

### **Vampire Derailment!**

And just like that, my planned evening of blissful slumber turned into *The Time I Went Vampire Hunting With a Vampire*. Gunnar begged off, claiming that he had to work through the night on legal matters and meet with his pack if he was to be ready to leave the next evening. So I grabbed Fragarach and told Oberon this was his last movie night for perhaps a long while, what would it be?

<I think I'll watch *The Boondock Saints*,> he said. <The Irish guys win, plus there's that thing with the cat.>

I hopped into Leif's Jaguar and he drove us to the west side of the Phoenix metro area—widely regarded by residents on the east side as the sprawling, sweaty armpit of Maricopa County. The streets were narrower, the trucks were lifted higher, aggressive bumper stickers abounded, and the police were far busier.

He took the 202 west and exited at 19th Avenue, where we could wait patiently for a light at a six-way intersection to tell us it was safe to turn onto Grand Avenue, a seedy street that slashes diagonally across Phoenix like a scar on the map. The culturally literate would probably be reminded of Fitzgerald's valley of ashes, for a railroad trails alongside, indicating a way out of the waste land that no one ever followed. Junkyards and scrap metal recyclers bore jagged testimony to the value people placed on old iron, while across the street, gritty dance halls and lurid strip clubs hinted at the value they placed on flesh. All it lacked was a billboard with a giant pair of symbolic eyes, grimly surveying the ruin and refuse and silently indicting the ethos that led to it. Instead there were only ads for light beer, DUI lawyers and health insurance, suggesting that citizens should drink more and prepare for the consequences.

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Leif's car looked out of place in this neighborhood, a pulsing black diamond in a bed of coal. He played selections from Yngwie Malmsteen's *Concerto Suite for Electric Guitar and Orchestra* on the stereo as we drove.

"We have seven stops to make tonight," Leif explained. "We will not negotiate. We will not kindly ask them to leave. We are killing them all."

"Killin' all the dead guys. Gotcha." I didn't have any moral qualms about killing creatures that were already dead. It was the equivalent of pulverizing a rock, except it felt like public service since rocks are usually not predatory. "We're not gonna leave one of them undead to run and tell the others to stay away?"

"No. I have sent letters and timed emails to all the territory leaders who matter, informing them that news of my demise or illness has been greatly exaggerated."

"When are they getting those?"

"Tomorrow evening. When they try to make contact with the ones we are visiting tonight, they will discover they cannot. Then they will warn any surviving stragglers in the rural areas of the state to get out before I can get to them."

"Ah, and this will leave Hal some breathing room while we are gone."

"Yes. They will probe again in a few weeks, but by then I will either be truly dead and it will not matter to me, or I will be back safely and handle it then."

"This, uh, probing—it's been going on for a while?"

Leif gave me one of those looks that communicates clearly that you've just asked the stupidest question possible. "It has always gone on."

"I had no idea you were so active. Or besieged."

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The vampire shrugged casually. “It has been decades since I have had to deal with a concerted attempt to take over my territory. I get only isolated young ones wandering in, sent here because they did something brainless wherever they came from. ‘Going to Arizona’ and ‘Visiting Leif’ are now vampire slang terms for dying the final death. Or so I have been told.”

“I had no idea you were so badass. Or terminal.”

Leif snorted. “Why would you? I do not let other vampires survive long enough to spread gossip.”

“True,” I admitted. “But neither would I chat with them in any case. You’re the only vampire I’ve ever managed to get along with.”

“Yes,” Leif smiled wryly, “I suppose this is a rather unique relationship.” He turned into the parking lot of a whitewashed building with a simple black and white sign of female silhouettes that proclaimed it to be The Body Shop Cabaret. The parking lot was nearly full but we found a spot and Leif promptly set me on guard duty. “Not a scratch,” he warned me. “I shall return in a fairly short but nonspecific unit of time. A jot, or a jiffy. Perhaps two shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

“How many are here?” I asked.

“Only three.”

