

Evolution

As I looked down at the dead Sabbat, I couldn't help but wonder at just how much I had changed in the last several years. Before I ever met Gilch, I had relied on luck and sheer bold stupidity to get me through the night. And there were many nights I almost didn't survive because of it. Once I met Gilch, things changed.

Hell, everything had changed.

Gilch taught me to use my blood. Perhaps more importantly, he taught me to use my brain. There'd been quite a few nights that I didn't think we'd get through during these times as well. But those had been fewer and much farther between than my early, raw wanderings. And then Gilch had gotten himself killed.

Everything had changed again.

I'd returned to wandering. Life on the fringes of vampire society was dangerous, but I was beginning to come into my own and I had learned a great deal when it came to surviving. But I wanted more. And then I heard about a job. A mainstream job... almost.

Now I live in Dallas. The Camarilla pays me to kill Sabbat vampires. I'd read through all of Gilch's library now and had understood a lot of it. Not everything to be sure but a good amount of it. I have put much of that knowledge into practice. As a result, I could be more difficult to detect than ever when I chose to be. I could summon flames at will... all it took was a little blood. Next time I read through his old books, I would understand a little more. In addition to these things, my personal power had increased as had my material possessions.

And yet something was missing.

Frowning, I wondered what it might be as I walked silently down the hallway in the large house. A Sabbat Gangrel sprinted out of a bedroom clutching a book. Almost absently, I shot him dead again. Picking up the book, I suddenly found myself face-to-snout with a wolf. Another Gangrel, already in wolf form. She lunged and latched onto the forearm I threw up between her teeth and my throat. Unfortunately for her, it wasn't the arm attached to the hand holding the heavy pistol. Three bullets from a single squeeze of the trigger and off she went to rejoin her friend. Flexing my fingers painfully, I picked up the book again and continued looking around the house for more of the Sabbat Gangrel.

With a bit of brutal self-honesty, I came to the conclusion that I knew exactly what was missing... and what was wrong. Pushing open another door, I shot a fellow who was halfway changed to some sort of werewolf-like form. Wannabe. He slowly returned to looking like a human as his blood spread out across the floor and ran down the wall. A quick glance around showed nothing more of interest and I returned to my search.

Two vampires suddenly popped out from a side hallway and began hosing my immediate area with automatic weapons fire. Each of them holding a pair of Mac-10s or Mac-11s. Firing off a burst at the fellow on the left, I threw myself into a backwards roll. They'd hit me at least half a dozen times but fortunately, none of the hits were bad. And none of the vest hits had gotten through which I counted as being very nice indeed. The hole in my arm and the nick to the leg looked almost inconsequential. Examining the slowly closing hole in my forearm, I decided they were firing nine mils and therefore the weapons were Mac-11s. Not that it really made a difference. Still, I liked to know everything I could.

From where I'd rolled up, I could hear the one bitching about the pain as the other fellow

slid a fresh mag into his first pistol. I took a moment to orient myself and continued listening. When the Gangrel slid his second mag in and the whining fellow popped in his first, I switched over to automatic and blazed at the two of them through the intervening walls, keeping the firing arc short and tight with a return pass.

After again reloading, I began obfuscating and stepped around the corner. Both were dead again. Gangrel really hated wearing body armor. Interfered with their shapeshifting I supposed. My personal philosophy was better uncomfortable than dead.

And speaking of discomfort, I had to admit that mine came from no longer using those early skills I had acquired. A little boldness and a lot of luck at first. Not really sure how much skill had truly been involved with that. Okay, maybe acting like a noob wasn't truly what I had in mind. But using my brain was. And I hadn't honestly done much of that lately. Instead, I'd begun shooting first and asking questions later. Like some sorry-ass, Brujah punk. Crap.

Honesty is highly overrated.

Looking out a window, I saw three Gangrel making a mad dash for their car. Samuel and Randal popped out from behind a van and shot them messily dead in a hail of bullets and exploding shotgun slugs.

Continuing my hidden stroll through the house, I came to the den. Here, it appeared that Robert had come and gone. At least judging from the mess I assumed it had been the big Nosferatu. There were Gangrel everywhere. At least large chunks of them. Just how many Gangrel had been in here remained messily unclear. Hmm. Room smelled kinda gamey for some reason.

Go figure.

And that concluded my sweep of the house. Stepping out onto the back porch, I found Kegger there holding a pistol. That surprised me. Kegger didn't seem to like guns. "Can you believe this crap?" he asked once I had made myself visible. "I'm stuck with this freakin' thing now. Some Gangrel bitch grabbed my stick and ran off with it."

