

Monty's Cellar

Opening the door into Rabid's basement showed a dark, rickety staircase leading down. "One at a time," I whispered. "I don't think it'll hold more weight than that." It was obvious the others didn't care for the idea but they listened and one at a time we made our way down. Turning my flashlight on, I found we'd come into a dark hallway with a pair of closed doors on either side. In the distance, another pair of doors were faintly visible. Other flashlights came on, illuminating the dark corridor in momentary sweeps before darkness returned, only to be temporarily washed away again by the restless, narrow beams of light.

"I say we just blow right on past these doors," Kegger whispered. "We know Rabid's gonna be at the far end of where ever this leads. Let's just cut straight to the chase."

"It's Rabid we're talking about," Robert replied with a frown. "We don't know squat about what else he has up his sleeve or where he is. We can't afford to risk the possibility that he's in one of these rooms."

"Yes," Samuel stated, "And it would be tactically unsound to leave potential enemies at our backs. We check each room as we go." Kegger repeated everyone's favorite F-word over and over, putting different emphasis on different parts of the word. After several seconds of this, Robert gave him a look and he shut up.

Let's hear it for the power of intimidation.

"Left or right?" I whispered as we approached the first two doors.

"Let's see what's behind door number one, Monty," Randal said with a smirk.

"Open the door on the right," Samuel snapped. "Randal, keep your weapon trained on the left door."

"Okay," the archeologist agreed with a pleased grin, happy for having successfully annoyed the Ventrue.

I quietly tested the right-side door to see if it was locked. It was not, which I silently communicated to the others as I turned the knob. This did nothing to make them relax. With a gentle push the door slowly opened. To my surprise, the small room was lit by a lone, dangling light bulb. A woman sat on a cot, chained at the wrist and ankles on the far side of the room. A very beautiful, well-dressed woman with long, blonde hair at that.

"Are you here to rescue me?" Seeing the startled look on my face, she quickly realized that we previously had no clue she existed. "Please," she whispered, looking desperate, "Let me out. There's a crazy man here. He kidnaped me. Please, you've got to help me."

Samuel said with a frown, "We don't know what Rabid's done to her. Any number of unfortunate things could have been planted into her subconscious. It's also possible that she could have tainted blood or even lycanthrope blood and those are just the possibilities that immediately come to mind."

"Yeah," I agreed reluctantly. "Not to mention the whole bomb in the guts thing."

"What did the man look like?" Kegger asked. "What happened to you?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "He was of moderate height, thin, with straight black hair that reached his shoulders. Except for his eyes, he seemed rather ordinary. He has these intense blue eyes though..." Shaking herself, she continued, "Three nights ago, he walked into my law office and said he had need of my services. Then I woke up here."

"Three nights?" Samuel asked with a scowl. "How do you know that for certain?" She

silently held up her right wrist as far as it would go. Upon it, an expensive watch.

“We need to be moving,” I told the group.

“No!” she hissed with a quiet desperation. “You’ve got to let me go. My family has money if that’s what you’re worried about. I’ll see to it that you’re well paid for your efforts. But please, I have to get out of here. I don’t know what he’s going to do with me and I do *not* want to know. Please!”

Face turned away from her, Robert said, “Taking you with us is too dangerous as would allowing you to try running out on your own. Once we’ve dealt with the man who kidnaped you, we’ll let you loose and take you with us. You have my word on it.” And with that he stepped back out into the hallway.

“You heard the man,” I told the others, moving back out the door.

“No, please....” was the last I heard from her before the closing door cut off all sound and light coming from the room.

“Let’s hope they’re all that easy,” Randal whispered.

“They won’t be,” Robert declared with an unwavering certainty.

I gestured for the Sten gun wielding Ravnos to open the door he’d been watching. With a shrug, he reached out the hand not holding the pistol grip and tested the door. Locked. The two of us exchanged a look and a shrug. He slung the machine gun over his shoulder and pulled out a pair of lock picks from an inside pocket of his jacket. A moment later, he gently pushed the door open and backed away quickly from it as he again readied himself for action. The room revealed stood empty save for a gift-wrapped box that looked big enough to hold a medium sized television set.

“Does anyone else remember the UV lamps with the car batteries?” Kegger asked.

“Oh yeah,” I agreed quietly. “Randal, verify that the box is the only thing in there.” With a carefree grin, he slipped into and then around the room. Just as quietly, he stepped back out.

