel kept watch topside for any Sabbat reinforcements. He had a grenade launcher and a rocket launcher from his private arsenal to keep him company. Kegger, Robert, and I began a more systematic search of the tunnels, looking for survivors and intel.

Over the course of the next several hours we each managed to get lost on multiple occasions. At least I could read the Nosferatu glyphs and eventually figure out where I was. The others weren't so lucky and both of them wandered around for a long time. Our systematic search turned out to be anything but.

We did have some luck in our searching. I managed to find two survivors as well as an electrified net trap. I was still twitching a bit from that. The survivors stopped twitching soon after our meetings. I also spotted an old friend of mine whom I let escape without ever seeing me.

For the moment anyway.

For his part, Robert found a knife trap, a spear trap, and a gasoline trap. When the gas trap had blazed up around him, he'd freaked and run away from the fire as fast as he could. Damned primal reactions. This got him even more lost. Which is how he found one of the Nosferatu higher ups trying to escape. That plan didn't exactly work out for the Sabbat scum but it did end up completely refilling Robert's dwindling internal blood supply. Kegger found a shotgun trap the easy way and a grenade trap the hard way. Using his Chimeristry power of illusion that comes so easily to most Ravnos, he did manage to trick one of the surviving Sabbat into walking into their own shotgun trap. Kegger didn't even have to use his stick on that one.

While we didn't find any important papers, we did all survive what should have been a suicide attack. Flushed the rats right out of their own nest. Our total kill count was over thirty. Probably better than fifty percent of the entire Sabbat Nosferatu population in Fort Worth. Maybe as much as sixty. Samuel called it a good night's work. I called it a good start and Robert called it a damned shame that so many had gotten away. He'd also been hoping to find and kill his sire. However, the vampire who'd turned him hadn't been here. Or if he had, he'd escaped. Either way the fellow had gotten a temporary reprieve.

Upon returning to Karl's office, we learned that the rocket attack on bishop Vengeful only wounded him. Letty's people had successfully flattened the Sabbat border stations. That had gone well enough. It didn't exonerate them by a long shot but it was good to know they weren't completely incompetent.

Early the next evening found me at Moon Shade. Fred, or Boomer as he now preferred to be called, thought he had a contact who could hook me up with more Sabbat blood. The irony of me asking for Sabbat blood had sent him into gales of laughter. Once he'd gotten himself under control, he'd told me that if the fellow would show, it would be around midnight. Still had over an hour til then.

The seat across from me was suddenly filled by the Toreador woman with the tri-colored hair. She wore a mask over the lower half of face. It was red and covered in gold and silver sigils. Most of them symbolized regrowth and death. A narrow white scar ran up out of the mask, over her eye, and up into her hairline.

"I still want my pistol back," she stated.

"I'm glad you're still with us," I replied.

“Why?” she asked bluntly.

“Because I’ve been having regrets about not taking you up on your offer to bang you.”

She looked around quickly before turning her glower back to me. “You’re joking. Making fun of my disfigurement. And I do not appreciate it one little bit,” she growled.

“I’m not some prissy Toreador who judges people by their looks,” I replied with a wicked grin. “I was tempted to bang you then but I needed the blood more. Now, I’m glad you’re still around so I have the opportunity to make up for that lapse. And some scars are just sexy as hell. Some people are enhanced by scars. Some are disfigured. So far, it looks like you fit into the first category. Either way, time and blood will melt away your scars. It may take a few decades, but they’ll heal.”

“Until then I am a pariah to my own clan. Toreador prize beauty. And now I am the least amongst my people. But that’s none of your concern. I want my pistol back.”

“Perhaps the one’s who are truly your people are the group you hunt Sabbath with. The ones who soaked you in a pool of blood trying to save your life. Who fought through the flames and wreckage of your apartment building to pull you out of harm’s way. Toreador is blood and an attitude. Sabbath-killing is blood and action. Think about it. In the meantime if you want your pistol, you can either meet my earlier terms or we can renegotiate concerning your offer of sex.”

“I’d like my pistol back,” she reiterated.

“Somewhere along the line I managed to get that very impression. I’m listening. Make me an offer.”

A moment later, she said, “I can’t get you the blood you want. The others won’t let me rejoin the unit until I’m more fully recovered. In my weakened condition, I don’t dare go hunting Sabbath alone,” she bitterly conceded.

