

The Line

Where do you draw the line between the good guys and the bad guys? At what point does one change to the other? What has to happen before the righteous become the evil and when do the evil become virtuous? And just who is it who draws these invisible lines? These thoughts absently wandered through my head as I stalked my next target.

This was the second Sabbat incursion into Dallas since I'd been on the job. The first had been a test. Little more than a probe. A few shots exchanged and they'd fled. My little Sabbat hunting group had gotten only a little taste of being thrown into action. A tiny sampling of what the others in our group were going to be and act like. How we'd each act and react. And the smallest shred of combat to show us that it was all very real.

While working for Gilch I'd done hardly any direct combat. There was a big difference between shooting someone in the back of the head and shooting at their Lincoln as it raced back out of Dallas while traveling at speeds well over one hundred miles per hour. The end run of what had begun as a very bold drive-by shooting at the prince's chancellor.

Just the barest flavor of what lay ahead.

I'd known on an intellectual level that I was going to be thrown on the front lines. Still, I had been a bit surprised at how frontal the action had been. But that little encounter was nothing compared with this one. No, this one had turned out to be a flat-out assault on the vampires of the Dallas Camarilla.

It seemed that this sort of thing happened from time to time, but here lately those times had started coming closer and closer together. And the scale had been increasing dramatically with each attack. I could only assume that this was a large part of what had led to my hiring in the first place as the fighting between the Sabbat and the Camarilla continued to heat up.

I'd received my call from Karl about this attack, what seemed like only a few minutes ago. One of his lookout points had spotted a gang of thirty bikers heading into Dallas from Arlington. All of them were vampires. Karl, the local vampire sheriff, knew who his people were and these weren't them. That meant it was another Sabbat incursion from Fort Worth. Fort Worth and Dallas were simply too close together for one to be run by the Sabbat and the other to be run by the Camarilla. A real war was inevitable but so far it hadn't happened. Only the occasional skirmish such as this one.

Thus far anyway.

Considering just how large Dallas truly is, it struck me as being rather impressive that they'd managed to spot the enemy incursion so early as I sprinted towards a neighborhood that actually had cars in it.

In a remarkably short time, I'd managed to jack a car. Unfortunately, after driving fifty yards, there came a loud bang from the engine that resulted in a large hole and almost immediately a second hole of approximately the same size appearing in the hood before billowing smoke poured out in a cloud. Piece of crap car. Behind me, the angry black woman I'd force out of the car yelled at me and bemoaned the fate of her car.

I had much better luck with the second car I jacked.

Driving quickly to the rendezvous location, I found Robert and Samuel were already standing there. Now we were waiting on Fred, trying not to look nervous about going into the battle that lay

ahead. At least I was. Samuel actually succeeded in looking cool and calm, although he did seem to have turned looking at his watch into a nervous habit. Robert seemed genuinely excited to be going into the fray. With an inwardly turned grin, I decided there were worse things to be. I reminded myself that part of why I was here was to ride the razor's edge and the grin spilled across my lips too.

According to Karl, Fred had the longest drive of all of us. Five minutes later, when he came skidding to a stop not three feet from me, the lot of us piled into Samuel's armored SUV. Robert drove as we tried to figure out where the bikers might be going. We'd barely gotten on the road when Samuel received a call from Karl. One of the elysiums was under attack. That would likely be a massacre. Elysiums were designated safe zones where no weapons were allowed inside. All the Sabbat would have to do was get past the weapons check in and they'd be pretty much in the clear. Samuel's mouth pressed into a thin line and Robert shook his head. Only the Brujah, Fred, seemed unphased by the news.

I supposed I was a bit surprised. Elysium's were more than just neutral ground. They were sacrosanct. Almost like churches in a weird sort of way. They were the places where rivals and enemies went to talk truces and to set aside differences. An elysium was a place where vampires went to unwind and let their hair down. They were supposed to be the one place where a vampire need never fear for his or her life.

Robert, with a grim look on his face, drove fast but despite the speed, it was still an ugly scene we came upon.

This particular elysium was a night club called the Wine Vat. Or, it used to be anyway. It looked like a number of motorcycles had been driven into the place through the front windows. The street-side neon Wine Vat sign had been rammed by something and was tilted at a precarious angle, the light flickering sporadically. A number of the cars in the parking lot and the nearby street had bullet holes in them and spider webbed or shattered glass. Blood pooled out from bodies scattered throughout the area in front of the club, in cars, in the parking lot, and even further down the street in both directions.

