

Chapter Ten – “Not the Dial-A-Bullet Hotline”

The vampire in question was named Viktor Kolmach, and he was from eastern Europe. In accordance with the Hunter Accords, he'd checked in with the Hunt Captain of the Vampires, but hadn't been incredibly specific about where he'd be staying while he was in town, claiming he would be 'with friends' and had listed a couple of names as contacts.

This was where I *started* to get very annoyed, because the Hunt Captain hadn't been paying much attention to the 'friends' that Viktor said he'd be staying with, otherwise he would've noticed that one of them, Cassandra Liebitz, had been dead for a few years now, so Viktor was rather unlikely to be staying with her. The other, Max Stelford, was the guy who knew literally every vampire ever made, and putting him down as a reference was a running joke that someone didn't want to be found. Sure, Max might have seen you, but Max sees everybody, and Max remembers nothing. Viktor had probably checked in with Max, but Max also ran one of the busiest import/export businesses on the West Coast, so if Max didn't have to care, Max didn't care. Max wasn't bad people, just in high demand.

Over the years, I've had to work very hard to combat my prejudice towards vampires. I grew up knowing they were just people like everyone else, but I also remember seeing my first feeding when I was only seven years old. Dad had brought me and Charlotte along to a meeting, because he was always keen on making sure we were learning our tradecraft as early as possible, and on this particular day, Dad wanted to stress to us the importance of being able to look at every person without deciding things *about* them *for* them.

'Let people reveal themselves to you,' Dad said, 'and never dictate to them who you *want* them to be before they do.'

Charlotte and I had both worked as hard as possible to remember that lesson, but it had been extremely hard oftentimes.

On that day when I was seven, I watched a powerful vampire named Selene Baghera suckle on the neck of a young man who looked lucky if he was eighteen, although my father assured me that he was. Selene had come to barter to raise the hunting levels for vampires in the Colorado Rockies, and the negotiations had been taking quite a long while for reasons that I was, unfortunately, still a little too young to understand at the time.

In retrospect, I've since learned that there was a mass migration of vampires from both eastern Europe and the Middle East to the United States, in an effort to avoid being caught up in warzones that had broken out, and in order to not overextend any one particular zone, they'd scattered a great deal over the country, but it turned out many of them had found the Rocky Mountains to be excellent habitats. They didn't mind the cold, they sort of enjoyed winter sports and it was astonishing how many people died to exposure, leaving them to be feasted upon.

That said, they were in need of opening a handful of feeding lodges, places they could set up where men and women volunteered to be fed upon, usually in exchange for money, but sometimes just for the thrill of being fed on.

What can I say? Anne Rice books were big at the time, and vampire romance was flourishing in bookstores and libraries across the country. A few decades later, it would be those damn Twilight books. I'm convinced there's some vampire patron who's smart and owns a book company and makes sure there's always some kind of bodice ripper featuring vampires and of decent enough quality out there, converting a new generation into willing feed bags.

Selene needed to feed, and she had gotten a young man from a local feeding lodge sent over, and I will never forget the look of sadness in his eyes while he waited, only to see it disperse and be replaced by a look of great ecstasy as he drifted off while she drank deep of his blood.

That young man still works in one of the local feeder halls, although he's no longer young and spry. He still enjoys what he does, however, even if he does spend a few days each month on his back recovering from having his blood drained. I've talked to him a handful of times, and he's always told me that there isn't any greater moment in his life than those when he's being fed upon.

I can't tell you how much that scares the crap out of me.

One of the things I also learned early on in life was how to spot addiction, and those who like to be fed on generally had that in spades. People find something that gives them bliss, and for whatever reason, they'll sacrifice every other moment of happiness they have chasing a few more seconds of bliss. Me, myself, I'd rather make *every* moment as good as possible instead of trying to catch a falling star.

