

## Conscience

In my early days as a vampire I wouldn't kill people for dinner. Knock them in the head? With a smile on my face. But I wouldn't outright do them in. Nor would I drink enough from them to kill... even when it left me hungry. And it did indeed leave me hungry on more than one occasion. No, I had too much of a conscience to do something like that. What had changed?

In short, nothing and everything.

I still wouldn't kill someone just to have a meal of their blood. Well, I wouldn't kill normal people.

Humans.

Vampires... well vampires were another story.

Perhaps it was foolish to drain the blood from the Sabbat vampire right there in the middle of their territory. However, unexplained corpses in Fort Worth did not cause the Camarilla to become concerned. Not that I was aware of anyway. Dallas on the other hand... well, as the seat of local Camarilla power, the vampires of Dallas kept a very close eye on every single corpse that turned up within the area.

Not that it was likely this guy would either be turning up or missed. The Sabbat vampire-making machine seemed to belt out vamps like this guy on a more or less continuing basis. And, on the off chance someone did actually miss him, they'd most likely assume that a stronger Sabbat vampire had killed him. Survival of the fittest was the motto that the Sabbat supposedly lived and died by.

As for his corpse, if no one found it before daylight came, the sun would take care of any evidence for me. And chances of anyone finding his body were slim. Over the years, I had become pretty good at hiding vampire corpses where only the sun would find them.

With all the blood out of him, I dragged his remains further into the scrub brush. Looking up, I was able to see the moon. That should do pretty well for ensuring that sunlight could get to this guy and tie off my remaining loose end.

On the way back, I capped off my partially filled five gallon jug of vampire blood. This represented a good couple of training sessions for me. I was already looking forward to the exercise.

Depositing the container into a holding bracket I'd built into the trunk of the Lexus, I was ready to go. However, something about my immediate environment bothered me. After a moment, it hit me. Too few insects were making noise. And while it wasn't like I was in the middle of a zoo, there should have been more animal-generated sounds as well.

Looking around, I saw no one but that didn't mean they weren't there. This brought to mind the latest rumor making the rounds. Word on the street had it that Bishop Vengeful had the Sabbat forming teams like the Camarilla sheriff used to hunt his people. My team in point of fact. Using vampires of different bloodlines to increase their team's functionality and usefulness. Just like we did. While the Sabbat weren't known as great team players, they *were* good at adapting to survive. It was entirely possible this rumor held some truth.

Driving quickly away, I wondered if I might not somehow have gotten myself spotted by

one of these groups. If they even existed. Or even by some more ordinary band of Sabbat lookouts or predatory troops. These I knew without a doubt existed. It didn't seem likely but when you hunt other vampires for a living, 'better safe than sorry' were words to live by. So, with that in mind I decided to head to Waco instead of back home. That would be a long drive and should give me plenty of time to figure out if I was being followed or not.

Waco. An interesting little city. Belonging to neither the Camarilla nor the Sabbat, it remained a free city. I had heard of no less than half a dozen vampire who desired to make it their own. None of them had done so yet.

Why not? In a word: werewolves.

For whatever reason, the werewolves liked having Waco as a free city. They didn't actually do anything to maintain control themselves. But, anytime the Camarilla or Sabbat had an operation grow bigger than they felt comfortable with, fuzzy critters came out of the woodwork and swarmed it under.

I suppose it helped the little city maintain its rustic charm.

Down on the south side of town one could find a little electronics shop that I did business with from time to time. For a couple of hundred bucks, they were more than happy to sweep my car for bugs or tracking devices. Maybe I was getting paranoid like Boomer. But he insisted that a little paranoia was a must in our line of work. Considering some of what I'd seen, I was beginning to agree with him.

Well, paranoid or not, it seemed like a good time to pay the electronics shop a visit.

Pulling the Lexus into the only open service bay, I managed to catch Jimmy's eye as he signed off on whatever had been done to the little Pontiac in the bay next to me. By the time I was out of the car, the owner of Everynight Electronics stood beside me.

"Dmetri Callander, what can we do for you tonight sir? And how are you liking those remote cameras? Everything okay with the hand-held display?"

"Oh yeah," I replied with a smile. "That's all working just fine. Tonight I'm just needing a once over on the car for electronic tracking or surveillance stuff."

"Must be rough working in such a competitive market," he told me, motioning over one of his people. In the course of our previous meetings, Jimmy had somehow gotten the idea that I was a courier for a high tech computer chip manufacturing company. It still seemed to be a convenient idea for him to have.

