

## Arcanist

Another fire suddenly flared to life within one of my encircling barrels. My doing and the fact that I hadn't even had to move from my seat in order to bring the fire to life brought a smile to my lips. I'd done it with magic. Pyromancy to be exact. The magic of fire. Except mine wasn't the pure magic. No, my magic relied on and used the vampire blood within me. And each time I utilized this growing power, I felt a little drier. Dragging the cooler a little closer to me, I snagged out a wine bottle now filled with blood and took a deep satisfying drink.

Right now I had five of the encircling twelve barrels lit. And while I was rather pleased with my accomplishment, I had reached the point where all that fire had begun making me nervous. Conflicting instincts warred within me. As a vampire, I had the instinctual fear of flames. As a burgeoning pyromancer, I had an instinctual love of fire.

So, for a while I sat in the empty building and simply watched the flames dancing in the barrels. After a while, my nervousness abated somewhat. Concentrating, I created a small flame in my hand. I then tossed it into one of the unlit barrels. The highly flammable contents caught with a whoosh and my nervousness returned full bore as did my delight.

And in the dancing shadows cast by my fires, I saw a human face in the darkness. A woman. A young woman. I could practically hear Gilch's voice telling me to show no surprise.

And I didn't.

Instead, I pretended not to notice her while casually studying her. She really wasn't very far away. Maybe forty feet. She had freckles and black hair. And in her case that meant she had dyed her hair. Probably going for the goth look. The fact that she wore dark clothing supported this newly formed supposition. Hmm. She was cute. Not in a drop-dead gorgeous kind of way. More in a tomboyish way. Couldn't tell much about her figure because of the way she was crouched down in the rubble where an interior wall had long ago collapsed.

Hmm. I didn't see anyone else but best to take no chances. Standing up, I stretched and walked behind one of the support pillars. However, rather than stepping out the other side of it, I began obfuscating and walked back the way I'd come. On a quick tour of the building, I found no one else. Nor did I find anyone outside nor any cars. I did find a dirt bike that hadn't been here previously though. Surprising that I hadn't heard the engine. Unless she'd already been here. The path I'd followed getting here led to the other side of the building so that seemed entirely possible.

Wandering back inside, I stopped to study her more closely. She was standing a little more upright than she had earlier and was looking around with a puzzled look on her face. Wondering where I'd gone, I supposed.

Her clothing looked second-hand. Like my own. She seemed to have a nice figure and her face was even more pleasant up close than it had been from a distance. I guessed her age to be late teens or early twenties. About like my own apparent age. For the rest of my days I'd appear to be a teenager. Certainly could have been worse. And I supposed she'd seen me throwing fire earlier. Interesting that she was still here.

As I strolled over to another pillar, I wondered what she would taste like. I'd be willing to bet her blood would taste good. Probably be a good lay as well.

'Appearing' behind this other column, I walked back to my chair, pretending not to hear her sudden gasp of surprise, and sat. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that she'd returned to her

crouched-down position in the shadows. Pulling the bottle back out of the cooler, I took another drink. This bottle was almost dry. If I was going to keep doing this, I would be needing a better blood supply. I didn't have enough bums in my employ to tap them nearly as often as I wanted to. If I did so enough to train seriously, they'd all become anemic and would then be useless to me. No, I needed a better source of blood. I could feel my gaze shift into predator mode.

Yes.

A dark smile slowly grew to grace my lips. I needed a better supply and I needed better blood. In fact, I needed vampire blood. And Fort Worth had a nearly endless supply of Sabbat just dying to donate for me.

During my planning, it occurred to me that this could potentially provide enough blood that I might be able to begin certain experiments with concentrating and storing blood that I'd been meaning to get back to. However, setting up a lab still required a new haven to put it in. My little crack house just wasn't up to hosting a lab. Not even close.

I also needed some cash. Fortunately, that wasn't a particularly difficult problem to solve. After a quick query to my network of bums and homeless people, I learned that a certain house on Barry Street received a shipment of drugs every other Friday. More importantly, I learned that the folks delivering picked up their payment at the same time.

So, on drop-off Friday I went avisiting. Without difficulty, I obfuscated my way inside the house in question and picked up the cash. Quite a bit of it, too. I also picked up a nice automatic rifle with an attached grenade launcher and a belt of grenades. These things were far too dangerous for a bunch of drug pushers to have. Half an hour later, someone inside began loudly panicking. Seemed their money had turned up missing and someone was expecting to get paid when they dropped off the drugs. A sudden silence descended upon the house as a nice caddy pulled up into the end of the driveway. Two men got out of the car and walked up to the house. A third man remained in the back of the caddy along with an apparently full athletic bag.