To me, vampires were, by their very nature, exploiting that human weakness, that addict's need to go chasing after an unquenchable high that they could never hold onto. I understand that it's part of their very nature, that they have to feed on blood to survive, but it's never sat right with me, the parasitic nature of their relationship with all the other species in the food chain.

So, I have to remind myself going into any situation where it comes to dealing with vampires that they aren't all bad people, because I just know my perception of them skews towards the negative. That's on me. I'm working on it, but, y'know, at the end of the day, vampires still drink blood. So there's only so much give room I got in me.

I could call Max and see if he remembered talking to Viktor, but I had a sneaking suspicion that was going to be a fool's errand. Max talked to more vampires on a day-to-day basis than I would in a month, maybe two.

I'd been to Ali Chen's feeder brothel, and while she hadn't known the fella in question, she'd been able to pick up his trail, at least a little bit. He'd been in a different feeder brothel, Countess Montrovo's, over near Russian Hill, and while he'd paid and fed like any other customer, the Countess warned the other feeder proprietors that he was someone to be kept an eye on, as she suspected he'd been 'wild fanging,' which was slang for feeding on the homeless population. It was a dangerous way to spread diseases to brothel workers, and the last thing any of them wanted to do was to have their whole world come collapsing down because some screener hadn't done their job. The Countess had warned all the other feeders in town that he should be treated as a new client, and they should run a bio screen on him before letting him feed.

Stopping by to see the Countess felt like the next natural stop, so I headed across town to visit my second feeder brothel in just a few hours. It wasn't my first time jumping between brothels in an evening, but this was for far less enjoyable reasons.

Montrovo's was, much like Ali Chen's, an entire building that screamed 'go away.' It was a three-story house that had a high fence around it and a little buzzer at the gate in front. The trees blocked most of the view of the place, although you could, at certain angles, see panes of one-way glass reflecting back the foliage around it. The views from those rooms were amazing, and added to the ambiance of the place like you wouldn't believe. I stepped up to the gate and pressed the button on the buzzer, looking up directly at the camera I knew was looking down on me from its nestled and concealed hideaway.

“Not time for an inspection,” a familiar voice, deep, gruff, and heavily accented, says on the other end of the line.

“Relax, Brass, I’m not here to bust anybody’s balls tonight,” I tell him with a laugh. “Here to get a bit of info on a red flag you tossed up yesterday to the other feeders.”

“What about it?”

“Can I come in, or you want to have this whole conversation with me standing out here on the street? Where anyone can walk by and hear about what kind of buis—” I wasn’t even through the word when the gate buzzed and unlatched. “Thought not,” I chuckled beneath my breath, heading though the opening, closing and latching it behind me.

At some point, Montrovo’s had actually been someone’s home, some wealthy rail or oil baron, likely, but they’d left it to Countess Montrovo when they’d died, and she’d been running it as a feeder brothel ever since and that had been over a hundred and fifty years ago. There was a small yard out front, with a lime tree off to one side, and a bench off to the other. Sitting on a series of wooden steps leading up from the walkway to the porch was Countess’s right-hand man, Nils ‘Brass’ Novoka.

Brass was probably the most Russian soul I’d ever met. He was only 5’6” or so, with long black stringy hair that hung to his collarbone, his skin an off-white like soiled snow, his eyes always with large bags beneath them, his beard too long to be considered stubble but too inconsistent to be considered a real beard, his eyes cold and blue and ancient looking. He wore the rattiest blue jeans I’d ever seen, more tatters than actual pants at this point, a black leather jacket that probably was sewn together in the 1950s, and a white t-shirt with Bruce Springsteen’s ‘Born To Run’ cover on it that had faded but was still legible, as if he’d taken care of that shirt more than anything else in his life. Down in the bottom right corner of it, though, there were still a few pink spots, blood stains that nothing had quite been able to get rid of. He was smoking one of those unfiltered Russian tar sticks they called cigarettes, and the scent of it wafted around him like a cloak of stench and midnight. He had a silver flask sitting next to him that I’d have bet just about anything on contained some of the purest, most distilled and chilled vodka this side of the Pacific.

