

The Beginning

“This is crazy,” I sighed.

“That’s what everyone says,” the man across from me agreed easily.

“So let me see if I’ve gotten this straight,” I said in a near whisper, looking everywhere in his poorly lit office but at the man I’d come to see. “You’ll help me find a job and get settled in with the Camarilla... but you want to know about my origins as payment?”

“All the way back to your human days,” the Malkavian nodded seriously.

“But you’ll never be able to publish anything like that. These Camarilla people won’t let you. Anyone who leaks anything about vampires and their very real existence gets the ax. Including other vampires. Even I’ve figured that much out... and it didn’t exactly come to me as a recent news flash.”

“You take care of your problems and I’ll take care of mine,” the crazy vampire replied with a smile. “So, do you want my help or not?”

“Now be honest,” the Malkavian insisted several hours later with a sharp look for me. “If any of the facts are off, let me know. Otherwise the story won’t chime in perfect synchronicity with the truth of the universe and all this will be for naught.”

“Umm, sure,” I agreed slowly. Well did I know that a lot of Malkavians used their widely acknowledged insanity as a cover for some very sane plotting. Unfortunately, I had no clue into which category this particular vampire’s behavior fell. Tired of living on the road and continually having to move the precious arcane library I’d gathered, I had reached the point where I was now desperate enough that I didn’t truly care if this was part of his inherent insanity or not. My world had changed a lot in the last ten years. Or maybe it was simply my place in it. Or my view of it. I suppose in the end it didn’t really matter. Right now I needed someplace where I could get my feet beneath me again. A place where I had access to the blood I needed and time in which to study and train up my skills. Unlike nights past, I had much more than mere survival on my mind. This would be my first step in that new direction.

“Alright,” the smaller, older vampire smiled, picking up the pages he’d covered in his spidery handwriting. “Here we go.”

“Ten years ago Dmetri Callander easily fit into the category of ordinary high school senior. His mother was a Russian immigrant, his father a native of Jackson, Wyoming. In this western city Dmetri had been raised along with his younger siblings Kate and Yuri. He was trying to decide between going to college in nearby Billings or perhaps going out of state. On a weekend trip with some friends into Billings, purportedly for gathering information about college but perhaps more accurately to check out the night life, Dmetri’s world changed.”

I found it interesting how he’d changed around what I’d told him so that it sounded more like a book or magazine article than my simply-told story. Story telling was not one of my talents. No, my true talents lay in much different areas.

“It took him two years to piece together his memories of what had happened that fateful evening. By then he was half the country away. On that apocalyptic evening in Billings, Dmetri and his friends had gone drinking in a number of bars near the college campus. They had met a lot of

'hot' college girls and were having a very good time in various parking lots and bathrooms across the city."

"Umm," I interrupted, frowning as I examined the antique-looking brass lamp on his desk. I rather liked the way the metal had been engraved with Celtic designs.

"Not accurate?" the smaller man asked intently.

"Well, it's accurate enough I suppose," I rather reluctantly admitted. Gilch had helped me look into the police records. I'd learned more than I'd really wanted to about where my friends had ended up... and how they'd ended up there. With a shrug to myself I decided that if they didn't care, I really didn't either. "It just doesn't sound very good when you put it like that."

"Sometimes the truth hurts, boy. Now shut up and listen." From the corner of my eye I could see him turning a dour look upon me which I did not meet. Not yet. Instead, I allowed my gaze wander away from his desk and over to the small collection of books he had on the nearby shelves. When he realized that I would indeed remain silent for the moment, the Malkavian continued reading from his notes.

"One by one, Dmetri's friends began disappearing. It didn't seem particularly strange to him considering what he thought was happening. He felt sure that they were either going back to their motel room or perhaps going home, or to some other quiet place where they could be alone with one of the friendly locals. Quiet places such as the aforementioned parks and bathrooms. Unfortunately for the lot of them, that was not the case. His memory of the night came to an abrupt end while walking a pretty blonde girl with a slight French accent back towards the boy's communal motel room. While not positive, he remains pretty sure her name was Dominique, although he has a vague memory of one of the woman's own companions earlier referring to her as Edi."

Yes, a woman I'd never forget, no matter what her name truly turned out to be. She'd left her mark on me in more ways than I felt easy thinking about.

