

## Rewards of Perseverance

“I still can’t believe he threw an effing werewolf at us,” Randal stated for what seemed like the tenth time as we were finally preparing to move on once more. That Randal was talking at all was a big improvement. It hadn’t been so long ago that his body had been too broken, by said werewolf, for him to even do that. Likewise, Samuel was also up again. If it weren’t for the bloody mess that was his shirt and jacket, you’d never guess that he’d been disemboweled not an hour before. Blood does marvelous things for vampires. And save for what we each carried within our skins, we were now out of blood. Samuel had called for blood and ammunition to be dropped off for us in front of the mansion. Not that either would do us any good until we left the basement we were now fighting our way through. But we were close to Rabid now. We all felt it. And no matter what traps he had in store for us, we weren’t leaving until we’d caught him.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Randal declared with a nod. “Let’s finish this.” I glanced around and saw nothing but ready faces.

“Then let’s get moving,” I said, starting down the hallway we’d had so much trouble traversing already. Not forty feet down the hallway, we came to a door, which effectively marked the end of this passageway. As I stepped to side of the door in preparation for opening it, I heard safeties clicking off behind me. Reassured, I pulled the door open.

Revealed was a short five-step staircase leading down into another hallway. But this one had no side doors. Just a single door at the far end of the hall, some fifty or sixty feet distant. Three dusty lightbulbs hung down from the ceiling along the length of the passage.

“What’s that smell?” Kegger asked with a frown.

Earlier I had stopped breathing due to the stench from the werewolf room... except for talking that is. After my brief statement I hadn’t started again. Breathing in through my nose, I figured out quickly what he was talking about.

“Kerosene,” Robert declared with a frown a moment before I could.

I took a couple of steps down and looked for the source. It didn’t take me long to find a drip and follow it back to its source. “It’s in the bloody fire extinguishing system,” I stated, pointing to the sprinklers and pipes that ran the length of the hallway.

“Well crap in a hat,” Kegger muttered in baffled consternation.

Frowning, I knelt down and picked up a handful of the dirt floor. It too smelled strongly of kerosene... and beneath the dry surface, it was still wet. “It’s one big fire trap,” I told the others shaking my head. “The entire hallway.”

“We could go ahead and light it up,” Kegger half-heartedly suggested.

“It could burn for hours,” Samuel stated, his eyes seemingly focused on what lay beyond the door at the far end of the kerosene-soaked hall. “And that could give *him* enough time to find a way out.”

“Assuming he hasn’t already,” Randal added. Though I suspected the Ravnos said it to annoy Samuel, he didn’t put much effort into it. It came out sounding more like he was voicing a common fear we held. No one rose to the bait if bait it truly had ever been. We were all much too aware that our reward for all this effort could be yet another miss. Just the latest episode in a too long line of being outsmarted by the wily Malkavian madman.

We stood in silence for a moment before someone said, “I’m willing to risk it.” To my great surprise, it was me.

“Screw it!” Robert declared angrily. “We’ve already faced fire. At least there’s no snakes here this time.” He barked out a humorless laugh. “Hell, it’s time to pay Rabid back for all the great things he’s done for us! What are we waiting for?”

Samuel shook his head. “We’re all as crazy as the Malkavian. Still, it is undeniably time we finished this.”

Randal and Kegger exchanged a quick look between them. Kegger shrugged.

“We Ravnos aren’t tamable but we’re not crazy either,” Randal declared. He looked at everyone seriously for a moment before a huge grin covered his face. “No way are we going to let you guys pay Rabid back without us there to give our fair share. Besides, who knows what treasures he’s got stashed away here. Let’s go. It’s just a hallway.”

And so we started walking down what suddenly seemed a very long hall. Our footsteps left dark tracks in the light colored dirt of the floor as we walked; our weight pressing the dried dirt down into the kerosene-soaked mud below the surface. Sharp eyes ever watchful for something that might perhaps cause the lights to suddenly drop or some hidden panel a torch might be thrown through as we strode down the hallway. Ears straining to hear the least sound that might signal a pending attack or the lighting of a fire. We moved silently and with a purpose. Though in reality it didn’t take long to walk that fifty or so feet, in my mind it seemed to take much, much longer. But in the end, we finally reached the far door without the hallway lighting up around us.

