

## Counting Time

I've never been very good at keeping track of time. Humans use clocks and watches to do this. As the skirmishes between the Camarilla, which I was currently working for, and our Sabbat foes grew, I began keeping track of time by a different method: how many ammo crates for my pistol I went through.

My preferred anti-vampire munition was an incendiary round. Expensive to be sure. But Karl had agreed to pay for my ammunition as part of our deal and he didn't hold back. I was beginning to suspect that Karl had a pretty large expense account. Now, while regular bullets would work on vampires, the wounds they made were relatively easy to heal. If I was going to go to the trouble of shooting someone, I damn sure didn't want them healing quickly. Incendiary rounds took care of that.

The problem was that incendiary rounds have this strange tendency to do bad things to flammable surroundings. Despite our slowly-intensifying war, we still had to keep the truth out of the press. At least to the point that the prince of our city could ensure that anything that the world at large found out had happened could be passed off as something much more mundane than vampires warring for control of the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex area. While it typically caused more trouble than it was worth in this regard, in a way the incendiary ammo helped with that one particular aspect. The bullets tended to create large, highly visible fires. Naturally, this created a new problem. However, it was a problem that could be explained away by simple arson. At least it could with a little prompting of vampiric influence upon the right people. These fires also tended to eradicate any evidence of supernatural activity.

The real problem was, as the fighting continued to grow, so would our visibility. And tonight, we were being pretty damn conspicuous.

When we first got started as a Sabbat hunting group, we'd sit around waiting for the phone to ring and call us to action... figuratively speaking of course. However, that got old fast. I had bills to pay and there's nothing like a little action to hone every aspect of your vampiric powers.

Both Robert and Samuel had contacts throughout the city. I think Robert had finally begun using his Nosferatu ties. He also had some sort of dance club or something which provided him even more contacts. Samuel had money and lots of people working for him. He started feeding them some of the raw information we'd collected.

And both their efforts had begun generating results.

After quite a lot of tracing and checking, Samuel's folks had finally found something concrete to us to work with. One of the enemy Brujah we'd done in along the way had a number in his cell phone. Actually, he and various other dead people had several numbers amongst them, hence the delay. However, Samuel's people had traced this particular number to an apartment complex in west Arlington. Very close to the Fort Worth border. The city which the Sabbat called home. And two other dead enemy vampires had the same number in their phones as well. So far as we were concerned, this was as good as gold and we ran with it.

Being the action oriented band we were, we drove over and kicked in the front door of the

apartment in question. Gutsy but not too bright, I'll be the first to admit. Turned out the complex was a Sabbat staging area. The fight started immediately and had quickly grown hot.

Now, it had become literally too hot as several of the buildings were on fire. Partly my doing that, and not just my incendiary ammunition.

Halfway through our battle with the initial thugs, holes began appearing in the building around us. Between that and the roar of automatic weapons behind us, we figured out pretty quickly that the punks in the apartment across the way had opened fire on us. This put us in a rather unpleasant crossfire, which, to say the least, is not where you want to be when it comes to gunfights.

Kegger, one of the new guys that Karl had saddled us with, had gone skating around (yes, I said skating and unfortunately, I meant it literally) the building and had drawn some of the opposing bad guy's fire. This gave Samuel, Randal (the other new guy), and me a chance to open fire on our original attackers. Robert, having bent his shotgun hitting one of the first guys we'd run across in the head, picked up a refrigerator and hurled it through the wall behind which the bad guys were hiding. This gave us a much better view of our opponents (despite him miraculously and sadly missing them all with the fridge itself) and we finished off this first lot quickly allowing us to get to cover and stop slowing down bullets with our flesh and bullet-proof vests.

Both Kegger and Randal Godfrey were Ravnos... which I thought explained quite well why they'd been stuck with us. Ours was a risky job. If one of them died fighting the good fight, then so much the better. If not, then at least they were out of the way for a little while. At least that was what I suspected the prince's view of the situation to be. Ravnos were almost as beloved by the so called Kindred as Caitiff. Seemed the whole criminal-with-a-sense-of-humor reputation combined with their ability to spin illusions made them unpopular with authority figures. Having met the young-looking Kegger, I can truthfully say that I completely understood the prince's point of view.