“How do you know?” Leif ignored this and strode purposefully toward the strip club. Whenever I asked him a question about vampire hoodoo that he wanted to keep secret, he always pretended not to hear and walked away. Several months ago I had used this to my advantage. I’d taken Leif to his first baseball game ever, a mild June night with the roof open at Chase Field as the Diamondbacks hosted the Padres. I’d known Leif

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would be curious about the game and the behavior of people in such a crowd, but his questions never ended: If the team mascot was supposed to be a rattlesnake, why was there a bobcat named Baxter running around acting like an idiot? Did this indicate humanity's visceral fear of fanged creatures? Why do ball players seem to have oral fixations on either gum, tobacco, or sunflower seeds? And why do some ball players feel the need to play with their balls between every pitch? Is that why they're called ball players instead of athletes or competitors or contestants? It finally came to be too much and I asked him a question I'd always wondered about.

“Hey, Leif, I've been meaning to ask. There's this famous kid's book called *Everyone Poops*. Does that include vampires, since you guys are on a strict liquid diet?” Leif regarded me glacially for a couple of heartbeats then rose silently from his seat, shuffling past people to the aisle which led to the main concourse. “Hey, get me a beer while you're up,” I called. “And a dog with mustard and onions.” I didn't see him again for three innings, but he came back with a dog and a beer for me.

I surveyed the parking lot as Leif entered The Body Shop. He didn't pay a cover, I noticed; he charmed the bouncer instead. There was a homeless man, bedraggled in a flannel shirt and what looked like three layers of pants, pushing his shopping cart of worldly possessions up the street. A slim silhouette loitered in the shadows on the side of the building, keeping absolutely still and away from the feeble cones of yellow spread by the lights on Grand Avenue. I checked him out with my faerie specs to make sure he wasn't a vampire.

Normal people churn with life and their bindings to the earth; the activity of their minds and their relative health is clear from their auras, which suffuse their entire being.

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Vampires are different in that there are only two clear areas of “being” at all. There is activity in the center of their ribcages, and there is activity directly behind the eyes, a dull red pulsing glow like coals in a fire. The rest of them comes across as nothing more than a sterile yet ambulatory collection of carbon, calcium, and iron, though they do have thin gray auras. This fellow in the shadows was a normal guy. Granted, his aura was burning with lust and despair like an oil field on fire, but at least he was alive.

The vampire who dropped down on him from the roof was not.

Leif hadn't been exaggerating earlier when he'd said ours was a unique relationship. Druids and vampires never got along very well. In fact, when I'd given Granuaile the brief history of Druidry last night, I'd left out the role vampires had played in our fall—or at least the role I suspected them of playing. Caesar and Minerva had certainly done the lion's share of the work, but behind the scenes, back in Rome, something had egged on the Senate to push for the Druids' demise, and my money was on the bloodsuckers. The young vampires wanted territories of their own and the older ones wanted them out from underfoot, but the continental Druids had been keeping them out of Gaul. They'd been able to do that very effectively because the vampires couldn't hide from them and Druids had absolutely no *tabus* against using our magic on the dead—it was only the living we couldn't mess with.

As far as the earth is concerned, vampires don't exist as sentient creatures. They are nothing more than collections of minerals and elements that have yet to be reabsorbed. I wasn't quick enough to prevent the hapless lurking man from being bitten, but I could and did save his life. Exerting my will and taking a few precious seconds to murmur a spell of unbinding, I dissolved the calcium in the vampire's skull, which had

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the primary effect of deflating its head like a balloon, and secondarily turned its exposed fangs to dust. It did not save the man from freaking out once the vampire's charm snapped. He began screaming "What the fuck! What the fuck!" in a shrill register as the vampire's body toppled over with a boneless bag of flesh sloshing about on its shoulders. Then the flight response kicked in, somewhat belatedly, and the man ran into the night, clutching his punctured neck and howling promises to Jesus that he'd never do drugs again.

The vampire wasn't finished yet, but safe for the moment. I drew Fragarach and scanned the night in a full three-sixty to make sure there weren't any more of them. Once I was satisfied, I turned back to the prone body of the vampire. The red light in its head was gone, but the one in its chest was still fine. Given time and a safe place to recuperate, that calcium would reform, the skull would grow back complete with fangs, and the vampire would stalk the night again. Those red lights, whatever they were—the dark magic of vampirism Leif refused to explain—they were failsafes of a sort, resurrection engines. That's why you couldn't just stake a vampire in the heart and assume you were done; you had to cut off the head as well to prevent regeneration. And that's why I'd known Leif would be okay after getting burned so badly by the witches; neither of his red lights had been snuffed out.