"She didn't try to hit you with it?" I asked incuriously, looking around for targets.

"Hello? I said bitch didn't I? She was in wolf form. I had to grab this off one of the dead guys."

"In that case, why was she running if she had your stick?"

"Probably afraid that Robert was gonna finish up in the den a little sooner than he did," the Ravnos replied with a shrug. "She didn't believe the illusion I threw up of a high fence surrounding the grounds. Just tore off across the yards there with my stick." I was not exactly feeling the pain of his loss.

With a frown, I returned to searching the house and began rather absently healing my wounds. When I got thirsty, I drank from a few of the more intact corpses before returning to my search. This time I looked for clues that might help lead us to Rabid.

One might reasonably wonder where the police were. Samuel's people were seeing to it that no one was dispatched to this location. One of the benefits of having loads of money and more influence (supernatural and otherwise) than congress. Should any patrolling officers hear the noise, Samuel had a badge and the contacts at the police department to tell the intruding officers to go away.

Two police-free hours later, we'd found a few thousand dollars, a couple of stashed weapons, and had collected a number of cell phones. Samuel would take those last around to his people as well as a few of the guns and have them check out the numbers within both. Since the other vampires of our little group disdained the pocket cash a few thousand dollars represented, I

made one last pass through the house collecting the bills left where they had been dropped or casually tossed.

And with that we called it an evening. Using quite a lot of kerosene, we set the house alight. After happily watching it burn for a while, I finally returned to my haven and kicked off my shoes. As I was putting up my jacket, I once again found the book I'd taken from that Gangrel. The cover was sticky where the fellow's blood had splattered it a bit. Licking my fingers clean, I leafed through the book.

Huh. A book on the Gangrel blood discipline known as Protean. Flipping through it, I compared it against a copy I had from a different author. Hmm.... Night eyes or Gleam of Red eyes. Nifty power that allowed you to see in absolute darkness. Wolf Claws. Pretty self explanatory and it matched up with the other book as well. Earth Meld. That was a cool one. Allowed you to sink into the earth. Great protection from daylight that but not one of the easier blood disciplines to master. Shadow of the Beast. A Gangrel favorite, this allowed a vampire to turn into a wolf. A popular variant allowed one to turn into a bat instead. Both copies of the book had both forms listed. And last of what both these books described was Mist Form or Form of Mist. Just like it sounded, this was the legendary power to turn into mist. I had to admit to some curiosity as to whether this power truly ever existed before the vampire mythology become so popular or if word of the power leaked out and grew into legend.

Either way, both books seemed to match up pretty well. Some notes in the margins as well as the occasional underlined word or letter finally caught my eye. Well, well, well. Not quite a perfect match after all. Flipping through the book again, I noted that my newest write up on Protean had some interesting extra notations.

Calling Robert, I quickly asked if he still had the piece of paper he'd found this evening with a bunch of numbers on it. Said it had fallen out of a medicine chest during his final search of the place.

"Yeah," he replied, sounding tired. "Just a minute." After several minutes of him moving around he finally said, "Okay, here it is. Why?"

"I think the numbers might be some sort of coded message."

"Right. But you need a key to decipher something like that."

"Yeah. I think I might have it. I took home a copy of a book on how to learn Protean in three easy steps. Thing is, it has some extra notations. I think we need to match up your numbers with my book."

"It's getting late," Robert replied with a yawn. "Come by early tomorrow and we'll see what we can figure out."

"Alright. See you then," I told him before hanging up.

So maybe I'd accidentally ended up using my brain after all. If we'd kept one of the Sabbat alive, we might have asked him or her about it. Not that they'd have willingly answered. And it wasn't like I could keep them for the private blood donations I used for my training. The rest of the group didn't know I was doing that. Speaking of which, it was about time I ordered up another vampire. My supply of the good blood was running low.

Sitting down on my sofa, I stared off into space for a while. No doubt about it, I was still changing. Today I knew more than I ever had before. Hopefully I'd be able to say the same again in a year's time. Now that I had the hammer, I was a real threat to almost any vampire still kicking. A major change from a few years ago. And I evidently had to make a conscious effort to remember that the hammer was still the lesser part of my arsenal. My mind should be my greatest weapon. Always. But I often treated either my magic or my weapons as if they were.

Not good. Literally, not smart.

Not only did I want to be around this time next year, I wanted to be in better shape in all ways possible. That meant exercising all my gifts. It meant staying sharp and using what I had. Yes, I was still changing.

With an idle frown I crawled into bed, I wondered what I might become if I happened to live another year.