"It keeps you sharp, that's for sure," I replied as the Latino man arrived. The two of them spoke in low voices and soon I was heading towards the office with Jimmy while his man checked out my car. Before we got to the office, a pair of fast cars came skidding to a stop some thirty feet away. Before any of the doors opened, I had the hammer aimed at the windshield of the first and had moved to partial cover next to the office door with the shop owner in tow.

"Whoa!" Jimmy called, holding his hands up. "Easy there. Those are friends of mine. They're not here for anything nefarious, I promise you. In fact, I'll vouch for them." With a quick, frowning glance at the man next to me, I lowered the heavy pistol... but did not put it away.

By the time the new arrivals finished cautiously getting out of the two, late-model hot rods, I'd counted seven of them. Five men, two women - all wearing wary looks on their faces for some strange reason. That was potentially a lot of trouble even for me to handle. And this

came to mind because the more of them I saw, the more I became convinced that the lot of them knew how to handle themselves.

Whether Jimmy knew it or not, he *was* betting his life on their good behavior.

Very slowly, never taking my eyes off any of them, I holstered the hammer.

“Jimbo,” one of the men called. This fellow seemed right on the line between being stylishly dressed and preppy. He was also muscular, fit, and I was suspecting armed. Without staring, he kept an eye on me as he walked over to the blonde shop owner. “Not our usual reception.”

“Donny,” Jimmy greeted him, looking a bit abashed, “always good to see you. Sorry about the confusion. Mister Callander here is a good customer who’s in a bit of a risky line of work. ‘Constant vigilance’ is more than a catch phrase to him.”

Just then, the Hispanic man who’d been checking the car walked over. In his hand, he held a tiny metal box with a pair of wires sticking out of it. “Found one sir,” he told Jimmy. “It’s emitting a steady pulse. Probably got a good ten mile range.” Ten miles? That almost certainly meant my pursuers were close. I started looking further afield, searching for signs that they might already be here.

“Search it again Beto,” Jimmy told the man as he scowled down at the little device he now held. “Make sure it’s the only one.”

“You got it jefe,” the man replied before quickly walking back to my car.

“Jimmy,” the new arrival said with a concerned frown. “If it’s important, you might want to help Beto. He’s good, but face it, you’re the best.”

A look of concern flashed across the business man’s face before he nodded. “You’re right Donny. This is too important. Everyone, please excuse me for a few minutes.” He moved with a purpose back towards the bay where my car sat.

Donny’s look of concern evaporated. “What’s following you jerky toy?”

“What?” I asked upon realizing he was talking to me.

“What’s following you?”

“Jerky toy? Did you refer to me as jerky toy?” I demanded, caught somewhere between amusement, anger, and incredulity.

“You heard him vamp boy,” one of the women hissed. “Now answer the damn question.”

“Ahh,” I nodded when the realization hit. “Some of Waco’s famous werewolves.” One of the men gave a little bow but the rest gave me staid looks that stopped just short of frowns.

“Who’s. Following. You?” Donny demanded quietly.

While I considered not answering him, there didn’t seem to be much to gain from doing so... aside from annoying them which was almost enough incentive to do just that... but not quite. “It’s possible there’s a Sabbat team following me.”

“Why?!” Donny managed to put an awful lot of resentment, anger, and frustration into that one word. I have to admit, I was rather impressed.

“It must be my charming personality,” I replied with a smirk. “Sabbat everywhere seem to love me.”

“Look you son of a bitch...,” the woman snarled, reaching for me.

Reflexively I took a step back and triggered my newest intimidation tool. To all appearances, my eyes were replaced by miniature whirlpools of fire. I still wasn’t completely sure it was all a Chimeristry illusion or if there might actually be some pyromancy involved. I had reached the point where I was well-versed in pyromancy but Chimeristry was new and I didn’t have much of a feel for it yet.

“Back the hell off,” I commanded, raising my left hand to ward her off and dropping my voice into a deeper range. My other hand conveniently found its way to the hammer though I didn’t draw it.

She took a surprised step back. However, one of the others asked, “What are you going to do if we don’t?”

Showing fangs, I smiled, took a dramatic step closer to the center of their group, and replied in a voice filled with more confidence than I truly possessed, “Kill you all.”

