

Underground

Bilious. It was one of the few Nosferatu names I knew in this state. I'd never met the guy but I'd heard some folks talking bad about him at Moon Shade. The vampires in question had been besmirching everything from his parentage to his looks and smell. And they had spent a great deal of time talking about him. Everything but his character. Sometimes it's what's not said that matters. If he had access to the usual Nosferatu intelligence network, then I needed to talk to him. But in order to do that, I first needed to find him.

Chester, Danny, and Kim constituted all three of the other Caitiff I'd met in this city. There were more lurking about. Somewhere. But these were the three I'd met. And with a little luck they'd be able to set me on Bilious' trail.

Chester owned a small book shop out in the suburbs. The three of them worked the store and lived upstairs. I'd accidentally found them one evening while trying to supplement my growing library. They hadn't been much help on that front but it had been kinda nice learning I wasn't the only Caitiff running around.

None of the three particularly cared for me. They all did their best to stay away from other vampires. All the vampires of the Camarilla did was cause trouble and look down on them. And I worked for the Camarilla. Additionally, I evidently carried a sign indicating that trouble followed close behind me. True enough I supposed, even if I didn't carry an actual sign.

"Look man," Danny began, walking over to the occult section where I stood pretending to browse through their selection. "We've asked you not to come around here. You're high profile. For a Caitiff anyway."

"True enough," I agreed with one of my what-the-hell grins. "So, the sooner you tell me what I want to know, the sooner I'll leave."

"Dammit," Kim hissed, stalking towards me from behind the counter. She wasn't exactly pretty but her boobs had a certain spring to her step which I appreciated. "We've asked you not to come here. The last thing we need is you looking for some sort of trendy occult book to impress one of your Camarilla friends with."

"Oh yeah," I nodded, raising my hand as though she'd made a good point. "That reminds me. You wouldn't happen to have a copy of Felber's Studies on Flamethrowers and Werewolves would you? Ironically enough, my copy got burned some time ago."

"You came here to ask about a book on Felber's perversions?" Danny asked, sounding incredulous.

"What? No, of course not," I told them grinning even wider. "I came here so you could tell me how to contact a Nosferatu named Bilious. I just thought you might have a copy of the Felber book to replace my lost one."

"We don't know any Bilious. Now get out," Kim demanded.

Turning on my heel, I walked further into the book store. "Wow, this really is a nice place! I could just stay here for hours and hours and hours. Night after night."

"We really don't know this Bilious person," Danny insisted, hurrying to catch up with me.

"You know what?" I asked the two of them as I hopped up onto a counter. "I believe you. But I bet you know some other Nosferatu. Probably several. Whether they like it or not, the downtrodden and the unappreciated all get squashed down into the same goo. That means that

you nice, quiet Caitiff folks are smushed right in with the Nosferatu. Tell me how to contact a couple of them and I'll call it an evening. Leave you in peace Probably for months or even years at a time."

"Just get out," Kim insisted.

"Yes, please," Danny added.

"No," I replied with another grin. However some of the humor had left my eyes. I was beginning to tire of this game. "Not without the information I came here for."

"There's three of us," Kim stated. "We'll throw you out."

"How amusing. Do you know what I do for the Camarilla?"

"You kill people," Chester stated from down the row to my left.

"Indeed I do," I agreed with a more genuine smile. "But I'm not doing that right now. Now I'm looking for a few Nosferatu. Help me find them and I'll move along. Don't help me and I'll come back. And I'll bring friends."

"People like you don't have any friends," Kim growled, sounding frustrated.

"You know, this is such a great place, I think I'll help you. I'm going to post a nice big sign at all the elysiums saying what a swell little bookstore you have here." Danny and Kim both paled a bit.

Chester sighed. "Wretched."

"What was that?" I asked with a frown.

"We don't know your Bilious. But you can find Wretched near the big arena downtown. Tonight's a game night. He'll be in the shadows rolling people for blood and wallets."

"Dammit Chester," Kim sighed. "Wretched's gonna be pissed now."

"Better him than this guy," the eternally balding fellow responded quietly before turning and walking away.