“That’s all there is to it,” he reported in a near whisper, grin still in place.

I turned my gaze to Robert and included Samuel with a glance. “Play the game or move on?”

“Could be a clue to what’s ahead,” Kegger suggested.

“This far, Rabid hasn’t been too kind with the messages he’s left us,” Robert pointed out with a frown.

“Randal and I can open it,” the smaller of the two Ravnos replied. “We’re tougher than the rest of you lot anyway.” He was referring the infamous Ravnos ability to absorb damage and keep on going; commonly known as Fortitude. I personally disagreed with his assessment - Fortitude or not. However, he *was* the closest thing we had to an expendable member.

“Do it,” Samuel commanded with a frown. A quickly exchanged glance with him clearly suggested that we’d arrived at the same conclusion.

The two Ravnos moved into the room and began carefully unwrapping the large package. Beneath the wrapping was a cardboard box. Using knives they cut it open. Revealing another, albeit smaller, gift wrapped package.

This time it was Robert muttering the curses.

Looking annoyed, the pair of Ravnos began unwrapping much faster. Two, three, four, five, and six more boxes were opened and discarded. The seventh box was a small, ornately carved wooden box. Randal threw us a quick look before carefully opening it. Frowning, he removed a black pistol from it. Pointing it at the wall, he pulled the trigger. A small flag with ‘Bang’ written on it popped out the end. Without a word Samuel turned on his heel and began

stalking towards the next doors, some thirty feet down the hall. With a jerk of my head I motioned the others to come on before following the angry Ventrue, Robert hot on my heels.

Once we were close to the second pair of doors, I silently indicated that Randal should again cover the one to the left. He acknowledged with a nod and I turned and began looking over the door on the right. It didn't take me long to figure out it looked identical to the previous two doors. With a gentle turn of the knob, I pushed the door. It swung open revealing a slightly larger room than the previous two. Attached somewhere up in the ceiling in the middle of the room hung a cord with a piece of paper tied to it. We moved started moving in cautiously to check out the apparently empty room.

"Hey," Robert called, sounding concerned. "What are these tracks in the wall?"

Samuel suddenly dashed for the door. However, before he made it, a heavy iron plate dropped down from the ceiling, riding along the tracks Robert had seen and completely blocking the doorway with a heavy thud. We were trapped inside for the moment.

"Dammit!" the stuffy Ventrue hissed.

"I think I can move this," Robert said a minute later after examining the large chunk of metal.

"Pull Me," Kegger read aloud, holding the piece of paper from the note on the pull cord. I hadn't even realized he had made it inside. He then walked over and joined the Nosferatu in examining the door. Though I wasn't really paying attention to the Ravnos, I did notice him glancing back towards the note.

Pulling out a knife, I began boring a hole through the sheet rock wall. It didn't take long before I hit something solid that didn't give. With a few quick slashes, I removed enough of the outer covering to reveal the real wall. And it seemed to be made of the same metal that now closed the door.

"The walls appear to be armored," I told them, giving the plate I'd uncovered a whack with the butt of my knife for emphasis.

"Isn't that just great?" Samuel asked no one in particular.

"So we're stuck?" Kegger asked.

"Not if I can help it," Robert replied, trying to get his fingers under the door in order to gain some leverage for lifting. He seemed to be having some difficulties doing so.

"Well, since we're trapped anyway," Kegger said just before pulling on the cord with the note.

"No!" I yelled, too late.

We could hear many squealing sounds, as though many metal pieces were moving against other metal pieces. Suddenly hundreds of snakes dropped down from out of panels in the ceiling. From the rattles and the hoods and the bright colors, I quickly deduced that most if not all of them were extremely poisonous. It became quickly apparent to me that dropping a snake from the ceiling was a very good way to piss it off. Snakes were striking at anything that moved. Themselves and us both.

Many people think of vampires as being immune to snake venom. And some venoms don't bother us that much. Neurotoxins are usually no big deal. But hemotoxins, poisons that rupture red blood cells, those are another story. We're dependent upon blood. Anything that destroys that blood is bad. Possibly very bad.

With a pained roar, Robert jumped up and hung from the ceiling, his claws on both his hands and feet plainly evident as his toes caught found some thin purchase in the sheet rock.. It didn't look like he had a very good hold, but he hadn't fallen yet. Samuel began firing with his

shotgun, over and over again. Snakes dropped and were blown apart left and right. And then a piece of buckshot grazed my cheek.