Donny, clasped a hand on the fellow’s shoulder in such a way the guy figured out he was supposed to stop talking. Their apparent leader returned his gaze to me, took a step closer, and said, “Look *pal*, we’re here to make sure....” I’m not sure what he was going to say because a huge hole suddenly appeared in his chest accompanied by an impressive spray of blood. Narrowly missing me, he fell several feet forward onto his face and didn’t move.

More by reflex than anything, I began obfuscating and moved for cover as the boom of a distant rifle could now be heard.. Someone had fired that shot from a very long distance away. Two of the werewolves rushed to their cars while another sprinted off into the nearby trees and undergrowth. I didn’t see where the others got off to but one of those going for the cars was my new, favorite werewolf woman. Putting a fist through a window, she grabbed a purse and with a rather impressive leap, dove for cover amongst a pile of boxes. Rolling up, she pulled a little Skorpion machine pistol from the handbag.

Automatic weapons fire from a van parked out on the street peppered the werewolves’ other car and the man digging around in the back seat. He yelped, ripped off the back door, and limped quickly towards the woods with a large sports bag. Halfway there, a second shooter from out of my sight chimed in, adding yet more automatic weapon’s fire. With a half dozen little blood sprays the werewolf dropped in the tall grass.

So long as I went around obfuscating, the rest of the world pretty much ignored me. At least that part not looking through mechanical equipment. Cameras and electronic scopes could see me just fine. Occupational hazard. Another problem was that while obfuscating, I could be seen by other vampires doing the same.

Fortunately, this time it was me seeing the other vampire first.

Though I still couldn’t see him clearly, the vampire was no longer the totally indistinct blur he would have been back when I’d first learned this discipline. Perhaps some day I’d be able to see obfuscating people clearly. It would be nice. However, I could see well enough to see that this fellow was going to shoot werewolf girl in the back. The hammer was up and blazing before I really thought about it.

Startled, the werewolf spun and shot me several times with her machine pistol. As I landed on my back, a large hole appeared in the wooden post behind where I’d stood. The top of the post cracked and dropped to the ground.

Damn. That shot had been close.

I returned my attention to the werewolf. “Look behind you, you stupid bitch!” I gasped as I heard the distant boom of the rifle that had just shot the post. Okay, considering the spray direction from Donny and the hole that just appeared behind me, I had a pretty good idea of the line in which the sniper lay. With a pained groan, I rolled to my feet and staggered to my left. Hopefully, this put me out of sight. I would be behind the storefront so that should narrow down how many people could shoot at me from far away. In theory.

With my back to the bricks, I took a moment to take inventory of my injuries. Other than a nick to the inside of my left arm, none of the bullets from her tiny machine pistol had drawn

blood. But they'd sure as hell generated a lot of bruises when they'd hit my vest.

A wolf howl echoed through the night quickly followed by a second and then a third. The woman with the Skorpion had moved around to the shop's glass back door. There, she alternated looking inside and outside for bad guys.

And speaking of bad guys, if the shadows cast by the light out front were any indicator, two riflemen were moving this way from the front and quickly. Moving fast, I took cover in one of the service bays behind a roll away tool cart. From there I watched the shadows glow longer and longer until their sources finally came around the corner. Once into the open area behind the store, the two vampire riflemen slowed down and began searching in earnest.

I feel pretty certain that the three round burst I put into the head of the fellow on the right came as a surprise to them.

With a roar of rage, the surviving rifleman began hosing the area I occupied with automatic gunfire. Bullets ripped into and through various pieces of equipment, the car behind me, the tool cart, and the divider wall. When the shooting stopped, a loud clang from right behind me startled me badly. I turned to find half an automatic rifle sticking out of the cart I'd been hiding behind.

Daaamn.

The shriek of metal being bent and strained almost certainly boded ill for me. As I spun halfway around the wall to fire at the fellow I suspected of making all the noise, the chatter of the Skorpion opening up told me the werewolf chick was still alive. But what really caught my attention was the fact that she was using said machine pistol on the rifle-less rifleman... and that he had picked up one of the werewolves' cars over his head.

My quick impression had been that he'd intended to throw it at me.

With a cry of pain, that plan went away. He fell to the ground with the car landing on top of him. Not wanting to miss such a golden opportunity, I fired a burst into the car's gas tank. Incendiary ammo plus gas equaled beauty. The explosion wasn't huge but it was certainly big enough to lift the car off the ground and engulf the fellow under the car in lovely flames. Then he got to enjoy the car crashing down onto him for a second time in less than ten seconds. His screams were cut short by more chatter from the Skorpion.