"You made the right decision," I announced to the world in general as I began heading towards the door.

"You're a bully," Kim hissed as she followed me. "You may have Chester scared but not me and not Danny."

"Then why is Danny refilling the coffee urn rather than joining us in this little conversation? And I'm not a bully. I'm much worse than a bully."

"Oh? Really?" she demanded as she stopped at the front door. A couple of kids who I'd been casually watching earlier were paying a little too much attention to our conversation.

Turning to them, with a nod of my chin towards the back of the store, I told them, "Go peruse the books back there for a while. And if you don't pay for the books you've got hidden in your coat pockets, I'm going to beat you both unconscious and leave you naked in an alley a few miles from here." The two teens walked quickly away throwing looks over their shoulder containing elements of shock, surprise, and fear. A little resentment as well but they were still too close to me for much of that to be a safe look to openly display.

"Dammit, you can't just come in here and threaten our customers," she growled.

"Now that was really a dumb thing to say. Obviously I can. And I'd be willing to bet that tonight's going to be the first time they've paid in quite some time. Now go back to snoring your way through eternity. I've got what I want and I'm leaving." She called me a number of rude and interesting things as I hopped in my car and drove downtown.

Wretched was a fairly popular Nosferatu name. Wherever there were more than a dozen of that clan together, you could pretty much guarantee that one of them would be named Wretched. It was a state of mind and being that was too close to far too many of that bloodline's heart. Many Nosferatu were named after something unpleasant. They tended to wear these names as badges of honor. Showing the world it didn't bother them. For most it's still a lie, but it helped the younger ones grow thick skins. Something of a requirement when your vampire bloodline guarantees some sort of deformity of appearance or bearing.

Yes, I knew Nosferatu very well.

And because of this I found Wretched after only a couple of hours worth of searching. He was just removing the wallet from an unconscious man in an alley. From out of the nearby shadows, I quietly called, "I need to speak with you a moment brother. I am willing to trade you information in exchange for the knowledge I seek." Despite this fellow stealing wallets, Nosferatu made their real money and power by knowing as much as they possibly could. Sometimes they brokered this information. Considering their natural talents for Obfuscation and their propensity to become peeping Toms, looking in on the life they once had, they often managed to gather more than their fair share of knowledge on current events and secrets that weren't quite held closely enough.

Unlike Robert, Wretched was a small man. He walked with a bit of a hunch to his posture so it was hard to tell how tall he was. Perhaps a little under five and a half feet tall. If he weighed a hundred pounds I'd have been surprised. He wore what had once been bath robes with some sort of equipment belt on over it. When I spoke, he momentarily froze and then slowly turned towards me.

"You're a quiet one," he whispered. "Didn't hear your approach. Unusual that. I have good hearing. Who are you and what do you want?"

"My name is Dmetri. I'm looking for Bilious," I replied.

"Ruskie huh? What do you want with Bilious?" he asked, moving a few steps away from me.

"Half Russian. I'm looking to trade some information with Bilious."

"He know you?"

"No. We've never met," I replied.

"Then what makes you think he's going to help you?" the fellow asked suspiciously.

"I have information that's worth trading for. That's why I think he'll not only talk to me but be eager to do so."

"Tell me," he said. "I'll be the judge of whether or not your information will be helpful."

"Oh please," I told him with a sardonic frown. "I wasn't reborn last night. Tell me your interests and I'll do what I can to pay you for the information I seek. But it is Bilious with whom I will do my primary trading."

"We don't rat each other out," and with that he disappeared. Obfuscating. I'd been doing it for years. It had kept me alive so far. With a little luck, now it would lead me to Bilious. Stepping back into the concealing shadows, I began obfuscating as well. And now that I was obfuscating as he was, Wretched had become something of a blurred distortion that the eye naturally slipped away from. Looking mostly from the corner of my eye, I could tell he was moving rapidly towards the end of the alley. I still couldn't see him clearly but at least I could detect him. Moving quickly but quietly, I followed him.