"His next memory," the Malkavian continued without pause, "was of waking up in chains at the bottom of a river in a cement-weighted barrel. Naturally, he panicked. Who other than a mentally superior Malkavian wouldn't? And he kept on panicking. It was probably close to a full half hour later that he finally realized that he wasn't drowning and evidently wasn't going to. After calming down, it turned out to be the work of only a couple of minutes for him to squeeze his way out of the chains and then out of the barrel. Soon, he crawled to the surface and lay panting on the shore. A place that a Malkavian would have already been far away from."

"Wait a minute," I demanded with a scowl, eyeing the globe in its brass stand across the room. "Is this my story or is this some sort of Malkavian propaganda tool?"

"Are the facts straight?"

"Straight enough, I suppose. Everything with the possible exception of the Malkavian fan club stuff." I bet the globe was expensive. It certainly looked it.

"And do you know that to be incorrect?"

"Umm, well... no. I don't know that for a fact. It just seems highly unlikely."

"Good," he stated firmly, with a nod of his dark-maned head. "Knowing you're an ignorant hick is the first step towards curing the condition. Now shut the hell up unless I've gotten something wrong." When he once more figured out that I had indeed returned to being quiet, he continued reading.

"Over the course of the next three days Dmetri figured out for himself that he had become a vampire. Upon finally realizing this, all thoughts of going home left him. He broke into a book store and stole one of each of all their books on vampire mythology. He tested what he could and wasn't

any too pleased with the reliability of what he had learned. The only thing the books and lore really seemed to have right was the blood drinking part and the whole ‘not going into the sunlight’ thing. Of course, there was the possibility that they might have gotten the stake through the heart business right as well... but he wasn't taking any chances on that just yet. Being a monster seemed to have its upsides as well as its downsides. And dead seemed much worse at the moment than being undead.”

In the ten years since, I hadn't changed my mind about that. Though there'd been a few bad times when dead had looked pretty appealing, that particular attraction had not endured.

The Malkavian paused a moment, but at my somber nod, he continued.

“Eventually, Dmetri learned that all his friends except James, the first to leave with his date and apparently the only to leave with a human girl, were now dead. They had turned up all across Billings, mostly in parks and infrequently-used public restrooms, having died in different, violent ways. According to the papers, Dmetri was now listed as missing. However, the young vampire had no doubt that if he turned up again on the police radar, he would instantly become a prime suspect in their deaths. Over the course of the next two weeks, Dmetri would be even more surprised to learn that all the deaths had been ruled accidents. Unknown to the new vampire, this was his first brush with the manipulations of Kindred society upon public services such as the police and media.”

Kindred. The vampires' word for themselves. The word suggested family. Kinship. The very top layer of lies and manipulations.

“Three weeks after he had climbed out of the river, while drinking the blood of a local street punk, Dmetri was jumped by two other vampires who beat him unconscious with a pair of baseball bats. He awoke on a bus with a note where his wallet should have been. The note simply said that poachers didn't get second chances and that if he came back to Billings he was going to become a permanent resident of someone's garden.

“The bus took him to Pocatello, Idaho.”

That pain-filled bus trip seemed now almost to belong to someone else. A different person. Ten years wasn't really that long but it seemed a lifetime ago. In truth, I supposed it was exactly that.

After a quick glance at me, the Malkavian resumed his reading, “The young vampire continued to bounce around the country. Along the way he learned that the local vampires had a tendency to be extremely territorial. Usually, as soon as he was detected, he was warned to get the hell out of town or get the worst sunburn he was ever going to have. On three different occasions he was shot by folks who seemed intent on warning him after the fact.

“Things continued on in this manner for a bit over four years. And then he arrived in the city of Los Angeles. There he met a Nosferatu named Gilch.”

Hearing my old mentor's name brought a small smile to my lips. Crotchety old bastard.

“Gilch saved his life and taught him the basics of vampire society. The Nosferatu introduced the young vampire to the court of Los Angeles and secured him a small hunting ground. He also helped the vampire, who was to eventually become his protege, figure out in which directions lay his innate strengths of blood. In return, Dmetri stole for Gilch, spread rumors for him, spied for Nosferatu, and occasionally hunted for him. They became the closest thing each other had to friends.

“This relationship lasted for six years. During that time, two of the dukes of LA went to war without the prince's permission. There followed a number of bloody battles as the two dukes fought each other. Eventually, the prince of the city fought with both of them in an attempt to bring them back under his control, and the two warring dukes lashed out at any and everyone who they saw as an immediate military threat to them - including the prince and his people.”

