

## Turning Point

“Why is it that I can only do magic after I’ve drunk one of your potions?” Julia asked. Since she’d begun taking the potions, she’d gone from being able to intermittently start fires to being able to make them every time she tried... all in the period of only a few weeks. I was rather impressed. It seemed that I was either a good teacher or Julia was a better student than I had been. Or both.

“You tell me,” I suggested from my seat within the ring of burning barrels. I’d already drunk almost all of my supply of extra blood for this training session.

“Dammit Dmetri, I want to know,” she snapped irritably.

“I think you already do know,” I replied in a carrying whisper.

“What are you talking about?” she demanded. Her anger amused me and I didn’t mind putting up with it. Her blood and sex with her were well worth any aggravation her temper might bring.

“You’re a smart girl Julia. The clues have been all around you from the very first night you hid in the shadows and watched me start fires without matches.” I almost had enough money saved up to move to a new haven. On one of my scouting runs, I’d actually found a good place. An old, abandoned fire station in a dying part of town. Reluctantly, I’d even spoken with Samuel about seeing to it that no one moved into the place abruptly while at the same time making sure that the utilities remained on. If I was going to have a lab, I really needed electricity and running water. While I hated relying on Samuel for anything, almost as much as I hated owing him for anything, I’d reluctantly decided that in the short term, it was an acceptable risk.

So far as I was concerned, the real question had become whether Julia was going to know about the move or if she would be exiting my life. One or the other would happen. Tonight.

She remained silent, watching me from across one of the burning barrels. Even as I worked my pyromancy, I continued to improve my control over the whole pyrophobia thing. I hadn’t mastered either, but I felt sure I was now well on the way to doing so for both.

“Tell me some facts, Julia. Tell me some of the things you know,” I prompted after the silence had lengthened sufficiently.

“You can generate flames at will,” she stated, beginning to walk around the barrels.

“Yes, what else?”

“I’ve seen you disappear into thin air behind those columns.”

“Correct. Continue.”

After a hesitation, she said, “You only come here at night.”

“Go on.”

“You’re always drinking from one of your bottles... yet, you never get drunk.”

“So it would seem,” I agreed.

“You almost always wear sunglasses at night,” she frowned.

“And what about the two times when you’ve seen me not wearing my sunglasses?” I asked quietly.

“I...”

“You didn’t think that I’d noticed you seeing that. I know that as well. In fact, I sometimes allow you to think I don’t see a lot of things. Tell me what you saw.”

“Your eyes turned red,” she whispered.

“Exactly,” I agreed.

“You let me see them,” she stated quietly as she finally understood that.

“Indeed, I did.”

She remained silent.

“Now, add up the pieces. What picture forms?”

“You’re a demon,” she breathed fearfully. This startled a laugh out of me and it took me a while to get it all out of my system.

Julia seemed annoyed of all things. This almost set me off again. “Alright, so you’re not a demon. The clues still point towards that conclusion.”

“I suppose they do at that,” I replied with a smile. “Now, assume that I was telling you the truth and that the pyromancy I’ve been teaching you is indeed a learned skill and not a demonic trait or power. Follow the trail of clues again and see what new conclusions you draw.”

Wearing a thoughtful frown, she remained silent as she reversed her walk and began circling the barrels the other way. Occasionally, she’d glance up at me a moment and her frown would momentarily intensify before she’d pick up her pacing again.

I admit to being of two minds about her. She was an interesting woman. And if she stayed in my world, she would die and stay that way forever. But she would never walk in the sunlight again; never again eat the foods we grew up on; never have children... at least not in the traditional sense; and she would never grow old. Maybe that was doing her a favor and maybe it wasn’t. If she did come into my world, I was going to make sure her transition was a damn sight more pleasant than waking up in a barrel at the bottom of a river.

“You’re angry because I’m so stupid,” she declared accusingly.

“No. I’m angry because I just re-remembered one of the more unpleasant evenings of my life. Considering some of the things I’ve done, me calling anyone ‘stupid’ would be hypocritical in the extreme.” Her doubtful look that I could ever have done anything so foolish as I claimed, warmed me a bit. Pulling off my sunglasses, I hung them off my shirt front and took a long pull from the bottle, almost emptying it. I could feel the blood from it turning my eyes red briefly before they faded back to blue. She watched all of this carefully and began silently pacing again.