Kegger seemed relieved to be there, but the rest of us remained vigilant. After examining the five steps leading to the door closely, Randal started up them with me right behind him. As he put his hand on the doorknob, Samuel, called, “Wait a moment.” It was obvious from the muscles straining in his arm and jaw that Randal wanted to open the door just to spite the Ventrue, but rather to my surprise, he pulled his hand away.

“If there’s an enemy on the other side of that door,” the portly vampire continued quietly when he had everyone’s attention. “If there is, we’ll have to at least begin the fight without firearms. We cannot risk open flame in here until everyone is out of the hallway. Though this hallway seems to end with the door, we do not know that the kerosene ends here with it.” Robert’s raised eyebrow and nod seemed to say what I was feeling pretty well.

“Okay,” Randal admitted with a grin. “Sometimes Ventrue do say something worth hearing. I suppose it had to happen eventually.”

“After you,” Samuel replied drolly, with a sweep of his arm towards the door.

Randal began pulling the door open. There followed a scraping sound and a flash of light from in front of the Ravnos. Acting completely contrary to the instincts that come with being a vampire, Randal threw himself onto the flames, smothering them with his own body before they had a chance to spread to the rest of the hallway. And just like that what would have started a hallway-spanning conflagration was extinguished.

Drawing a suddenly shaky breath, I released it quickly. “Damn, that was close. Well done Randal.” It took him a moment to regain control of himself and he let a weak smile suffice for reply in the meantime.

Examining the now open door, I found that Rabid had gone very low tech on us indeed. He’d imbedded a piece of flint into the edge of the door opposite a steel strike plate. Opening the door had dragged the stone over the steel bringing a rain of sparks that very nearly led to us all burning. It was so very easy to picture the hallway filled with flames and then having our vampiric panic instinct kick in.

Not a pretty picture in the least.

Behind the door stretched a short hallway. What appeared to be a barred doorway, like one would expect to find in a jail, barred our way. Ten feet across from that we could see another door; metal plated and closed. Randal and I stood examining the barred door for any signs of traps.

A couple of minutes later I shrugged. "I don't see anything beyond the obvious."

"It's probably a burn stop," Samuel stated with a frown. Upon seeing the blank looks directed his way, he added, "I rather strongly suspect that it's meant for those burning vampires who run this way. They get to the bars and can see the door beyond... but they're held up here by the bars. So, being driven by panic instincts, they strain futilely at the bars, burning up blood while they literally burn. Naturally, they won't run back into the fire to try for the exit at the other end. So, they tear at the unyielding bars and burn."

"Brutal," Kegger breathed.

"Very harsh," I agreed, eyeing the barred door anew.

Fifteen seconds later Randal swung it open. "Very simple lock," he said with a grim grin, "...if you're not freaking out in a fire-induced panic."

"Yeah," I muttered, walking by him to examine the next door. It looked stout and this side was completely covered in metal plating. Below the fixed handle was what looked like a simple bolt lock. Nothing else struck me as being worthy of comment.

"Not even industrial grade," Randal said while picking it. A moment later he turned the lock. Seeing the rest of us ready, he pulled the door open.

Revealed was a large, plushly appointed study. Fine wood paneling on the walls, thick carpet on the floor, shelves and shelves of books and ledgers, and a number of objects d'art that were no doubt quite valuable. And directly across from us, behind a nice, large desk, sat a vampire. Not particularly tall, though it was hard to judge his exact height since he remained sitting. Untidy, short brown hair, glasses that he almost certainly didn't need, and piercing blue eyes. He wore a sweater vest and looked like a college professor or maybe a doctor preparing for a jaunt through the country.

"Rabid," Samuel stated quietly with more than a hint of pleasure in his voice.

"Yes," the vampire behind acknowledged with a nod. "Doctor Raymond Bihd, at your service."