Such beautiful flames....

The sound of the werewolf girl reloading brought me out of my little reverie. Cautiously, I stepped out from behind my covering wall. Three Sabbat down and out. How many more to go? At least one sniper. Hopefully the werewolves were going after him. But I didn't trust them to deal with this. So, until I knew the sniper was dead or otherwise out of the picture - and that my car and myself weren't going to be getting large holes punched in us, I wasn't driving anywhere.

At the sound of my footsteps on the gravel, she spun and pointed her machine pistol at me. Again. Good hearing to pick that little sound up over the roar of the burning car.

"If you shoot me again, I'm going to return the favor," I told her seriously.

She lowered the pistol enough so that it was no longer pointed at me.

Looking at the rifleman who was now missing most of his head, I noticed he had a radio. Hmm.... Picking up the radio and his rifle, I burned off half the mag - the last few shots fired with the radio on. Triggering the radio again, I yelled, "We got him! Make for the van!" and immediately followed that with several short bursts from the rifle... several of them with the radio on.

"Clever," the woman said with a grin as she turned to look for Sabbat heading towards

the van. It didn't take long. Barely two seconds later some Celerity junky sprinted way too quickly across the clearing on the other side of the road and into the back of the van. I fired off a couple more short bursts from the rifle just to give the illusion that the person on the radio was still alive and kicking... if in an undead, vampirish sort of way. Shooting at the man would have been a waste of time. I was a good shot but not that good. Or maybe I was just too slow a shot. I'd have to think about it later. A second vampire came running into view from just down the road. A much more normal run this time. That said, while this gal was much slower than the Celerity monkey, she was still covering ground quickly.

"Give me the rifle," werewolf girl demanded, holding a fresh clip she'd just taken from the dead guy's belt. Knowing her Skorpion wasn't much good at these ranges, I didn't hesitate to hand it over. The old clip came out, the new clip went in, and with a smooth, clean motion she turned and opened up on the vampire as she crossed the open street. The vampire staggered but kept running, eventually making it to the cover provided by the far side of van. Werewolf girl didn't stop firing, shooting holes in the windows and seriously pockmarking the side of the van.

As I was aiming the hammer at the van, the engine started. At almost the same time several howls came from somewhere far away. "Doe's that mean reinforcements are on the way?" I asked.

"That's a victory howl. The sniper's dead!"

My game plan immediately changed. Obfuscating, I sprinted towards the van. With the hammer on auto, I opened the back door and commenced to hosing the inside. There were at least three rows of bench seats. I had no idea how many the bullets were going through but I know it was making short work of the back and suspected they were moving all the way through to the front of the van. Almost instantly, the back wheels began spinning as the driver floored it. Someone inside the van screamed in agony. Having been hit by incendiary ammunition, I understood why even if I felt no sympathy for these would-be assassins.

The door lurched out of my grasp as the van started speeding away. Last time that had happened, human vampire hunters had gotten away from me.

Not this time.

With a much practiced move I holstered the hammer. Both hands raised, I called fire and immediately sent it forth. Roaring, the flames leapt out, the forty foot distance between myself and the vehicle nothing as the van was suddenly filled with a raging inferno. The remaining glass burst out and the van veered hard to the left, flipped over onto its side, and slid to a stop. Not being one to stop with a little fire when a big fire was available, I used my beautiful flames to blow up my second vehicle of the evening.

Suddenly the Celerity monkey popped out of the flames from the vertical driver's door window. Sprinting blindly, he plowed straight into the side of a nearby cinder block building where he dropped unconscious. I amused myself by shooting his prone and still burning body until my current clip ran dry.

By the time that happened, I had worked myself in a good mood.

With a smile I reloaded and re-holstered the hammer. I was not particularly surprised to find several werewolves nearby. Covered in blood, Donny didn't look well or happy to be there... but he was standing once more. In fact, the only werewolf who didn't seem to be standing there was the fellow who'd dropped in the field.

"Jimmy's going to have to be converted," Donny told Beto who walked out to meet them. Beto looked both a little sad and a little eager which was a strange combination for one's face to achieve. I started to object but stopped myself. Donny noticed and raised an eyebrow. "You

wanting to convert him?”

“No,” I replied with a sigh. My plans had not progressed to that point yet. If the Camarilla found out I’d converted someone without their permission, they’d kill me and the one I’d converted. And I wasn’t strong enough to go against that.

Yet.