“Cease fire!” I yelled as a snake bit me in the leg and Kegger slammed back against the metal barricading the door. He’d been hit in the chest by another piece of buckshot. The armored walls weren’t doing a very good job of absorbing the impact momentum of the shot.

“We’ve got to do something,” Samuel growled. He then fired off another two shots, however the second one came right back at him, striking him in four paces in his right leg. He dropped where he stood, landing on a snake.

Kegger jumped over and took care of the snake the Ventrue landed on, getting bitten by that snake and another in the process.

“I’m almost out of ammo anyway,” Samuel sighed.

“Robert!” I commanded, “Down here in the corner with these two.” The big Nosferatu allowed himself to fall, landing right in front of the other two and on another snake’s head. “All of you, face the corner, close your eyes and plug your ears.”

“What?!” Samuel declared.

“Do it!” I snapped, summoning up a handful of fire.

“That’s not a good idea,” he growled but his eyes held a hint of fear.

“You got a better idea?” I snarled back. It was obvious he wanted very badly to have one and equally obvious he did not. With a wordless hiss he threw himself into the corner and covered his ears. The other two had apparently figured out what I was about to do and already had their hands clamped over their ears. It’s not just seeing the pretty flames that strikes deep into our primal fears. For many, the sounds of a roaring fire can be just as bad.

Inside, I was at war with myself to the point where I was literally shaking. I loved fire. I always had. But as a vampire, I feared it as well. It was one of the few things that could inflict long-term harm on a vampire. And I had not quite conquered that fear yet. Close but not quite there. Yet here I was in an enclosed space, getting ready to fill it almost completely with flames... unless I miscalculated. In which case it would be completely filled. Fear sought to dampen the flames - eagerness fought to unleash them.

Screw it.

With a joyful cry, I released my constraints on the power within me and the flames burst forth in a brilliant flash and roar. It didn’t burn for long. There simply wasn’t enough air in the room to sustain so much flame for long. But while it did burn, it was both glorious and terrifying.

As the last of the fire burned out, I removed my flashlight from my pocket and turned it on. Looked like all the snakes were crispy critters. Same as the room lights. With a pat on the back, I let Robert know that it was over. He and the others slowly stood. Samuel concentrated a moment and pieces of buckshot dropped out of his leg.

“You’re one crazy son of a bitch,” Robert said a little shakily.

“No doubt dude,” Kegger seconded immediately and with great fervor. He never saw the murderous look Samuel gave him. Probably just as well.

“Here,” I said, pointing to a spot low on the slab of metal covering the door. The track had been bent slightly and it looked like Robert might be able to get a good grip on it.

“That’ll do,” the big Nosferatu stated, moving me to the side with a quirky little smile on his face as he did so. Evidently, the metal the track had been made of was not as sturdy as the slab of metal itself. With a loud metallic, shriek he tore the thick sheet of metal away. In the doorway stood a very relieved looking Randal.

“Thank the gods,” he sighed. “When I saw flames coming out the cracks, I started fearing the worst.” He laughed, “Gave me a bit of a start it did.”

“You’re not the only one,” Robert told him with a pat on the shoulder as he turned to look at the next door. “You’re not the only one.”

“Other door?” Randal asked.

“Give us a few minutes,” Kegger replied with a too wide grin. “We were just in an enclosed room filled with fire all around us.”

“Yesss,” Samuel hissed, turning his furious eyes away from the Ravnos.

“How much ammo you got left?” I asked Samuel a few minutes later. Dammit but the snake venom burned. Thankfully, it was fading now.

“Not enough,” he replied, scowling back over his shoulder at me.

“You want to go back and resupply?”

He sighed in frustration, “That’s not a good idea. I’ve still got my backup weapon. We continue on.”

“Randal,” I said quietly and nodded towards to the door. Without another word the others shifted into their positions. Randal glanced up to make sure that everyone was where they needed to be. Returning his attention to the door, he silently turned the door knob and gently pushed the door open.

Inside, we could see that the room was completely dark. Additionally, it had been painted black - walls, floor, and ceiling. From inside the room a powerful stink emerged. As though someone had kept an animal caged inside without bothering to change the litter box.