"At our service?!" Randal asked incredulously.

"Yes indeed," the blue-eyed fellow agreed. "You've caught me fair and square. I didn't like my chances of making it out of here past you and any traps you may have placed. And even if I had, you have proven yourself most resourceful. I find it most likely that would have simply tracked me down again. Life on the lam is no life at all."

"We shouldn't listen to this filth," Kegger declared angrily. "We all know the power his words can have. Let's just kill him and take his head back to Karl. We all go before the prince... we all get hugely rewarded."

"May I ask that you hear me out before you kill me?" the Malkavian asked.

"If you try using any powers...." Samuel began but didn't finish.

"Clear enough. I would like to stay alive obviously. And with that in mind, I am in a position to aid each and every one of you most generously in return for this. Killing me will really avail you nothing. It certainly won't slow down the Sabbat's attacks. The prince will only appreciate you so long as it is politically expedient for him to do so or until he begins to see you as a threat. Of course, there is a way of nullifying this eventual outcome... you can become too powerful to be ignored and/or cast aside. And I can help you with that."

“Come on guys,” Kegger growled. “Let’s kill his ass. We’ve earned this payback, each and every one of us. He deserves to die many times over.”

“I do,” the vampire doctor agreed. “But why not get what you really want? Samuel G. Martin, you want power. The prince, your primogen, and your mentor have all stopped helping you in this regard. But I can offer you many, many types of power.” The Ventrue’s eyes lit up but he said nothing. “Robert Sherry, I know the name and location of your sire; the one upon which you truly wish to avenge yourself.” Without looking away from the blue-eyed vampire, Robert reached out and lowered Kegger’s stick from the threatening stance in which he’d held it. “Randal Godfrey, you’ve been all over the world finding rare artifacts. You are a man of culture and exquisite tastes. I can help you with your collection.” The Ravnos’ eyebrows raised thoughtfully but he said nothing. “Dmetri Callander, I’ve heard little about you but it’s been suggested to me that you may be something of an alchemist. If that’s true, I can help you. I have access to information that few others can boast. Marion Geddies, better known as Kegger... amongst your dozen or so other false identities and street names. I can help you help your aunt out of the predicament she’s gotten herself into.”

Kegger blinked in surprise, “What are you talking about?”

“You must have wondered why your aunt hasn’t shown up of late? Why she hasn’t called you as has been her habit for the last fifteen years? She was coming to visit you, driving in from Florida, and got stopped.”

“What have you done with her?” the young-looking vampire demanded furiously.

“Me?” the Malkavian asked, looking surprised. “Why I’ve done nothing at all. No, she ran afoul of the Camarilla in New Orleans. You know her habits. She drank from the wrong person and she got caught. But I know the details of where she’s being kept. And with those details, you can undoubtedly find a way to set her free again.” Kegger looked like he did indeed know the woman in question’s habits... and that he would very much like to know how to retrieve her.

None of us said a word, we all simply stood there thinking about what we’d been offered.

“There is one major problem with all of this,” Samuel declared. “That being that the prince has ordered your death.”

“That is true,” Rabid agreed with a nod. “However, that is not an insurmountable problem. As I stated earlier: I want to live. However, I’m not averse to the idea of ‘Rabid’ dying. I can take a clue from your young associate there and create a false identity easily enough. This house is not my only haven... though it is my favorite. It would be no great problem for me to move out of the city to one of these other places... with a new identity.”

“That might work,” Robert muttered, looking thoughtful.

“We’d need a body to take back,” Samuel said after a brief silence.

“Why, there just happens to be one in the closet over there,” the Malkavian replied with a gesture towards a small door close to where we’d come in. A frowning Randal moved across to investigate. Cautiously, he opened the door. Inside stood a vampire, his fangs plainly visible. He was dressed in a nice suit with expensive-looking watch and shoes.

And he’d been staked through the heart.

Contrary to most superstitions, a stake through the heart does not usually kill vampires: it more commonly renders them comatose. A thin stake had been used, minimizing the actual damage and greatly decreasing the chances that the vampire in question would die upon it’s removal.

