

Introduction to Gilch

I couldn't help but feel slightly wide-eyed, surprised by just how big the city of Los Angeles truly was. Seeing it in pictures and movies was one thing; seeing it person... that was proving to be something else entirely. Looking at the city lights that seemed to go on forever, I felt very, very far away from my old Wyoming home. A home I hadn't seen in four years. A home I was all too aware I could never go back to, now that I had been turned into a vampire. So I walked away from the bus station carrying a backpack that held all of my worldly belongings and began looking for a place to call my own in the big, bad city.

Moving in my chosen direction, the quality of the people around me steadily declined. Soon the 'normal' people were almost entirely gone. As the blocks slowly rolled by, Gangbangers watched from inset store fronts and parked cars as I passed. A hooker gave me a quick once over but she didn't slow down. Probably on her way to a better part of town to sell more tiny pieces of her soul. A slick man in a BMW slowed down and picked up the hooker before she had gotten out of my sight. A homeless man lay under the bus stop bench I strode past. Talking to himself and perhaps a non-existent companion, a junkie staggered by, not seeing the world as I saw it. Yes, I was almost there now. I could hide amongst these people.

Next to the need to find a hiding place in which to spend the day, the need to find another gun weighed most heavily on me now. My sawed-off double barrel shotgun had been lost when I had jumped off the wet-side of the Hoover Dam in a desperate bid to get away from some rather upset vampires who'd chased me there from Las Vegas. That fiasco had been an even bigger disaster than most in my last four years... and that was saying something.

My stomach growled again but that was certainly nothing new. With a sigh, I frowned at myself. Though I'd heard it growl, it hadn't actually done anything. No, that was just my subconscious telling me in the human terms a part of me was still used to that it was time to feed again. From the couple of vampires I'd done in along the way, I'd learned that most of the internal workings... well, they didn't work anymore. Intestines, liver, all that good stuff. They were shriveled up. The stomach was apparently just a place to hold blood while it seeped into our bloodstream. The lungs had shrunk on one of the vampires but not the other. Guess it didn't take much air to talk. Only the heart had truly seemed alive. Funny how that worked.

Not for the first time, I wished I had the knack for hypnotism that all the vampire books spoke about so seductively. That would have made getting a little drink so much easier. For that matter, not having a conscience would have made things much less complicated. Then I could have simply killed the people and drunk my fill. But I was indeed saddled with a conscience so that option remained closed to me. And that rather obviously reduced my dining options considerably. Typically, I eked out a living by jumping the occasional jock or thug with a padded bat and cutting open a vein and then licking it shut after a quick drink. There were a number of variations on the theme that sometimes included the homeless or even strays on a few occasions. Due to all the practice, I was getting pretty good at it. Thinking about how I'd grown brought a small smile to my face.

Licking wounds shut. Interesting ability that. Most convenient for hiding bite marks. I had been rather surprised when I'd discovered that particular ability by accident sometime last year. Looking back on it, I couldn't restrain a sardonic grin. All I had to do was lick a small bleeding wound and it closed. So very simple. My nocturnal existence would have been so much easier had

I know how to do that four years ago.

Again my stomach rumbled, wiping the smile right off my face. Hmm. The occasional drunk was not only a good source of food but provided a pleasant buzz as well. That might be nice... it had been a long bus ride. With a frustrated sigh, I continued looking for someone to buy a gun from, or a drunk who looked close enough to passing out in a quiet enough place that no one would be surprised by or even notice him or her being unconscious.

As I continued walking, the area became less and less desirable. More akin to the areas that I had come to think of as home. A burned out shell of a building here. An graffiti-covered, old apartment building with boarded over windows and a doorway that reeked of stale urine. A vacant lot with trash piled high. Judging by the smell, something had died in there some time ago. Not slowing down, I passed buildings that had once housed a row of stores, long closed to any legal business. Within a few hours of leaving the bus terminal, I found a place to stay for the day. It was an abandoned building that even the homeless avoided because of the weak floors and the "worse than generally lousy" overall condition of the place. Even the spray painted 'art' was old and faded. My kind of place. It wasn't much but it would provide shelter from the light of day and a concealed spot in which to stash my backpack.

Inside, the shadows welcomed me home. As light-footed as I had become, the treacherous floor posed no problem. Yes, this would do fine for the moment.

With said backpack hidden away, I went out to find that drink. Not wanting to crap in my own back yard (as the saying goes), I walked several blocks away before I began searching in earnest. It didn't take long before I found a lone drug dealer hanging out near a street corner. Luring him into the alley was almost too easy. After beating the guy unconscious, I took a nice, long drink before closing the wound on the guy's wrist. Yes, I'd gotten good at jumping people. And looting them. Not surprisingly, the fellow even had a gun, a 9mm pistol. The drugs weren't much but I figured I could sell them cheap to another drug dealer and maybe gain a street connection in so doing. Nice bit of cash to boot. Yep. Things were looking up in this new home, I decided with a little smile.

And that's exactly when the shadows fell across me.