“Oh damn!” Randal muttered. “Glad I don’t have to breathe.”

“Shut up!” Kegger hissed. “Did you hear...”

Before he had a chance to finish his sentence, a furred monstrosity crashed into Randal. In the blink of an eye, it carried him across the small hallway with a shoulder in his chest. There, the Ravnos was slammed into the concealed metal of the opposing wall with a deep, metallic thud. Randal dropped like a sack of potatoes along with the wall’s outer covering of sheetrock. I figured out the monstrosity was a large, black furred werewolf about the time it threw Kegger into me. His impact staggered me but unlike him I did not continue on to the floor.

Samuel fired point blank with his shotgun, injuring the beast and causing it to take the shotgun away from him. It then gave him a quick one, two combination of bashing the shotgun across his face and raking claws deep across his abdomen. Samuel also dropped. However, all this had given Robert the time he needed to grow claws of his own. The large vampire and werewolf crashed together in a flurry of claws and biting. Their roars and screams of rage were deafening.

Trying to get a clean shot was difficult as both of them attacked each other non-stop and neither were kind enough to stay in one place while doing so. However, as the splashed blood from their fight began dripping from the ceiling and running down the wall, I got a clean shot at first the creatures’s arm and then a leg. Fortunately for us, I was now burning that half mag of silver ammo that I had left over from the skeletal swarm Rabid had sent after us earlier. Unable to support its weight with a silver-induced hole in the leg, the monster toppled with Robert riding it down. This didn’t slow down their fight any, it merely moved it to the floor.

Kneeling down, give me a much better angle on there werewolf. Our eyes met for a moment and he figured this out too. The monstrosity with the black, matted fur tried to use Robert as cover while still fighting him. It didn’t work out so well as Robert continued slashing up the creature and I started poking one thirty caliber hole after another in the prone beast.

Robert suddenly flew off the creature. I think the beast was actually trying to throw him at me. However, it didn't work out that way. With a nice, clean shot, I put a bullet in its head. A moment later Robert severed said head with three violent slashes of his claws. The pissed off Nosferatu tossed the head down the hallway and out of sight.

"Dude, that was freakin' awesome!" Kegger declared from behind me. Sitting on the floor, he seemed to be closing a wound in his shoulder. Evidently he'd landed on the blade of his own stupid metal stick.

Robert let out a low growl that echoed up and down the hallway by way of reply.

With a wry grin to the bloody Nosferatu, I walked over and pulled the equally bloody Randal out of the mess Robert and the werewolf had made. A quick check indicated that he had a lot of broken ribs. However, he was even now licking his lips clean of the blood that had been splashed all over him during the fight. He wasn't fully awake but he didn't seem too far from it.

"Leftover blood packets?" I asked Kegger.

"Yeah, here's two. I think maybe I've got one more somewhere besides." Frowning to himself, he began fumbling around with his pockets.

"One for Randal and one for Robert," I told him. "I suppose I'd better check on Samuel."

Right next to where Randal had laid was Samuel. Next to that was a lovely pile of his guts. The right side of his face seemed to be one big bruise. A little careful feeling around suggested that his cheekbone and jaw had both been broken. The couple of teeth I noticed on the floor provided a little added credence to my suspicions.

"Samuel's going to need blood as well. Would anyone care for the privilege of sticking his guts back inside?" His guts looked basically like guts are supposed to. That meant there was no question about him being a relatively young vampire. Definitely less than 100 years dead.

"Kegger, do what you can to put him back together."

"I'm not gonna touch his intestines. That's disgusting!"

"I'm standing guard now. In fact, I'm the only one standing guard. Do it. It's not that bad. It's probably been fifteen or twenty years since there was any crap or digestive juices in there anyway."

"No way man, I'm not touching that," he insisted.

"Do it," I replied with a not-so-pretty smile. "Or I'll tell them about you injuring yourself on your own stick."

"That's not right man," he replied sullenly.

"Probably not," I agreed. "But that's the way it is tonight. Safety first. Help him. We need him up and moving and you're wasting time we don't have to spare."

With obvious reluctance, he began fiddling around with the unconscious Ventru's jacket and shirt. Satisfied for the moment, I exchanged a quick glance with Robert who finished draining his plastic blood packet even as I gave him a quick grin and turned my attention back to the dark, apparently empty hallway that patiently waited for us.