“He doesn’t really look like you,” Robert said with a frown.

“No, he doesn’t. But then again, most people don’t know what I really look like. And this fellow thinks he’s me. Has for years. A number of Sabbat have seen him acting the role of me... as has the woman I hold captive. He even has some small portion of my abilities. I am very good at what I do as you well know. And I am most thorough... as you also know. You can take this fellow to your Camarilla. Invent whatever story you like about how you captured him. You will be rewarded by the Camarilla... not much I shouldn’t think. Perhaps they’ll allow you to do what every vampire should have the right to do: create more vampires. But from me... from me, you’ll get what you truly desire.”

“This is not a good idea, guys,” Kegger stated, his voice holding an odd tone.

“Do you really care so little for your Aunt?” the Malkavian asked. “Or perhaps you are so confident in your burgeoning abilities that you think you can simply waltz into and then back out of where she’s being held... assuming of course that you can even find it?”

“He’ll betray us!” the young-looking Ravnos all but shouted.

“Betray? No. I’ve been very straightforward in my efforts against the Camarilla. Later, I focused my efforts on you, the bloody fist of the Camarilla. I’ve always been very straightforward in my efforts... even if the efforts themselves were convoluted. No, you have my word that I will do as I say. I do not give my word quickly or easily, but once given, I keep my word. As I will expect each and every one of you to do if we reach an accord.”

On the way out Kegger paused while everyone continued on past the kerosene trap. “I’d like to leave Rabid with a little message,” he told Randal who stopped to see what he was doing. This cause me to look back in time to see him pull out a cigarette lighter and start the kerosene burning. The flames spread quickly back the way we’d just come. Soon the entire hallway stood ablaze. It didn’t take Randal long to say something to the effect of screw that, I’m outta here. The others followed him quickly out. I stood watching the pretty flames for a long while. So far as fires go, this one didn’t smell very good but I really didn’t care. I stopped breathing and enjoyed the lovely show.

Eventually, I moved on.

The others had stopped outside the first door we’d entered in the basement. The one holding the kidnaped woman. No one commented on where I’d been. Samuel threw Kegger a low-grade scowl which the other vampire didn’t seem to notice. It occurred to me that we’d promised Rabid to leave him and his stuff alone. And Kegger had broken that word. I added my own unnoticed scowl to the Ventrue’s.

As I got there, Robert opened the door to the woman’s cell. To no one’s great surprise she sat right where we’d left her. Randal walked over and picked the locks on the handcuffs that bound her.

“You’ve got blood splashed all over you. All of you do,” she whispered, looking over us, as Randal led her out of the room.

“Yes,” I agreed absently. “And a dead man over my shoulder. The man who kidnaped you. The people working for him are dead as well.”

“Quite right,” Samuel agreed almost happily. “Come with me to my office. We’ll work on your story. Also, I feel quite certain that my company has need of your legal services. Believe it or not, you being kidnaped will turn out to be one of the best things that ever happened in your life.”

Walking out the front, we came across the corpses of the first of the near-skeletal men and women who'd attacked us. The woman gasped and put a hand to her mouth.

"The bodies don't actually bother you," Samuel told her in a whisper, looking into her eyes. "They're just corpses, better off now that their miserable existences have been extinguished." She immediately relaxed. "You and I will talk later. You're going to forget large portions of the last few days happened at all." She murmured her agreement.

Continuing on to where the others had parked, we found a pair of cases in the back of Samuel's car. One contained ammunition and the other clear plastic packets of blood. "Go sit in the passenger seat," Samuel told the woman and off she went. The power he had over people's minds was just creepy. I gladly dumped the body into his trunk. We then gratefully drank many blood packs and reloaded.

And reloaded and reloaded some more in my case.

"This changes things," Robert said seriously after we were all feeling better.

"No, it changes nothing," Samuel countered. "We still work for the prince. Randal and I have down payments on what the Malkavian. You have the name but not the location of your sire. And as of now we have dealt with a priority target. More priority targets await. While each of us has the better part or the entirety of a favor to collect, our business of killing Sabbat continues as usual."