As our SUV came to a skidding stop, we came under immediate fire from half a dozen of the enemy. Using my Obfuscation ability, I sprinted from the vehicle and moved around to encircle the Sabbat Brujah who made up this group. While a lot of people made a big deal about the differences between those who'd turned from the Camarilla and joined the Sabbat and vice versa, I still had yet to see just a great deal of difference between the two sides. The Sabbat were a bit wilder and sloppier. The Camarilla were neater and borderline obsessed with order. And neither side gave a tinker's damn about anyone other than themselves. Thinking about this distracted me from thinking about how dumb me moving around to attack five or six vampires really was.

With only a little effort I found a nice, dark place to hide that also provided good line of sight on the enemy. Once I started shooting, I would no longer be able to concentrate enough to maintain my obfuscation. Hence, a good hiding spot was a must. The place I'd found also had a good field of fire against the bad guys and not so coincidentally offered a nice escape route into a drainage ditch if things went disastrously wrong.

Thinking was good but thinking and not acting was not.

The red dot had just barely had time to find the back of the rearmost thug's head when I squeezed off my first shot. A quiet thump sounded from the silenced Glock, followed immediately by the leather-clad fellow pitching over onto his face. While the popular theory was that vampires only died from a stake to the heart, a bullet or two to the head usually did the trick quite nicely. The

stake in the heart thing tended to bring about some peculiar results and surprisingly enough, death usually wasn't one of them. Besides which, I was all out of stakes at the moment. Getting on with it, I continued lining up shots and putting the bad guys down as quickly as I could. By the time the fourth one dropped, the remaining two started figuring out something was wrong. Rather bad timing on their part as Fred chose that moment to open up with his G3 from somewhere out of my sight range. The one who'd actually begun looking in my direction died again. Messily this time in a hail of bullets that punched holes through him and the car behind him as well. Lots of leather didn't seem to do much in the way of stopping large caliber bullets. Mental note complete, I switched mental gears briefly.

I found it amusing that both the Sabbat and Camarilla had a number of bloodlines in common, Brujah being the most popular but there were plenty of others. And both the Sabbat Brujah and the Camarilla Brujah touted the differences that made them better than their unenlightened counterparts. All the shared bloodlines did. And so they warred with their brethren in a bitter, uncivil war that flared and faded but never truly died. Somewhere there was a demon who was laughing his ass off. The whole situation was dark enough that I found it rather humorous as well.

Enough thinking, Fred's distraction provided too good an opportunity to pass up.

Moving closer, I was just about to shoot the last of the six biker-looking thugs who'd so rudely greeted our arrival when Robert came running over from the SUV and fouled my shot. With a growl, the big Nosferatu grabbed the surprised Brujah's arm in passing, jumped up into the air, and with an acrobatic little twist slammed the punk back to the ground, abruptly ending the Sabbat vampire's shriek of surprise before it really got started. I couldn't help but wince a bit at the sound of shattering bones. I'd known he was strong but... wow.

Walking over to join him, I went ahead and shot the Sabbat fellow in the head. Robert threw me a dark look but instead of saying anything, the wide Nosferatu turned and dashed into the open front of the Wine Vat. Fred caught up with him, moving supernaturally fast, and together they entered the building. Samuel and I followed along a bit more sedately as I popped a fresh magazine into my pistol.

In the front area, a lot of dead people lay sprawled where they'd been killed. Some of them had undoubtedly been vampires. Quite a few ghouls and humans as well. The smell of blood was so strong it was hard to tell who was who without a closer examination. I'd noticed the smell of blood out front but it hadn't really made an impression as I'd been rather busy dealing with bad guys. Now, it was impossible to miss.

This was the problem that had taken me the longest time to get over. This had made those first four years of being a vampire harder than they should have. The blood smelled so good it almost hurt. I knew these people were dead and that they'd died in terror. And they smelled good to me. Instinct versus upbringing as Gilch had put it.

I noted in passing through the entry area that there was only one corpse that belonged to the attackers. It was easily identified not only because the guy looked like a generic biker complete with bandanna and tatoos, but also because it was the only corpse that had weapons thus far. The dead Sabbat was missing most of his neck which showed that at least one vampire had fought back. Shaking my head, I wasn't really surprised that the body count was so badly skewed. The Sabbat had gone after the soft underbelly of the Camarilla. To mix metaphors, they'd struck paydirt.

Too much off-topic thinking again. There were punks to kill.

Stepping on, around, and over bodies, Samuel and I moved deeper into the club. To our left, Fred stepped into a side room and immediately began shooting. Almost as quickly, he stepped back

around the corner. Robert, who had been standing off to the side, climbed up the wall using some very long, wicked looking claws that hadn't been there a moment ago. Where he passed, he left deep, ragged holes in the material of the wall. Evidently he'd exaggerated a bit when he'd said that strength was the only power he'd gotten from his sire. The broad-shouldered Nosferatu stopped climbing and simply held himself in place just over the doorway.