Another spoken spell of unbinding released all the carbon molecules in that body to do whatever they wanted, and in this case they wanted to melt into sludge. The red light in the chest winked out, and I chalked up my first vampire kill since that time in Argentina I saved Diego Maradona from an undead English football fan. (He'd wanted

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revenge for England's 1986 humiliation in the World Cup.) And I'd never even stepped two paces away from the Jaguar.

Leif burst out of the club and looked around wildly for an opponent, crouching in a defensive stance. All he saw was me staring placidly back at him. "There were only two inside," he called.

"Third one's around the corner," I said, pointing to the side of the building that was currently out of his sight.

"Did you get him?"

"Yep."

Leif straightened and grinned. "Excellent. I want one of those "easy" buttons, you know the red ones I mean?"

"Is it all going to be like this?" I asked. "You hardly need me along if it is."

"Oh no, no. The next one is significantly tougher." He straightened up and strolled jauntily over to me, a small trickle of blood trailing from the side of his mouth. He sounded unusually cheerful as he said, "The entire seethe from Memphis is at the Cardinals game right now."

"There's a game tonight?"

Leif's eyes bugged and he held up his hands, wiggling his fingers playfully.

"Playoff implications. Oooooo."

"So we're talking more than three fanged dead guys here."

"More like three and sixty," he said casually.

Leif was right: this next one would be significantly tougher.

Chapter 10

The punk vampire leapt at Leif, still completely unconscious of my presence. That allowed me to whip Fragarach cleanly through his neck, and his sailing head looked bemused as it fell, unable to process how Leif had managed to decapitate him from several yards away.

Now there were two headless bodies for fans to scream about, and we knew that would quickly draw security. We moved counterclockwise around the stadium's main concourse, looking for similar vampire sentries at all the entrances first. Their "camouflage" was different from mine; it was an area charm that caused people looking straight at them simply not to notice, while simultaneously suggesting to the humans that they shouldn't walk through the space the vampires occupied. It didn't work on me. I saw them clearly, jogging lightly to the right and behind Leif. They were dark shadows in my magical vision, only two ruby fires glowing in a cloud of coal dust with a gray aura, while humans milled past and around them in a riot of colored auras and bindings.

The next pair of sentries attacked Leif before we reached the door they'd been stationed to watch. They'd heard the commotion when undead Elvis left the building, but just like the first pair, they focused on Leif and not on me. He twisted aside from the first one's lunge, leaving me to cut him down, and he tore the head off the second. That cued more screams, and we moved on. The entire main concourse was cleared in like manner, and we moved up to the Club level.

A large pack of them were lounging in the area dubbed as the OAZIS in large red letters. They were the upper echelon of the seethe, dressed more fashionably than the

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sentries on the main level, wearing tailored pants and tight black turtlenecks molded closely around their torsos, or white shirts with rolled-up sleeves and skinny ties. They were mingled with humans who were flushed with lust, drawn to their charisma and power or simply ensnared by their charms. They held drinks in their hands that they never sipped and their faces were afflicted with unnatural beauty and ennui. They were all dead white males.

“Hello, boys,” Leif said quietly, but somehow his voice cut through all the babble, and thirty pairs of cold eyes locked onto him as he calmly fished his gold pocket watch out of his waistcoat and checked it. All conversation stopped because the humans turned to look at what had snatched the pretty vampires’ attention away from them. I didn’t move, knowing that I would be completely invisible so long as I remained still. Leif continued in the same controlled tones.

“I am Helgarson, in case you do not know me. I must inform you that you have overstayed your welcome in my territory by a good deal.” He snapped the watch cover closed and replaced it in his vest pocket. “I will grant amnesty to any who walk away in the next five seconds. I will end the existence of all who remain. One.”

The humans muttered in confusion. The Memphis vampires all flicked their gazes toward one particular figure who looked like an action hero in the movies, except paler. He wore white linen pants and a matching shirt with a dark sport coat pulled over it, and he had a festively plump woman in a low-cut dress gazing at him adoringly as she clung to his arm. Figuring he was the leader, I began a spell of unbinding on his head and drew on the limited store of power in my bear charm.

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“Two,” Leif said. Several vampires began to circle around behind us—Leif, really—but I had his back.

“Three.” The Memphis vampires all dropped their charms, and the humans started to blink and wake up.