Shaking his head, Kegger walked off and got into Randal's Humvee. "Don't worry about him," the archeologist told us quietly. "I'll talk to him. His aunt means a lot to him. I don't think he'll turn on us over anything as silly as loyalty to the Camarilla. We Ravnos just don't care that much about the whole Camarilla/Sabbat dynamic. It's just a good excuse to have fun."

"Talking to him might be a good idea," Samuel told him with a quiet nod. Randal soon joined the other Ravnos and the two of them drove away. "Perhaps I'll talk to him as well," Samuel added in an almost silent whisper. I probably should have shuddered at the thought, but to be perfectly honest, I didn't care enough about the Ravnos' mental health to worry about it. Samuel got into his expensive car and prepared to leave with the girl. Had I been a better person, I probably would have worried about her as well but I wasn't and I didn't.

"Can we give you a lift back into town?" Robert asked, opening the door of Samuel's car.

"Hmm?" I replied, looking as though I'd been lost in thought. "Oh, no thanks. I'll walk back. The exercise and thought clearing time will do me good."

"Alright," he replied with a grin, getting into the car. "This has been a great evening for us. A great evening." I waved to them as they drove away. Turning on my heel, I walked in the general direction of the entrance to the storm drain. When the car was out of sight, I changed my angle slightly and walked around to the back of the house and the corpse of the devil pig.

There I pulled out my knife and began skinning the monster. It's hide had been incredibly bullet and claw resistant. I could use that kind of protection. In conjunction with my body armor, it might give me an extra edge. Or, it might make me just cocky enough to make a fatal mistake. However, that was a risk I was willing to take.

"Thanks to you I'll be dead in the morning," the head of the pig informed me from its position in the grass, some distance away from the body. This stopped me for a moment. Yes, this was a lot weirder than normal. But was I going to let a little thing like a bodiless head talking to me distract me from getting this prize the others had ignored? I actually considered it a couple of second before returning to my pig skinning. "I can't believe this crap," the pig continued. "Killed by a bunch of gormless corpse puppets. How very embarrassing."

"I know how you feel," I told it while continuing with my work. "I was once killed by a

vampire too.”

“Oh, that’s funny,” it snorted derisively. “Killed by a corpse puppet with a sense of humor.”

“You know, skinning you isn’t particularly easy. Neither was killing you for that matter. How do most people manage it?”

“They don’t. Rakasha are at the top of the food chain. We are the super predators.”

“I hate to break it to you,” I replied straining to separate skin from corpse, “but you’re suffering some serious delusions of grandeur.” Rather predictably, it cursed at me for a while. When it finally ran down, I said, “Well, that was educational. I must say, I never knew that about my mother. Who’d have guessed? And why aren’t you dead? Actually, I suppose the real question is why are you still talking?”

“Daylight will finish me off,” it said sulkily. “Unless you’d care to move me into a nice shady spot?”

“Seems we have similar problems with sunlight,” I replied, having finally finished with one side of the beast. Damn but this was hard work. It seemed the rakasha had nothing else interesting to say. This allowed me to finish skinning it’s corpse in peace.

“Oh, so that’s what you were doing,” the pig head stated as I started walking by with the skin. “And now you’re just going to leave me here to die in the sun.”

“You know what? No, I’m not going to leave you here,” I countered, picking the heavy head up by an ear.

“That’s good. You won’t regret this,” the pig head declared, sounding grateful.

“I’m quite certain that I won’t regret it,” I agreed, walking through ever shorter grass on my way towards the entrance into the storm drain. I considered for a while keeping it. A bodiless, talking pig head was not the kind of thing you ran across every day. However, there was the worry that it might actually grow it’s body back somehow. That and it didn’t seem to be particularly forthcoming with useful information. When I found a nice section of bare earth, one with no hint of shading trees overhead, I set the head in the center of it. Realizing that it had reached the end of the road, it began cursing me anew. With a smile on my face, I climbed down into the storm drain and towards a new era for myself and my little group of fellow Sabbat hunters.