He simultaneously looked nineteen and a thousand.

“So, if you are not here for inspection,” he said, that voice still dripping with the accent of his homeland, “then why are you here, Gunslinger? Is this the day you and I finally draw down?” His hand hovered over his hip tentatively for a long moment before he and I both started laughing and he pointed a finger gun at me. “Pew pew!”

“Damn traitorous Russian!” I shouted in mock agony, clutching at my chest. “We were supposed to pace off!” For effect, I fell to my knees and pantomimed blood spurting from my chest like I was in Sam Peckinpah film. A few seconds later I laughed, stood back up and reached out to shake Brass’s hand. “Heya comrade, how’s it going?”

“De fuck are you doin’ here, Gunslinger? This about that sketch fanger we sent the alert out about last week?” Brass shook his head and grumbled something in Russian I couldn’t pick up. “I told the boss lady he was going to be trouble, but she said business is business, and as long as he’s not breaking rules and screens clean, we let’em in. What did he do?”

“One confirmed kill, two possible others,” I said as we started to walk up the stairs. “More annoyingly, he threw my ass out a window. Or, I suppose, if I’m being more accurate, he dragged my ass out a window and then flew off while I was trying to figure out how to not die.”

Brass winced overdramatically, laughing a little bit. “Bet you must be *pissed*.”

“You have *no* idea.”

“No one is allowed to get the better of Dale Sexton,” the Countess’ voice purred as we entered the front living room, a handful of men and women loitering about, watching television or reading books. Like most feeder brothels, the ‘feeder’ aspect was kept to the background, and the place spent most of its time being an actual brothel, not that *that* was legal in San Francisco, either, but sex work had a long and storied history in the Bay Area, and people had been getting by for a long, long time, usually with the cops looking the other way as long as it kept disease and crime in check. And beyond that, we had an arrangement with the SFPD to ignore the feeder houses, as per the Hunter Accords. They’d initially not been thrilled at turning a blind eye to vampires living and working within the city limits, but when it had been explained to them that either we would have feeder houses or the vampires would be allowed free hunting throughout the city below an enforceable cap based on population, the SFPD wisely chose to keep a lower body count. “How’ve you been, Dale?”

Unlike her right hand man, the Countess Bella Montrovo had worked extremely hard to blend in, and instead of looking like she walked out of a Tolstoy novel, she looked much more the part of a local hippie dippy crystal queen, somewhere between the Free Love and New Age generations, with a big, billowy sundress that clung to her like a promise, her raven black hair smooth and silky, her figure full without being too Rubenesque. She was curvy in all the ways that would draw the attention of any red-blooded man or woman and hold onto it for as long as she wanted it. Any hint of accent she might have ever had was gone, and she spoke at least a dozen languages conversantly. In addition to running both the feeder and the brothel parts of the house, she also gave tarot readings and other forms of divination.

My late father, who certainly had his thoughts about ‘predicting the future,’ had never gone out of his way to rule the possibility out completely and told me that if I ever wanted a glimpse into the potentials that awaited me, the Countess was as close to the real deal as he’d ever come. He’d never tell me what she’d told him, but I knew my father well enough to know when he’d seen something he couldn’t explain, and the one time I’d seen him come back from a reading by the Countess, he’d looked *shook* like I’d never seen, not before or since.

I’d never quite been daring enough to get a reading from the Countess.

“It’s been a hell of a week so far, Countess,” I sighed. “I picked up a case that looked like it should’ve been a simple find and rescue but has been nothing but a pain in my ass. I got a fanger racking up a bodycount and trying to throw me out of skyscrapers. I got a dead Lady of Tides and the person I was going to *replace* her with was the one our troublesome vamp killed. Which means I *still* got a missing person, I *still* got no replacement Regent of Tides and I’m *still* trying to figure out what this jackass’s plan is, if he’s even got one, and he’s not just randomly dropping bodies left and right to fuck up my case.”