As the two men entered the house, I walked over to the open car door with my Glock in hand and put a silenced .357 bullet into the backseat fellow's temple. Without stopping, I set the pistol down on top of his drug bag, popped up over the open door, and fired a grenade into the house. The explosion was gratifying. In quick succession, I loaded and fired two more grenades into the place. Not quite as enjoyable as the first one, but good enough to bring a smile to my face.

Walking away with the sports bag and the attache case that held the money, I went ahead and fired one last grenade into the caddy. The gas tank immediately went up, sending an intermingled thrill of fear through me as well as a rush of pleasure as the fireball climbed into the night sky and quickly degraded into smoke.

I was well away before the police even got the call.

“So just what is it you're planning on doing with this fellow?” the Brujah asked. His name was Hugh and he worked for Karl. Hugh had a something of a gambling problem. Which explained why I'd hired him. He didn't mind getting his hands a bit dirty so long as I provided enough cash to cover some of his gambling debts.

“You willing to pay for that information?” I asked seriously. Shaking his head, he pocketed the envelope with his cash, got in his truck, and drove away.

In the backseat of the car I’d jacked the other night, a vampire was tied up tight. He was a Sabbat Tsimesce. The Tsimesce (I was told it’s pronounced Say-Me-Say) were a clan with a variety of weird powers. It’s been said they have a whole range of talents whereby they could warp flesh and bone with a mere touch. Used these powers for information gathering as well as entertainment. They had a very bad reputation within the Camarilla and not a much better one within the Sabbat.

My new friend and I drove back to the crack shack. After dragging him inside, I hooked up a transfusion set so that he’d be donating blood to a desperately empty, five-gallon water pail. I stuck a needle into his arm to get things rolling. And he promptly healed the hole, pushing the needle out. Well now. I tried it again with the same result. I then tried it again after hitting him in the face a couple of times. This time I got a little blood before the trickle dried up. I was beginning to become annoyed.

Switching gears, I removed all the tubing and needles. I then placed a large funnel over the top of the collection pail. Hanging him from the ceiling by his feet was quite a bit more difficult and I won’t get into just how much so it really was. Instead, we’ll skip straight to the part where I stuck a sharpened chunk of a chair leg through his heart. He tried to scream through the gag but didn’t quite make it. And that was the end of my difficulties with him. Using a straight razor, I slit his throat and sat back to happily watch as he finally bled for me. Of course, he didn’t fill up the five gallon container but the big fellow provided me with about seven quarts. Enough that I was pleased with the results. From the large container, I filled quite a few wine bottles. Dropping his body off in an empty lot where the sun would take care of him, I couldn’t help but feel that the money I’d paid the Brujah had been well spent.

And with five bottles of Tsimesce blood in my cooler, I returned to my warehouse and resumed setting the contents of a number of barrels on fire. Thanks to the vampire blood, I was able to practice much longer before I’d used up the blood in my system and needed to feed again. Vampire blood was much, much better for this sort of thing. Probably how the rumors that elder vampires only drank the blood of other vampires had come about. Taking another swig from my current bottle, I set another barrel on fire. I now had eight going at once. And a sudden twitchiness on my part suggested rather strongly that eight seemed to be good enough for the moment.

“You’re doing real magic, aren’t you?” she asked from the shadows.

“Yes,” I replied with a quiet smile.

“I want to learn.”

“Do you really? Then step closer and tell me your name.”

Slowly, cautiously, she walked out so that she was just outside the ring of barrels. “My name is Julia. I watched you the other night. Looked around after you left. There were no signs of any gadgets or devices. You’re doing real magic.”

“I know you did. And you’re right. I am doing real magic,” I replied, taking another drink. “And you think you want to learn?”

“I *do* want to learn,” she declared.

“In that case, I have two questions for you Julia. What do you think to gain from this knowledge... and how much are you willing to pay for it?”

“I’m seeking real power,” she replied. “And I’ll pay anything to get it.”

“No,” I countered softly. “You won’t pay anything... you’ll pay everything.”

“So be it,” she stated firmly.

“So be it,” I echoed quietly. Seemed my life was going to change more than I had expected.