“Four.” It was dawning on the Rubenesque woman snuggled up against the leader that those were real fangs in his mouth, and if he wasn’t a vampire then he desperately needed to see a dentist.

Leif never got to say five. The Memphis leader bared his fangs and shouted, “Kill—” and that’s when I completed my spell of unbinding and his head collapsed like a failed soufflé, his eyes popping out and bouncing on the floor.

A good two seconds passed where no one moved; they just stared at the erstwhile leader to make sure that shit had really happened—even Leif, who knew I could do such things but had never seen me do it. The leader’s arm candy broke the silence: Every inch of her bounteous flesh quivered as she screamed and pushed him away. He fell like a post, his knees locked, and the bloody bag of his head popped and splattered on the floor. That set all the other humans screaming and chucking their cocktails at the nearest vampire as they ran for their lives. A good half of the vampires looked wildly around with large eyes for someone arching fingers at them from beneath a pointy hat, and when they saw nothing but fleeing humans, they looked uncertainly at Leif, and thereby lost their best chance to defeat us. Paralyzed by indecision, only half of them rushed Leif at the same time.

What they didn’t know was that they were also rushing me. I spent most of my remaining reserves on increasing my strength and speed, leaving only a wee bit

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untouched for healing emergencies. Then I laid about me with a will, securing Leif's back from a few enterprising and scrupulous lads who thought it would be unprotected. I swung Fragarach in powerful strokes meant to hew off limbs and heads, because you can't stab a vampire in the guts and expect him to slump weakly to the ground—you have to make them fall down so they can't get up. Three of them were down before the rest were able to process that Leif hadn't done it, and they hesitated, refocusing their senses into the space I occupied and realizing that they had more than one enemy here.

It wasn't time to give them any quarter. They'd see the blood on Fragarach's blade, smell me and hear my heartbeat, but I kept the camouflage on anyway because they still wouldn't know precisely where to hit me. There were three more of them in a rough half circle facing me, crouching in their tailored linen trousers and hissing like they thought I'd be killed by sheer vitriolic sibilance. Peripheral awareness told me that the humans were clear for the moment, Leif was handling himself well at my back, and the vampire on my left was getting ready to jump.

I flicked my sword to the right and snapped my wrist so that the blood flew from the blade to splatter into the face of the vampire on my right. He flinched and I lunged forward to the center vampire as the one on my left leaped at where he thought I was. Fragarach cleaved through the skull of the center vampire as the left vampire missed me and tackled the right one instead. They tumbled to the carpeted lounge floor making tom cat noises, and I suppressed a chuckle as I closed on them. They weren't battle trained. The left one was quicker to his feet and he put his arms up defensively over his head after seeing what happened to his buddy. It left his body wide open, so I held Fragarach like a baseball bat and swung up through his torso underneath the ribs, causing his top half to

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slide forward and fall in front of his legs. The follow through left Fragarach high in the air, and I brought it back down onto the head of the scrambling right vampire.

I'd now accounted for seven, and looking up, Leif had done at least as well, perhaps better, with nothing more than his superior strength, speed, and skill. Sprawled corpses lay in a ring around him with heads sprinkled among them like enormous peppercorns, their dark blood pumping into a cherry red carpet. There were still more than a dozen of the sucky things to kill, however, and they were wary now.

Leif and I wanted this battle over sooner rather than later. The longer it lasted, the more likely it was that an unlucky fan or security officer would become a statistic. Thus far it hadn't occurred to the Memphis vampires that taking a human hostage might work, because they assumed that Leif wouldn't care.

I wasn't too impressed with the array of enemies left. They were uncertain and desperate and knew that they were outclassed, because they were the weaker ones—the cowardly ones—and their strong ones were already dead. But that sort of thinking is what gets you killed. I even recognized it and checked my six to make sure I wasn't about to get ambushed from behind, but it was too late and I didn't look low enough.

The left vampire that I'd cut in half had crawled doggedly behind me, pulling himself forward with his clawed hands with his organs trailing behind him, to take a last vengeful swipe at my right hamstring. I felt the muscles tear and the pain followed soon afterward. I was going down.

There are an infinite number of things I'd rather do than fall down within reach of vampire's claws, so I pivoted on my left foot and made sure Fragarach fell first, finishing the job I should have finished earlier by hacking into his skull.