“Who’s missing?”

“Runaway fae bride.”

“You sure she didn’t change her mind?”

“Everyone keeps asking that, but if it’s that way, she went *way* out of her way to hide it,” I said. “I’m almost starting to think they’re holding her to use as leverage against my client to make him do or say something, but whatever they need him to do or say hasn’t happened yet and is being held up by something. That’s the only possible reason I can think of for no ransom note or demands. Besides, he’s just a beat cop, didn’t even know a thing about the Veil until his girl went missing.”

“I’d offer to help, Dale,” Bella said with a soft sigh, placing one of her oh so soft hands on my shoulder, “but you know vamps and fae rarely mix well. I don’t really have much in the way of contacts over there to aid you in your investigation.”

“Not her disappearance I’ve come to talk to you about,” I said to her, reaching into my satchel, pulling out the sketch of Viktor I’d made after he tossed us both out the window. “This the vamp you sent the danger signal up the flagpole about?”

“That’s the one,” she said, glancing at the sketch. “He your killer?”

“Fraid so,” I said. “What can you tell me about him?”

“Viktor Kolmach. Referred to us by Olga Treyonksy. Hails from Belarus. Has known connections to the K4...”

“What’s the K4?” I asked her.

“Soviet group of vampire gangsters,” she sighed. “I don’t like dealing with them, but as long as they don’t bring their business behind my walls, I can’t say too much about them, just because I don’t get their business mixed with mine. They’re into the usual ways to pressure people to make money – shakedowns, protection rackets, drugs, smuggling, weapons—”

“Smuggling?” I frowned, nodding. “That makes sense. They’re trying to get a Regent of Tides that’ll be a bit more flexible when it comes to their business, wanting to bring things in or take things out without doing the usual Dark Docks taxes and tariffs. I’m going to have to get someone who’s a great deal less lenient than I’d originally been looking at.”

“Who was your first choice?”

“Carlos Aquino.”

“Yeah, he’s a straight shooter,” Bella said to me. “He wouldn’t have tolerated any of their bullshit. He was the one who our vamp killed then?”

“Mmmm,” I said. “They were arguing and then when I burst in, Carlos had a couple of gunshot wounds in the chest, and Viktor was holding the gun.”

“Can’t get much plainer than that.”

“He’s lucky he threw us out the window,” I grumbled. “Otherwise I’d have put a SoulEnders round through him.”

“Fatal or no?”

I smirked a little bit, turning my head to cock and look at her. “How did you know that the SoulEnders have a non-fatal setting?”

“Always assumed there had to be, because I remember you putting down Billy Wix without killing him when you were dealing with that Pine Hunt nonsense a few years ago,” Bella said.

“Gods,” I mumbled. “I forgot that ended with a shootout out front of this very building. That was what, two, three years ago?”

“Something like that.”

“Shit, I need a goddamn *vacation*,” I groaned. “It’s been nonstop go go go since I took on this damn job. Oh well, no rest for the wicked. What can you tell me about where I can find this Viktor character?”

“He’s renting a flat out in Sunset Heights. I don’t know the unit number, but I can tell you the building and hopefully that’ll be enough for you to get what you need in terms of direction and where to be headed.”

“That sounds like a good start, thanks Bella.”

She grabbed a pad from a nearby table and scribbled down an address for me, tearing the sheet off and holding it out to me. “Don’t get yourself killed, though, huh, Gunslinger? I’ve grown to like our regular chats and drinks, even if you haven’t taken the hint to invite me out on a date yet.”

I smirked. “I didn’t think you were hinting; I thought you were trying to drum up business for the non-feeder half of the business,” I told her. “Never assume I can tell the difference between business and pleasure when it comes to people in your line of work.”

“Well then, consider this an open invitation if you want to take me out for drinks, dinner and dancing sometime.”

“Fair enough, I’ll try to remember that,” I told her with a nod. “Of course, you *do* also have *my* number, you know.”