“You know, I don’t like vampires,” Donny began, shaking his head. “But I wouldn’t burn them alive. Nor would I want something like that on my conscience.”

“Then you obviously haven’t met the right vampires,” I replied seriously. Turning, I started towards my car. Two bays down from it, Beto was talking to an obviously distraught Jimmy. At the far end, several stunned looking people stood around in a daze. Stopping, I asked, “What are you going to do with the customers?”

“That’s not your concern,” he told me. “Now take your unwelcome ass out of our city and don’t come back.” Good mood sliding away, I turned back to face him.

“Your answer is not good enough. Tell me what’s planned for them. And then ask yourself if you really want to make me your enemy.” I pulled out my little flask and drank down the concentrated blood from within it. If these dogs were planning on killing the humans, I was going to do something dumb.

Again.

“That’s all the answer you’re going to get. Now you’d better get your skinny undead ass outta here or we’ll end you like we ended the other vampires.”

With a derisive snort, I looked over the available vampire corpses. “Are you under the impression that your people did this? I killed most of them. Which is not surprising because that what I do and I’m damn good at it. Now explain what you have in mind for the humans so I can be on my way. I have better things to do than argue with you.”

“I don’t know who you think you are or where you think you are, but you’re not on vampire turf here!” he declared. Turf?

“Oh hell!” I declared loudly, shaking my head. “You’re not the *real* werewolves. You’re like the junior achievers or something. How did I miss seeing that?”

“Donny is in charge of our sub-pack!” the girl declared hotly.

“Shut up Melissa!” he commanded and she closed her mouth with a snap. “You,” he began, pointing a finger at me, “will get the hell out of our town and you’ll do it now. If you return, we’ll kill you.”

I turned back and looked at the stunned people who stood blinking at each other, trying to make sense of a situation that a rational mind just couldn’t accept. I’d never killed a human to feed myself. So far as I knew, the only humans I’d ever killed had been working with Sabbat vampires. So far as I knew, the werewolves were planning on eating these people. And while I might not be pulling the trigger, they’d still be dead.

Turning back to Donny, I smiled a cold, dead smile.

“I’m going to ask you one more time,” I all but whispered. “And if you don’t answer my question, I’m going to kill you on the spot. Donny, what are you going to do with the humans?”

He opened his mouth and my smile widened even as my eyes remained frosty. He closed his mouth and swallowed.

“Tell him bro,” the werewolf who’d bowed to me earlier advised. “It’s not a secret to anyone but humans.”

Donny shot him a look that shifted from initially hostile to considering. With a scowl, he returned his gaze to me. “We’ll take them to the pack. We have a couple of hypnotists there

who'll erase their memories of what happened here. If any of them are resistant to that, they'll be converted and given the chance to join the pack."

"Good enough," I replied and once more turned towards my car. Halfway there, I stopped and faced him again. "I don't come to Waco often but I do come here occasionally. I would suggest that we call a truce. You can ask any Sabbat you can find, I take it very badly when someone tries to kill me and I'm not adverse to sharing that displeasure. You're werewolves and you're a tough bunch. But I'm a professional killer who hunts Sabbat vampires for fun and profit. Think about it. I have no doubt we'll eventually meet again." And with that I got into my car and slowly drove away.

Sitting down in preparation for sleeping through the day, I smiled. Another band of Sabbat had died tonight. Not just any band but trained fighters. Those were the sort of vampires the Sabbat couldn't just crank out like doughnuts. No, that part of the evening had gone well.

Thinking of the Lexus wiped my smile away. I'd had to drop it in a lake. After tonight, I just couldn't trust that it wasn't electronically marked in some way. Shame. I'd rather liked that car.

And what about the humans?

Was my conscience clear in regards to them? I wasn't so sure about that. Would the werewolves keep their word? I didn't honestly know what their word was worth. Had I damned them all by turning them over? I didn't think so. But I wasn't sure if said humans would have agreed with me or not. If the werewolves kept their word, most of them would have no clue what had happened.

If. One of the larger two-letter words available.

I laid back on my bed and stared at the ceiling for the last few minutes before daylight struck. They'd threatened to kill me if I returned. But I knew I would go back. At some point, I would find out what actually happened to those humans. Maybe the werewolves would try to kill me.

I felt myself slowly smile at the thought. I had a lot of alchemical experiments in mind that would benefit greatly from a large amount of werewolf blood.

With that cheery thought and a reasonably clear conscience, I fell asleep for the day.