Neat trick that.

I began Obfuscating again and moved around to find a covered position from which I could provide fire support for them. Seemed like a good enough plan.

Instead of someone cooperating and coming out through the doorway Fred, Robert, and I now covered, three of the Sabbat Brujah came walking with a purposeful caution down a hallway behind me. The doorway they were heading towards wasn't fifteen feet away from myself. Fred stood on the other side of a partition wall from them. Robert however, was hanging on the wall in plain view... and they plainly saw him.

Moving quickly, I walked across the room towards them, still obfuscating to the best of my ability. The three enemy vampires remained focused on Robert. As the first two reached the doorway and raised their weapons, I shot the lead vampire in the forehead. He fell back into the second, fouling his shot as my Obfuscation dropped. The third one definitely noticed me and I began targeting him. Unfortunately, he was indeed a Brujah and capable of moving at unnaturally fast speeds, thanks to their damned power of Celerity. Even as I moved the barrel the scant distance needed, he raised his Uzi. At approximately the same time, we shot each other.

Blood spraying behind me, I was thrown back across the floor. The sudden perspective shift startling, especially in conjunction with the flares of pain as I suddenly found myself on my back. Half a dozen shots to the upper right side of my chest and upper arm. The shot to the arm hurt abominably. Bullet wounds always seemed to. He'd also hit me just above the collar bone which didn't feel any better than the arm injury. Both bullets thankfully passed on through. Made healing the wounds considerably easier. The rest had been caught by my body armor. Not really painful when compared against the holes. Obfuscating again, I picked up my pistol with my left hand and went to stand on a nearby corpse. While no one was likely to see me, I was bleeding. Even the dumbest of vampires could follow a blood trail. Then again, come to think of it, with all the blood in here, my own little blood trail was a small drop in a large bucket.

Behind me, Samuel commanded the Brujah I hadn't shot to drop his weapon. The clatter of the weapon actually bouncing off the floor surprised me enough that I turned to see what was going on. The Sabbat had really dropped the weapon. I'd seen the Ventrue power of Command before. But never in combat. Freaky.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw movement. From the opposite doorway a denim-wearing biker had suddenly come charging up from out of a nearby room, shotgun blasting as he grinned madly and sprinted. Fred opened fire with his G3 creating quite a mess of the fellow. However, this brought an immediate response from the others who had evidently been in the room with the fellow. Bullet holes began sprouting all over the common wall. Fred did a dive roll, ran a couple of steps, staggered as blood sprayed from high on his leg, and then took cover behind the doorway into the front area.

Despite the noise of all the shooting, I was still able to clearly hear Samuel shooting the fellow in the hallway thanks to the explosive shells he was firing. Presumably it had been the fellow who'd dropped his weapon. Since I'd shot both the other Brujah in the hallway, they should all be dead for the moment. Problem solved. Until reinforcements arrived. Regretfully, when dealing with Brujah,

that could happen very quickly indeed.

Not wasting any time, I found cover and concentrated on healing my injuries. As the holes slowly closed, I felt the first real tinglings of hunger. I hadn't dined tonight and the aroma of the blood around me increased in sweetness. I'd started into this battle a day's worth of blood short. During the days, vampires still used blood. Just not as quickly as we did at night. I was going to need to find a meal sometime soon. Vampires without blood could not use blood disciplines. Vampires without blood could not heal wounds either. And there came a point where starving vampires lost control and fed indiscriminately. I'd learned to live on the cusp of that point during the lean years. It was not a place I liked to be but knew it well. I had to drink soon or I'd soon find myself balancing there again.

Suddenly, vampires came streaming out of the doorway Robert hung over. A couple of them even crashed through the bullet-riddled walls. They immediately began shooting at Samuel and Fred. Those two returned fire as they dashed and limped for better cover. Fred tagged one fellow with lots of chains in the guts which caused him to drop. Not fatal but he was out of action for the moment. Our Brujah also popped another in the arm causing him to drop his weapon. Samuel had fired two wild shots as he had been literally shooting over his shoulder as he ran for cover... both missed badly. Several of the Brujah opened fire as he slid behind a juke box. The music machine got it bad.

However, in their haste...the bad guys had failed to notice Robert.

Leaping down from over the doorway, he landed on one and rolled into another. The fellow he rolled into kept his finger on the trigger and stitched a line of bullets across the back of one of his fellows. I took the fine opportunity to pop up and shoot the first vampire who looked Robert's way in the head. For my efforts I got to see a nice splash and received three bursts of automatic gunfire in my direction.