I didn't know the kid's real name. I had the impression he had actually been a vampire about as long as I had - around ten years. He had long, black hair, wore a T-shirt with an arrow pointing at his crotch which read 'I'm with stupid', jeans, roller blades, and he carried a metal stick with a hook on the end. He said the thing was for maneuvering with the skates and for hitting people. About the only thing I liked about him was his shirt.

Randal was a different story. He looked older than most of our group, appearing to be in his late twenties or early thirties. I didn't have a good feel for how old he really was but he was certainly a lot younger than Karl. Where Kegger had claimed no particular profession, Randal claimed to be an archeologist. The more I talked to him, the more I suspected he did all he archeological studies in a museum. And that this was also where he picked up any relics or artifacts that drew his eye. I'd figured this out all by myself after he'd mentioned he was currently on the lam for stealing something from a museum in Egypt. And Mexico. And Thailand. And several other places to boot. He dressed a bit like Indiana Jones but with a more expensive tailor. He'd kept the .45 revolver though. He wasn't a bad shot with it... but unfortunately he wasn't a good one either. Oh, he could also pick a lock faster than anyone I'd ever met which was pretty darn impressive.

After Robert had made us a door into the other side of this smoldering apartment building and the vampires here had been dealt with, we'd circled around to go after the bunch of Sabbat who'd been shooting at our backs. That's when we began to figure out that there were a lot more of them than there were of us.

Considering how many Sabbat we were turning up, it was a crappy time for us to be unable to contact Fred. The semi-psychotic Brujah was bloody useful in a firefight. Robert had collected everyone's phone numbers weeks ago. We'd gathered in Robert's club once Samuel came up with

the information about our target. However, we hadn't been able to get in touch with Fred or Boomer as he was sometimes called. His phone kept going to voice mail. After a couple of hours of this, we'd said the hell with it and decided this would be a good field test for the new guys we'd been saddled with. So naturally it turned into a huge firefight with more Sabbath than I could shake a stick at.

Definitely missed Fred. A damn sight more so than both Kegger and Randal combined.

I probably should have gotten along better with Kegger. Like me, he looked like a teenager. Not so unusual there, a lot of vampires were converted in their teens. Unlike me (most of the time) he acted like a teenager. Unfortunately, he was a skater - one of the most annoying varieties of teenager. And he was still trying to be a skater despite the fact he was undead.

At least he had some distraction value.

Burning blood to use my Obfuscation ability, I snuck around to the bad guys' apartment - the last such place we currently knew of. The other members of my team were staying behind cover to give me a chance to get inside without being shot in the back.... or the front from the Sabbath returning fire. Just because they couldn't see me didn't mean they couldn't shoot me. Twisting and turning my way past enemy vampires, I worked my way through the crowded entry way of their apartment. Had I been more talented with my Obfuscation, I could have just breezed through and they all would have moved out of my way without ever knowing they'd done so. Gilch had held that level of talent. I was getting there but didn't want to push it. Bumping into one of them might not have made them notice me... but it might have. Ducking an outstretched arm passing over spare clips, I finally managed to get past the last of them. Damn; rather reminiscent of an evil game of Twister. Once inside the apartment itself, I was rather dismayed to count ten heavily armed vampires in there. Most of them preparing to dash out and do us harm. So, rather than cap a few in the back of the head as I'd originally planned, I went to the kitchen, passing the two with guns pointed out the patio windows, and with a quick, more than human-powered jerk, pulled the gas line off the back of the stove.

"What's that noise?" one of them asked.

"Don? Was that you?" another asked as I began working my way back out through the crowded room and entry way. I actually had to bear-crawl part of the way to get out without further pressing my luck and my ability to Obfuscate.

As I passed the last one, I stood and walked out the front door.

Behind me I heard one say, "What's that smell?" And a second say, "Quiet guys, I'm still hearing something." Yes, he certainly was. That would be the hissing of natural gas quickly leaking into the place.

When I was fifteen feet away, I used one of the magical talents I'd started developing: pyromancy. Fire magic. In this case, it was from one of the Tremere line of vampire's Thaumaturgy books. Where Gilch had gotten it would forever remain a mystery. Yes, I'd finally gotten around to studying Gilch's books. One of my main reasons for getting a 'steady' Camarilla job in the first place. The lovely, red and purple fire I called into being by using up some of my blood showed beyond a doubt that I was making progress with it.