The small Nosferatu ran across a street, down two more alleyways, and then down a long side street. At last he came to a bridge where he went over the rail and down underneath. Unlike

me, he'd made no move to hide his movements. This was a flaw a number of young Nosferatu shared. They thought because they were obfuscating and therefore unseeable to most of the world, that there was no need to hide. I knew better. Gilch had explained all this to me years ago. That Toreador woman had rather painfully reinforced said lesson much more recently.

Wretched entered a storm drain below the bridge and I followed him. Now I had to be doubly careful. I didn't want to alert him that I was trailing after him, but even more than that, I didn't want to trigger any Nosferatu booby traps. Just as the outside of the drain had been tagged with a peculiar bit of graffiti that identified it as an entry point into the Nosferatu's realm, so might the traps be marked. Except for the ones that weren't. The Toreador woman with her unnaturally keen eyes would have been handy to have here. That thought brought a smile to my face. As if she'd be seen within miles of a Nosferatu tunnel entrance. While she might be a fighter for her bloodline, she still undoubtedly held the inherent prissiness all Toreador seemed to share.

We walked through miles of underground tunnels. Most of them unpleasant by design. Many of the crossways were marked with signs I was mostly familiar with. The marks had a few extra curls or twists from the ones Gilch had taught me, but they were still decipherable. Most were simply saying what lay at the end of the way or signposts for turning left or right. A few did indeed mark traps as well as predetermined locations for placing dead animals to rot. Rotting animals tended to keep casual interlopers away. Eventually, the small Nosferatu stopped in front of a metal door and knocked. Another Nosferatu opened the door and stepped out into the cement tunnel.

This fellow stood a bit taller than Wretched. He wore loose fitting clothing and had a reptilian tail sticking out the back of his pants. Well. That was a new one on me. Upon seeing Wretched, he looked around and managed to see me through my obfuscation. Despite the fact that I was annoyed with the frequency with which this had been occurring of late, I gave him a smile and winked.

He blinked in surprise.

Oblivious to this exchange, Wretched began going on about how someone was looking for him. It had been a good-sized Russian vampire. If Bilious wanted to know more about the fellow, Wretched asked only for a little information about how Kirkland Rhodes had ended up bloodied after the prince's last party. Bilious shook his head and told Wretched that he'd been expecting the man. "Then he lied," Wretched muttered darkly. "Said to me that he'd never met you."

"Oh, that's certainly true enough," the larger Nosferatu replied easily.

"Then how is it that you were expecting him?"

"Well," he began thoughtfully, "For information on how Gordon Carlisle came to control a hunting ground so much better than the one he had, I might be willing to tell you about it."

Wretched seemed to consider the idea for a moment before shaking his head. "Not worth it. I've done my duty and warned you. If the Ruskie kills you, I done my part." And with that he turned and walked back past the side corridor I'd ducked down when I figured out he was about to leave.

A long moment later I stepped back out to find Bilious looking at me. He looked around, frowned, looked at his door and frowned again. With a sour look he opened the door and motioned me through. I moved to do so quickly.

Inside, I allowed my obfuscation to drop and looked around. This was a simple little room that had been made by walling off a section of the cement corridor. A rickety table and two

folding chairs were all that decorated the room. However, through the slightly open next door, I could hear the faint strains of classical music.

“Hello,” I greeted him after he’d closed the outside door. “I’m Dmetri and I’m looking to trade information.”

“You’ve obviously been trained by one of my people. Why did they agree to do this?” he asked, sitting down in the far chair.

“I think he felt sorry for me at first,” I replied with a faint, fond smile. “After that, we became friends. He taught me how to be a vampire.” And then he’d gone and gotten himself killed. I still missed the crotchety old goat.

“How’d he die?” he asked. I noticed something else about Bilious besides his tail. He didn’t smell any too good. I couldn’t see anything dirty about him. Must be some sort of musk gland or something.

“The war in L.A. Almost two years ago now. An agent for one of the rebel dukes intercepted him on his way to report to the prince. There was an explosion. That’s all I know,” I replied with a sigh.

“Don’t know much about how he died, do you?” he asked with a sideways look at me. “I guess he didn’t train you very well... but then, you’re not an actual Nosferatu.”