Turning slowly around, I found six thugs wearing black leather. Now, while I admittedly didn't know much about vampires, I had learned the word 'Brujah' early on. That's what these guys were. And just what was a Brujah? They mostly seemed to be the vampire version of knee breakers, punks, and toughs. Most of them really did seem to be into wearing leather and they were more often than not armed. Mix this with the scent of vampire and an 'I'm going to kick your ass' attitude and you had a Brujah.

Or six.

Oh, damn. Without a second thought, I turned and sprinted further down the alley.

Brujah were faster than most vampires. Another little something I had already learned the hard way. But, outnumbered six to one, I had no choice but to put their speed to the test again. Twenty steps down the alley, one of them caught up with me and threw me into a wall. There followed a short, vicious fight in which I managed to give one of them a black eye and passed out a few similar favors to a couple of the others. But the Brujah toughs gave as good as they got and it was only a matter of moments before I was down on the dirty floor of the alley bleeding from mouth, nose, and one ear.

"Wouldn't be much of a protection racket if we didn't protect our boys, would it scum?" one of them asked while kicking my ribs.

"Never seen this one before," another added with a kick to my head that sent my senses

reeling. "I don't think anyone will miss him."

"Let's find out," suggested another with a laughing sneer that the others quickly picked up on.

"Boy, did this jackoff pick the wrong night to go poaching or what?" Another asked just before stomping on my shoulder. This brought another round of derisive laughter, the humor of which I completely failed to appreciate thanks in large part to the additional pain it also brought with it.

There came a sudden clattering noise back up towards the mouth of the alley that drew everyone's attention but my own. And then much to my surprise I felt myself being moved. It was as though I was looking through a tube at the punks... a tube that was quickly shrinking down. As though from a great distance, I could hear the Brujah's shouts of surprise and dismay before my narrowed vision faded completely to black.

Next thing I knew, I was slowly waking up on the floor of a cement room somewhere. To be sure, I still felt like crap; but I'd been beaten before and knew I'd get over this beating as well... if another didn't follow it too soon. Looking around, I found myself on a blanket. It even seemed to even be clean. My mouth tasted of blood and I was surprised to find that it wasn't my own but someone else's. Other than myself and my blanket, the room was completely empty save for an old Coleman lantern, which provided the room's light. The walls, floor and ceiling all seemed to be made up entirely of cement.

When I tried to move a little, my shoulder and ribs protested vigorously. Moving slowly seemed to help. Not moving at all would have helped more but I was afraid it likely wasn't going to be an option.

While still gathering the scattered wool that was my thoughts, one of the ugliest people I had ever seen walked into the room. He was a stump of a man, short and wide. His back seemed to have a permanent hunch to it which brought all sorts of Quasimodo jokes to mind which I immediately discarded. While his face wasn't exactly deformed, it looked as though it hadn't been put together quite right either. All his features seemed slightly off, a nose tilted too much, eyes not quite lined up and slightly mismatched, cheekbones that didn't match. Not as bad as what that painter who'd cut off his ear had made his subjects look, but bad nonetheless.

"Hello," he announced and a rich voice without preamble. "I'm Gilch. I saved your dumb ass. Were we in the orient, it might be said that you owe me your life. As we're in L.A., I'd say you owe me a favor."

"Sure thing," I agreed quickly, sitting up gingerly as pain shot through my shoulder and down into my legs. The fellow might be ugly but he'd apparently already taken more of an interest in my life than anyone had in long time.

"That was a little too easy," the fellow frowned, sitting down close to the blanket and eyeing me cautiously. "Too easy makes me a bit edgy. I think you'd better explain yourself to me." His eyes were different colors as well. One black and the other a pale grey.

"Explain myself?" I asked with a bemused smirk that sent a jolt of pain across my jaw and down my neck. "You saved my life," I told him as my smirk became a grimace of discomfort. "What the hell more do you want? I'm grateful. Did you expect me to throw a fit or something? Deny that I owe you? That's not gonna happen. I do owe you and I pay my debts. Especially when they

involve someone saving my ass.” Which had never happened since I’d become a vampire. Hadn’t happened since my friend James had yanked me out from in front of a speeding car when we’d both been children. This time the car had been six thugs but I felt every bit as grateful.

“Most vampires balk at the idea of owing favors to Nosferatu.”

“Wait a minute,” I began, starting to hold up a hand and deciding better at the first painful twinges. “I’m confused. I thought all vampires were called nosferatu. And that the punks were all Brujah.”

Gilch made a tutting noise and shook his head, “No, no my dear boy. Vampires are not all called nosferatu except in popular literature. Not all punks are Brujah, though most Brujah are punks. It seems you have a lot to learn. Fortunately for you, I have some time on my hands and a surplus of knowledge.”

So sitting on a clean, baby blue blanket in a room I later learned was located in the basement of an abandoned power station, I finally began learning what it really meant to be a vampire. And perhaps more importantly, what it meant to have a friend and mentor in a world that consisted only of night and darkness.