As the fire bloomed in my hand, I lost my hold on my Obfuscation and several of the Sabbath I'd passed (twice) in the entry way suddenly noticed me standing in front of them. Too late. I felt a nasty smile cross my lips.

One of the Sabbath guys grinned and began raising his shotgun, apparently thinking me an easy target. Another's eyes widened in fear. Vampires have an instinctual terror of flame and the newer

a vampire you are, the stronger the fear is typically. It was one of the two main reasons I'd chosen to start with the magic of fire instead of one of the other magics available to me via Gilch's library. A third guy seemed to put two and two together and gave a horrified look into their kitchen.

It was a small flame that I threw into the open doorway.

But that's all that was needed.

Upon reaching the entry way, the entire apartment filled with flame in the blink of an eye. The expanding fireball blew out the windows and then everything else.

It immediately occurred to me that maybe fifteen feet hadn't been far enough away.

A short time later, Robert helped me stand again, shaking his head as he did so. Groggy and dazed, I wobbled in place a bit. Looking myself over, it appeared that I'd been peppered with glass and brick and I don't know what all else. Shaking my own head to clear the cobwebs, I began pulling debris out of my arms, legs, and face. An endeavor every bit as painful as it sounds. Thank goodness for body armor or I'd have been pulling more pieces out of more places. Looking at the burning building, I'd been about to congratulate myself on a job sloppy but thoroughly done (the second floor collapsing on the thugs I'd tried to blow up seemed to have done them in). Additionally, I was rather pleased to note that particular building was quickly turning into a huge bonfire.

Naturally, that's when bullets began raining all around us, kicking up chunks of earth and debris from the shattered building. Roaring guns pulled my attention in two directions. First from a pickup load of Sabbat to my left and then a separate group who were charging from around the first building behind me and to the right. With their flannel shirts and hunting rifles, the guys in the truck reminded me of a redneck parade. The other guys were younger looking, dressed in dark clothing, armed with a variety of automatic pistols and rifles, and running straight at us.

Just as I was about to run for cover, Robert bellowed out a challenge and charged the group that was charging us.

Son. Of. A. Bitch!

Moving as close to this second burning building as I could force myself to get, in the hope that those by the road wouldn't be able to see me clearly, I began firing away with the pistol at the big Nosferatu's would-be victims. Robert got hit several times by the people he rushed, but he either shrugged off the effect or his armored vest soaked up the damage. With a battle cry of, "This ensemble's Armani you bastards!", he began clawing his way through the unsuspecting Sabbat. I say unsuspecting because he was way stronger than he looked and he looked pretty strong to begin with. Additionally, he didn't have claws on his fingers until he reached them. That's when rather lengthy claws popped out and those Sabbat learned a new definition for the phrase "Oh, this is bad". Blood sprayed and things that should have been inside the Sabbat vampires suddenly began coming out for fresh air. Teach them to shoot holes in a man's clothing. And speaking of shooting, I continued to do so, just as fast as I could point and fire. Blood spattered as new holes appeared and the group that seemed to be made up of mostly new Brujah continued dying at a fast pace.

Behind me, another section of the burning apartment building collapsed. Now as I've mentioned, vampires have an instinctive fear of fire. Probably because it's one of the few things that causes us lasting damage. For me there is something of a conflict with this fear. I feel it the same as other vampires do, but I'm drawn to the flames as well. The other big reason why the first magic that I had chosen to pursue was pyromancy. Fires have always held a fascination for me. I suppose Dad beating the crap out of me after I set one of our sheds on fire was probably the only reason I wasn't a full-fledged pyromaniac today.

In the middle of the fight, I stopped and watched the building burn for a few seconds. The

beautiful, swirling reds, oranges, and yellows of the flames were entrancing. The heat felt good as the night grew cooler. At the same time I felt my heart beating faster and sweat break out on my forehead as the ingrained fear began trying to get hold of me.