“So offer me something else I want,” I told her.

“I’ll pay you for it.”

“I know you will. That’s why we’re negotiating the form that payment will take.”

“I mean in cash. I can get you as much as twenty thousand for it.”

“For that you could have the pistol remade. In fact, you could have three or four of them made for that. And the answer is ‘no’. I have no need of cash,” I lied.

“My pistol has sentimental value dammit. And I know you need the money. Take it!”

“Not interested in money. Make another offer.”

“You do not want to trade for sex with me.”

“You mean *you* don’t want to trade sex with *me*,” I contradicted. “Because as I mentioned earlier, I *do* want to have sex with you.”

“No you don’t,” she told me in a quiet yet intense whisper. “I’m deformed now. Badly scarred.”

“Well. In that case it’s obviously going to have to be a lot of sex to make up for your lack of perfection. Possibly a year or more of near constant... service.”

“Are you insane?” she snarled.

“There’s a growing list of people who think so,” I replied with a grin.

“I can’t believe this is happening. A week. No more than an hour each night.”

“Oh no,” I countered. “Not after that earlier speech of yours. I don’t see how I could go less than ten months worth. And at least four hours per night.”

“That’s ridiculous! You couldn’t last four hours anyway. Two weeks for two hour per and if you can’t make any of our rendezvous then you’ve still lost the night.”

“You’ll just have to see for yourself how long I can last. Six months with three hour

minimums. Nights you miss or leave early add twice their number onto the end of the time period. And I give you your pistol in advance.”

“That was already implied,” she frowned.

“Oh no, it was not,” I countered with a grin. “Take the deal and I’ll place the pistol in your hand tomorrow night.”

“Half that time with the same stipulations,” she said and looked like she regretted doing so.

“For three months we triple the makeup nights default brings.”

She closed her eyes a long moment. Through gritted teeth, she said, “Deal.”

Taking her hand, I kissed her fingers. “Deal.” Though she looked like she wanted to pull her hand away, she did not. “We’ll choose various places to meet. Here’s my cell number. Give me yours.” Rather reluctantly, she did so.

A moment later Bilious walked up to our table and sat down an unopened bottle of blood. “Pardon the interruption,” he told us. A small sneer formed at the corner of her mouth and he noticed. “Was that for my looks?” Her face flushed red and she looked away. Turning back to me, he said, “I believe you ordered this?”

“Did I?” I asked with a quirky grin. “I can’t say I remember ordering this evening.”

“No. This was a previous request a friend of a friend heard about. It comes to you in thanks for the great service you and yours did our clan while in the line of duty last night.”

“Oh really? Now isn’t that interesting,” I murmured, looking over the peculiar label.

“What is it?” the Toreador woman asked despite herself.

“A nice, young vintage of loup-garou,” the Camarilla Nosferatu replied with a grin. She rolled her eyes obviously thinking he was lying to her. I’d never mentioned to Bilious that I had been looking for werewolf blood but the hidden clan had ways of knowing things they shouldn’t.

“Well please give my thanks to my benefactor for me. I’ve been looking for this for quite some time now.” Oh yes. It was time to change my alchemical gear setup again!

“Certainly. Now I must bid you a good evening.”

“Before you go I want to tell you a quick story.” Interested, he stopped and turned back around. “While out on the job, I saw a person who did not belong at our place of business. Perhaps this fellow was merely lost. Anyway, there was a nice Caitiff fellow there who allowed this obviously confused person to leave unawares of having been seen and otherwise intact. And this person did indeed leave in a big hurry.

“There. That’s it. I’m afraid I’m not much of a storyteller. However, I believe there is a moral to the story. Sometimes it’s nice to have your house cleaned by others. Sometimes it’s even nicer to clean one’s own house.”

“I see,” he whispered seriously. “Does this person have a name?”

“As I recall it is a most common name,” I replied with a nasty smile. “No need getting the fellow confused with someone else who might share the name. No. I think you and yours can find him.” Upping the evil in my grin, I added, “He’s quite easy to follow.”

Understanding filled his eyes and without a word he turned and left.

“I gather you just rolled over on a Nosferatu spy?” she asked, now openly interested.

“Like a steam roller over a Chihuahua,” I confirmed, still grinning. Oh yes. Wretched had just become a short timer.

Sometimes the indirect means of killing rats was just as much fun as the direct.