Off to the side, Fred whistled. This was supposed to be everyone's cue to open fire. However, all the scenery in my vicinity was busy being shot full of holes so I didn't join for a moment. My position did provide a good view of Samuel sticking his head and gun around the bottom corner of the wait station that happened to be closest to the now deceased juke box. He began firing quickly at floor level. Bad time to be a bad guy's lower leg. As the hail of bullets around me suddenly stopped, I cheerfully stole Sam's little idea and popped out from cover on the side. From the other side of the room and my cover, a series of unpleasant sounds tried to distract me from my work.

Still shooting the enemy Brujah, my eyes and ears traced down the sounds of screaming and breaking bones. It was coming from behind the bar to my right. A Sabbat vampire tried to climb over from behind the bar but something jerked him back out of sight. The biker screamed in panic, his voice going up several octaves in mid-scream. A sudden splash of blood up onto the mirrors behind the bar coincided with the fellow's sudden silence. This was followed by some nasty, squishy, and snapping noises that made me feel a tad queasy. Not letting this distract me, I took a moment to shoot someone who was moving around for a better shot at Samuel to my left across the open portion of the room. Before I could look towards the bar again, I had to shoot someone blazing away at Fred, who was idiotically making himself an easy target. Seemed someone on the far side of the room had offended Fred and he was charging across the room after them, shooting all the way. I was beginning to suspect that Fred might not be all there mentally.

Not sure how many times I'd fired, I went ahead and changed to a fresh magazine. Not seeing any enemies at the moment, I walked out from cover. Somewhere in a nearby room to the right, Fred began blazing away with his G3 again. Idiot. He should have waited for us. When his current magazine went dry, he yelled, "Fire in the hole!" This was rather predictably followed by an

explosion that made me wince even this far away. Presumably, one of his hand grenades.

From my left Samuel stepped out from behind his wait station about the same time that a very bloody Robert hopped up onto the top of the bar. That explained the mess on the mirrors. All three of us warily looked around for more Sabbat in here. Finding no active enemies, I noticed there were no active Camarilla members other than the three of us here either. Maybe some of the victims would pull through, maybe not. I found one of the wounded enemy and walked over to him. He was freshly missing his left leg below the knee and had a big hole in his right shoulder. Despite this, he was still alive.

Good.

Pulling him into a neck breaker hold, I bit him. He woke up and feebly protested being used like a Capri Sun packet before passing out again. Oh yes, his blood tasted good on my parched lips and throat. While I didn't drain him dry, I bled him good. Standing up, I shot him in the remaining knee and his left elbow. That should ensure that he stayed around long enough to be questioned. With the additional wounds I'd given him, he didn't have enough blood to heal them and become troublesome again. Hell, he'd be lucky if he woke up at all before they started interrogating him.

Which again set me to thinking about just where the line was. Good and evil. There was certainly plenty of evidence suggesting that this fellow had been on the side of evil, as the corpses of the innocent clearly attested. However, considering that I'd just shot his helpless self and that he'd likely be tortured by those I would be handing him over to, it seemed quite likely that I was evil, too. When I realized I would have no compunction at all about handing him over to this most unpleasant fate, it seemed even more likely. With a shrug, I decided that it most likely depended on how you looked at it

Moving through the slaughterhouse that had been a club, I looked for my next target as Robert and Samuel joined me. Pistol fire rang in the distance. Together, we started following the trail of bodies that Fred was leaving behind. I stopped for a moment next to the body of a pretty young woman who'd been shot in the chest and neck. Shiny, straight, chestnut colored hair fell over her shoulder and hid most of her face. Part of her lovely hair soaked in blood from the pool she lay in. Her blue eyes seemed more surprised than pained and she looked almost at peace. Combined with her athletic build and the blue dress she wore, the dead girl reminded me of Beth. Anything that sparked memories of Beth always brought with it strong emotions.

Reaching down towards her face, my hand shook. Letting out the breath I hadn't realized I'd taken, I regained my self-control and the shaking stopped. Gently, I closed her eyes. No, this wasn't Beth. But she did go to elysiums.

A cold, burning rage flashed through me as my gaze turned back towards the sounds of gunfire. Gritting my teeth, I forced most of the icy anger back, keeping just enough to be useful. Another trick Gilch had taught me. Self-control. Despite all the blood disciplines, the magic, the alchemy, this was probably the single greatest lesson he'd taught me.

Standing back up, I refocused and led Samuel and Robert through the club as we searched for surviving Sabbat.. I was no longer really concerned about whether I was good or evil. Right now, I was going to find and kill those who had crossed *my* invisible line.