This internal conflict was resolved when the rednecks' pickup exploded, jolted me out of my reverie. Apparently, Samuel had finally hit close enough to the gas tank with one of his exploding shotgun rounds. Turning back to Robert, I found that he was down to two bad guys. The scene had gotten quite a bit messier in the few seconds I'd been distracted. There were now several detached limbs mixed in with the downed vampires. One of the two surviving vampires of this group was crawling towards his gun, moaning in pain as he did so. The other, the one upon which the angry, blood-soaked Nosferatu had focused his attention, was backing away as quickly as possible from his upcoming demise. Across the way, Randal sprinted as fast as possible across the courtyard heading in the general direction of the armored SUV we'd arrived in. A moment later, several Sabbat came into view in hot pursuit.

Starting at the back, I began firing at them as they concentrated on Randal. The first couple dropped off nice and quietly. Unfortunately, the third one I shot I hit in the arm instead of the head and he started screaming. This had the distinctly negative effect of distracting the rest from the chase and it didn't take them long to focus their attention me and Robert.

Shaking my head, I muttered a quiet but heartfelt, "Damn!" What can I say, I was inspired. I'm an alchemist, a growing pyromancer, and a slowly burgeoning Nemesis, not a poet.

As these latest bad guys slowed and began turning in our direction to myself and Robert, Randal stepped behind cover and began shooting rapidly if not accurately with his pistol. I absently shot the crawling fellow in the head just as his hand wrapped around the handle to his weapon. While a few of them had been distracted by Randal, it was not as many of them as I had hoped. And one of them had the incredible lack of courtesy (or perhaps luck) to shoot my pistol. Flew right out of my hand. Didn't they realized these things were expensive to get done right? It's not like Glocks grown on trees dammit! Evidently not feeling my pain, Robert picked up one of the dead vampires and threw her at the bunch who were now all running towards us rather than after Randal.

"They shot my freaking pistol! Oh, this sucks!" I declared loudly throwing a piece of flaming two by four at the Sabbat which they ignored. A distant part of me wondered if the loss of the pistol, and with it my last few remaining bullets, officially made it tomorrow, as this was my new means of tracking time.

Robert's laughing reply was, "It's all good until we run out of Sabbat to kill. A gun's a gun. Grab another and get back to exterminating these vermin."

A gun's a gun? My silenced Glock had been a precision instrument of death. Fine tuned for my grip and well known and very comfortable for me by now. These other guns scattered across the battlefield were generic. They were simply made to throw lead in a given directly as quickly as possible.

"Heathen," I yelled as I picked up a Mac-10 and emptied it on one of our latest attackers. "In fact, I think that qualifies as blasphemy," I yelled after him. Rolling across half a dead vampire, pain flared in my leg as I snatched up an AK-47. Robert was dodging to the right to clear my line of fire. All but one of them were concentrating on the big, bloody Nosferatu that was working his way inexorably towards them. The oddball of the group had his eye and his weapon on me. Flipping the selector to auto, I blazed away starting with the most immediate threat to myself and began working my way towards Robert's next victims. I did a number on them and Robert immediately crashed into the survivors.

Dropping the empty rifle, I realized that I'd been shot again. Thrice more in the vest and twice more in the leg. Oh, and in the lower back as well. Ouch dammit. Wasn't sure where that one had come from or how long it had been there. With a pained sigh I limped over and picked up my damaged pistol. There was a big dimple in the barrel. As I began healing my leg, I wondered if maybe in the next time period I should break down and pick up a backup pistol.

Another section of burning building collapsed behind me. I could picture the headlines now - 'Gangwar Burns Down Apartments'. Glad I didn't have to coordinate the cleanup with the police reports, the fire department, the morgue, and any other agencies or groups who might potentially find out too much about the existence of vampires. No, that was the prince's job. Or someone who worked for him. Which would go a long way towards pissing him off royally. However, we'd killed a lot of Sabbat tonight and that sort of body count didn't happen without making some noise. The prince knew this. If he got too annoyed, he'd tell Karl to redirect our efforts. But after the elysium massacre, I didn't expect that to happen anytime soon. No, we had our license to kill and for the moment, the more dead Sabbat we turned up, the better.

I holstered my damaged Glock with a frown.

My mental gears switched again and I wondered if time would pass more slowly if I got two cases of ammo? Living on borrowed time, I snagged another AK and joined Robert in looking for survivors and clues to where we might find more Sabbat as the first sirens could be heard in the distance.