This bottle, in fact all the bottles I’d brought tonight, had been a fine vintage of Sabbat Gangrel. The blood had a lovely, wild flavor, reminiscent of the beasts that hid within the Gangrel blood. And the vampire who’d donated all this blood had appropriately enough burned with the day’s sunrise. Just as I was now using his blood to fuel the flames I conjured. Too bad I wasn’t getting bounties on these guys.

“You’re not a demon or half-demon,” she mused, glancing at me again as I took a final swig of Gangrel blood from the green wine bottle I’d put it in. She froze. “No....” I leaned forward to better watch her. Her face showed a number of emotions that passed each other quickly. “That’s why you drew so much of my blood!” she finished. “You’re a vampire!”

“Bravo, the pretty girl wins the prize,” I told her applauding.

She suddenly looked uncomfortable. “Umm... what prize do I win?”

“You said you wanted power. You said you wanted to learn magic. Congratulations, you have. And now you know what the next step is if you want to keep walking this road.”

“Is...is it like the stories and the movies?” she asked quietly.

“Some parts are, some are most certainly not.”

“If you’re a vampire, why aren’t you rich?” she half asked, half demanded. That startled another laugh out of me.

“As you may have noticed, I’m busy learning magic. Practicing magic. This is only one facet of my life and I keep it mostly hidden from most others. Why? Because, when I decide to become rich, I want to have the means of keeping my riches. And holding power... many kinds of power... is the only sure way to do that.” Hmm. And come to think about it, maybe that explained why Samuel was slumming with the rest of us. That would certainly bear some thinking about later.

“So, are you as poor as you seem?” she asked.

“No. But I’m not a good deal richer at the moment either. Not in worldly goods anyway.”

“Knowledge....” she began and stopped.

“Yes. Knowledge. That is where I am far richer than most,” I agreed with her barely stated realization.

“And you’ll share this with me. But only if I become a vampire,” she stated.

“I’ll answer your original question now,” I replied instead of answering that. “Why can you only do magic after you’ve drunk one of my potions? The answer is that the potions I’ve given you contain a little bit of my blood. You’ve noticed an increased vitality of late, no doubt.” She rather reluctantly nodded. “That’s your body using my blood. The magic I’ve taught you is dependent upon my blood. When you practice magic, it uses up the blood of mine that’s within you. And at the end of most of our evening practices, you have nothing but your own blood left inside you.”

She watched me, her eyes quite large for a moment, before nodding her understanding. “Therefore, I can’t really learn more without becoming a vampire. Because I don’t have the blood for it.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “That is it exactly.” I knew she was smart.

“Tell me about it. Please?”

“The whole becoming undead thing is true,” I began. “Holy water and crosses seem to be so much bull. Same for sleeping in coffins and running water.”

“Running water?”

“You haven’t heard about that? Well, there’s an old myth about vampires not being able to cross running water,” I explained with a grin. “Anyway, sleeping during the day and the severe allergy to sunlight are both real. As is drinking blood,” I told her, holding up the bottle in a brief salute before drinking the last, laggardly drops. She nodded that she’d figured that one out already. “I don’t know about souls. Losing it or otherwise. I’ve never seen one. I’ll tell you this, I feel mostly the same as I did before I died. I’ve certainly lived a lot more since dying. That’s without a doubt the great irony of my life.”

“And for me to join you, I’ll have to die as well,” she whispered.

“In a very specific fashion,” I agreed.

“Startling realization isn’t it?” I asked gently after a silent moment passed. “Stating you’re willing to pay any price for power is one thing. Suddenly understanding that you are indeed going to have to pay *everything* for that power... that’s quite another.”

“Except it’s not everything, is it? At least not from your standpoint. It’s only my life.”

“I still remember holding my own life precious. And to my way of thinking, I still do.”

“Will I grow old?”

“No.”

“Who will I be fighting?” she whispered.

“What makes you think there’ll be fighting?” I asked curiously.

“I’ve seen your gun. And pyromancy doesn’t have just a whole lot of peaceful uses. Not with the amount of fire you’ve been conjuring for the last few weeks.”

“My enemies are many. But not overwhelmingly so. If you join me, I’ll tell you all about them.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I won’t tell you anything further.”

“I know too much, don’t I?” she whispered.

“I suppose that depends on how well you can keep a secret,” I answered equally quietly.

“Dead women tell no tales,” she breathed.