I found myself looking at the Malkavian's shoes under the desk. They were expensive.

Probably Italian leather. The war in L.A. had turned using my vampiric powers from being fun to being a vital necessity. They'd become the edge I'd needed to stay alive. Nice shoes but not good for running or fighting in.

Starting at the top of another page, the Malkavian read, "Dmetri couldn't have cared less about any of it. As he was a Caitiff, one of the clan less, the other vampires all treated him like the same form of foul-smelling garbage. Therefore, so as long as they were killing each other off, he didn't mind in the least. In fact, in some ways matters improved for him as the other vampires couldn't take the extra time to deride him or his friend. Of course, after six years of tutelage by Gilch, Dmetri was much more able to defend himself and actually had a little pocket change. Life as a vampire was finally getting good.

"Then Gilch got himself killed while reporting to the prince rumors of one of the duke's next strikes."

Stupid old goat. He should never have gone to that meeting. In the reflection of the Malkavian's office window, I could once again see the entire warehouse blowing up. I'd been three blocks away acting lookout and I'd been knocked to the pavement. Gilch hadn't even told me who he'd been meeting other than 'the prince's man'. He'd just said that the report had to be made. The information had been of vital importance and was dangerous. His final understatement. The little vision cleared as the Malkavian read the last little bit.

"Without further ado Dmetri who took a couple of Gilch's more interesting books onto a bus bound for somewhere else. The young vampire felt determined that he was going to continue learning to harness the power that literally flowed through his veins. In one tragic evening Dmetri Callander decided that he was tired of being an idle spectator in the night."

I found it interesting that the Malkavian had been almost as interested in my feelings at the time these events had occurred as he had been in the events themselves. A little unsettling to be sure but that could just be from me not spending too much time around crazy vampires. Well, not the Malkavian brand of crazy anyway.

"So that's how you got your start," the Malkavian stated, shuffling the papers back together and straightening them up. "This is accurate?"

"Yeah," I agreed with a sigh, not bothering to mention that the 'couple' of books were actually an entire library's worth. Or that the bus had actually been a stolen car. The other vampire wasn't paying for that level of detail. Not even close. "It's accurate."

"Very well. You have fulfilled your part of our bargain. Now I will fulfill mine. Go to Dallas. The sheriff there is something of a friend of mine. He's a bit different. Despite the fact that he's a Brujah, he doesn't automatically hate all Caitiff. Or even everyone else for that matter. Karl's not a fair man, but he's not likely to mistreat you either. Since he's the prince's sheriff, you can bet he's smarter than the average Brujah tough and he's probably plotting something. Keep your eyes open or you'll likely end up dying as a patsy for some scheme of his. However, in the meantime, I'm sure he can arrange a hunting territory for you and provide you with paying work. So long as you don't mind using a gun?"

"No," I replied in a quiet, dangerous voice, looking the Malkavian in the eyes for the first time since I'd met him. This was the voice I used to let people know it was time to back off or die. Sometimes I simply used it before I killed them. It was great for intimidating people because of the sincerity of the threat behind it, "I don't mind using a gun."

Suddenly uncomfortable, the Malkavian looked away. "Very good then. Best of luck to you. You've had a rough start. It's made you flexible. Strong. Don't become too comfortable and make

sure you don't lose that flexibility and strength." He pushed a piece of paper across to me with a phone number written in his spidery handwriting.

"I won't," I replied, pocketing the number. "And... thanks."

"Oh, don't thank me. I don't think it will surprise you to learn that I'm getting a referral fee from Karl. Happily double-dipping on my incoming wealth as it were. And while I'm not throwing you into the grinder, I'm sending you to the man who will."

"I'm not afraid of meat grinders anymore," I whispered on my way to the door. "They provide a familiar environment with familiar pains." The door closed behind me with a barely audible click. I began using my blood talent of Obfuscation to make myself unnoticed and stood listening by the door... just in case he decided to call someone other than this Karl guy. Perhaps someone local who might not have my best interests at heart.

As silence once again descended upon his office, I could hear the Malkavian pattering around. Sounded like he was putting his papers away. His voice sounded a strange cross between happy and worried when he said under his breath, "Look out Karl. Here he comes."

Smiling grimly myself, I went to gather what little gear I had left for my trip to Dallas.