“It’s taken me a while to come into my own,” I admitted, looking down at my feet. I turned my gaze up to look him in the eyes. “But I am finally getting there. And to continue my progress, I need information. Information you have or I believe you can get.”

“Why did you come to me?” he asked with a frown.

“I heard a number of other vampires at an elysium badmouthing you. They said rude and stupid things about your looks, your ancestors, and how you dress. But they said nothing against your character. Sometimes, when listening to foolish people, what’s not said is more important than what is said.”

“Who were you listening to?”

“Are we trading information?” I asked.

He frowned for a moment and then motioned towards the other chair. I sat. “Thank you. Before I answer your question, I’m going to tell you what I want. I’m looking for information about Rabid.” He didn’t look too surprised at this and nodded. “I was at Moon Shade. A Brujah by the name of Don was one of the ones talking about you. Tall fellow with sandy blonde hair. Wore mostly black leather. Another was a Gangrel woman. Been animal too much. Permanent fangs and wolf eyes. Didn’t catch her name but one of them called her Stalker or perhaps referred to her as a stalker. The last of the three was a Toreador. Fancy lad by the name of Wilton.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “I know all three and do business with them on occasion. Seems I should raise my rates the next time they need something.” I nodded but didn’t say anything. A moment later he sighed. “Rabid’s gonna be hard to find. I can tell you that right now. He’s got deep and widespread ties to the Fort Worth Sabbat.”

“I don’t expect you to find him. I just need information that can get me to some of his top people. The people who are useful to him. People who might have an idea of where he is,” I explained.

“That’s a bit easier but not by much,” he responded thoughtfully. “Word is that Rabid was once a psychiatrist. An intuitive genius when it came to diagnosing and treating people. When he was turned, he brought that with him. And gained an insane insight into how to make people do what he wanted them to do. Word has it that he is impressive in his mastery of the

Malkavian blood power of Dementation, he's dangerous. Very dangerous."

"I'm quite aware of that," I replied drolly.

"Oh? And who are you to be so aware?"

"Can't you guess," I asked with a small smile.

"I'd say you were part of Letty the Wolf's team, but they got wiped... oh. Dmetri. Yes, it all fits. You're a member of the sheriff's hit squad. I'd heard there was a Caitiff who'd been brought in to anchor the group." Anchor the group? That was a new one on me.

"Yeah," I nodded with slightly narrowed eyes despite the fact I hadn't heard a word of that before. Never allow a lack of knowledge prevent you from learning something new. I could practically hear Gilch's sardonic voice growling at me. "How'd you figure that out?"

"You're a hit squad. And an effective one. Rabid was after you to start with in a general way. Your group has been making a noticeable difference. And now this Malkavian knows your group's hunting him in particular and he'd be stupid not to be worried or at least concerned. I'm passively familiar with the Nosferatu on your team. Robert. He's not much for the subtle. The Brujah in your group has been taken away by his primogen but he was another of the not-so-subtle variety. Those two prefer brute force and therefore they are predictable. You've got a rich Ventrue in your group. He's not only predictable, but according to some new rumors, Rabid can out command even the strongest Ventrue. That little tidbit's free by the way. And that leaves you and the two Ravnos. The Ravnos are in your group because the prince hopes they'll be killed and therefore will stop troubling his territory. You're the one Rabid doesn't know about. You'll be the one he's most curious about. Or..."

"Or what?" I prompted.

He frowned in thought, "Or he *does* know about you. If he's figured out you've been Nosferatu trained, that'll worry him a bit more. And rumor has already placed the Caitiff, you, as the only stone cold killer of your little band. A rumor that may potentially lead you to problems with our beloved prince once the Sabbat have been dealt with. Yes, I think you're right about getting to him before he gets to you. Now, tell me the information you have to trade for me seeking out information about Rabid for you."

We had a long conversation in which I ended up telling him more than I'd really wanted to. But then again, he was facing death or worse if Rabid's people caught him snooping around. We arranged a few drops for each other to periodically check if we needed to contact the other and I left. Good intel took time to gather. Trustworthy people to gather said intel took even longer to prove themselves. This was Bilius' first and only chance. We both knew it.

I supposed that time would see if my time underground had been worth the information I'd paid.