“You’d be surprised what dead women have told me,” I said with a wry grin. “Or undead women anyway.”

“You know what I mean,” she declared a bit fearfully.

“Yes. I do know,” I replied in a voice that was neither threatening nor reassuring.

“What will you do if I just walk away?” she asked.

“I rather imagine that I’ll watch you walk away.”

“Either way I choose, there’s no going back. Is there?” she asked in a voice filled with trepidation.

“That’s right,” I agreed quietly. “You either become a vampire... or you walk away and live in the world practically everyone else believes to be real. Whichever world you choose, you will live it in for the rest of your existence.” Reading her expressions and her body language, I knew what she was going to choose before she did. Still, a part of me was hoping I was wrong.

She stood there a long moment, obviously deep in thought. Eventually, she sighed, walked over and hugged me. “This is a lot harder than I thought it would be,” she said with tears in her voice. Looking down, all I could see was her hair... which was most likely exactly why she held herself the way she did.

Returning her hug, I told her, “Doing what’s truly right for yourself tends to be either very easy or very difficult. Most of my choices have been towards the ‘difficult’ side. Do what you’ve got to do and carry no regrets with you.”

“If only it was that easy,” she whispered.

I gave a rueful little laugh. “Yeah, I’ve noticed that words come pretty easy to me. Acting on them, that’s the tricky part.”

“Yeah, it is,” she agreed after a moment, sounding as though the tears were pretty much over with.

“Not many people come to such an obvious or literally life-altering turning point in their lives. In that regard, you’re already special, whatever road you’ve chosen. But that turning point is indeed here. And now it’s time to choose your road and to start walking it.”

“What do you want me to choose?” she asked, still not looking at me.

“The road that makes you happy, challenges you, and fulfills your reason for existing,” I said with a smile. My anti-Sabbat team members would be shocked to hear me say that. Both for the depth of character and the depth of implied knowledge and wisdom. But then again, I only allow them to see one side of me: the killer. Just as I’d only allowed Julia to see the one side of me: the arcanist.

She barked a little laugh that held no humor. “Which choice is that?”

“The one you choose,” I answered gently.

“You’re not helping, dammit!” she growled, suddenly angry as she pushed away from me and began pacing.

“On the contrary,” I countered with a rueful grin. “I’m being more helpful than you know.”

Unfortunately for you, it's gonna take you years before you understand just how helpful I was tonight." She muttered something rude and my sudden grin became a gentle smile as she returned to her pacing.

At last she stopped.

"I... I'm not really ready to die," she admitted in a whisper. "The goth stuff... sometimes I felt like I was dead on the inside. Parts of me were, I suppose. At least that's what I thought. Now I realize those parts were just withered and needed a little nourishing. I feel alive again. And I'm not ready to die in order to keep feeling that way. My head's pretty screwed up but not that screwed up. Before my time's up, I'm gonna go back to my world and live my life instead of bemoaning my fate. If I can learn blood magic from a vampire, I can take fate by the horns and point it in whatever direction I choose." Inside, I sighed. Sometimes being right just sucks ass.

When I didn't say anything, she said, "I'm really going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss you, too," I replied. "But you made the right choice for you. Sometimes, my world is very dark indeed. Despite your black hair and makeup, you're not ready for that kind of darkness."

She stood silent a moment before nodding. "I hate long goodbyes." She walked over and gave me a last hug. "I'll miss you." She then turned and walked out of the building towards her dirt bike.

Putting my sunglasses back on, I followed her and began obfuscating.

As she got onto her motorcycle, from a mere ten feet away I pulled my pistol and pointed it at her heart. Oblivious to my presence, she pulled on her helmet and started the bike. I clicked off the safety. She began riding away and I tracked her progress with a little red dot from my targeting laser on her back. As she approached the bend in the road that would take her out of my sight, my finger tightened on the trigger... but not enough, and she rode around the turn in the road and out of my sight.

Out of my life.

Resetting the safety and holstering the pistol, I turned to gather my gear. She'd been right about one thing. She knew too much. If she kept her mouth shut about what she knew, maybe she'd live to be old with dozens of grandchildren. If not, she'd probably have been better off had I squeezed the trigger just a little harder.

But she chose her road. It was her choice to walk it. Just as it had been my choice not to end her walk before it began.

I suppose in a peculiar way, it had been a turning point for both of us.