“You aren’t going to assume it’s urgent Gunslinger business if I ring you up?”

“I’m just some guy like any other, Bella,” I said, starting to head towards the door. “My phone just connects you with me. It’s not the Dial-A-Bullet hotline.”

“One last thing before you go, Gunslinger,” she said to me as my hand was reaching out to rest on the door handle. “Do you want me to give you a free reading?”

The words sent dark chills along my spine and every sense I had and several I didn’t was telling me that I should run and never look back. But then the words of my late father crossed over my mind once more – ‘Anything that scares you should be considered with measured intensity and dismissed casually at your own peril.’

I lifted my hand up off the door and turned back to look at her. “Alright. Your readings were one of the few things I ever saw give my father pause, which is more the reason to rush towards it instead of away from it. I only have half an hour or so.”

“That’s all the time you’ll need,” she said, turning to head towards a door leading further into the house, as I stepped away from the front door and moved to join her. “Surely the great and all-powerful Druid Gunslinger isn’t afraid of a few potential future pathways?”

“*Everyone* is afraid of the future, Bella,” I cautioned her. “Those who aren’t have no reason to still be among the living.”

We walked down a hallway, past the normal rooms for feeding and fucking, and headed towards what I can only assume was the Countess’s personal office, as there was a table covered in velvet set off to one side underneath a particularly low mood light, draping the room in a cool orange glow, a second desk with a chair and a computer off to the other side of the room. She led me over to the table with two chairs, gesturing for me to sit down. “You know, I only read your father’s cards four times over the years. Once when he was made Gunslinger, once after your sister was born, once after *you* were born and one final time a year or two before he died,” she said, as she sat down on the opposite side of the table, unwrapping a bundle of silk cloth to remove a stack of well-loved cards from it, extending them to me. “Shuffle these until they feel comfortable in your hands. Think about whatever you’d like guidance on.”

As tempted as I was to look for guidance on the case, I figured I had a pretty solid handle on what I needed to do next in terms of finding our vampire, I was still no closer in trying to find Gao’s girlfriend, which was the case I *should’ve* been working on before I stumbled headfirst into this Tides nonsense. So I tried to focus on Saoirse Staire, thinking about the pictures he’d shown me, hoping maybe this would help me line up with the case, tell me where to start looking for her.

Almost as if she could read my mind, she smiled, reaching over and patting her hand on top of mine. “Don’t think of specifics. The cards aren’t going to give you an address. They’re going to give you a way of thinking about things, insight into what you may not have considered. But don’t expect details, otherwise you’re going to come away disappointed.”

I chuckled softly, letting the cards dance between my fingertips. “Trying to lower expectations?”

“Trying to help you get something useful from this, and hopefully it will encourage you to come back more,” she said with a wry grin. “I see your sister every few months.”

“Oh yeah?” I said, pushing the cards to slice and weave together. “She’s never mentioned it.”

“I think she’s afraid you’ll get the wrong idea about it.”

“And what wrong idea would that be?”

“That she needs guidance, rather than she likes making sure she’s not missing things.”

“My sister is entitled to do whatever she’d like whenever she’d like in her spare time, and I’m not going to judge her for those decisions.”

“Unless it comes to people she’s dating,” Bella scolded.

“Hey, my sister had a right to know what a brat that woman was when she started seeing her,” I said defensively. “That’s all I was doing – looking out for family.”

“You’re lucky your sister agrees with you. Not all family disputes are settled so amicably.”

I finished riffling the cards together and handed the deck back over to her. “Well, my sister and I get along remarkably well for having been at each other’s throats most of our childhoods. There’s your cards back. Now, tell me what the future holds.”

“This is a 6-card spread, focusing on self, wants, fears, forces in your favor, forces against, and the likely outcome. So, let us begin...” She flipped over the first card and it was a priestlike figure upside

down. “The Hierophant reversed – you see yourself as a new approach to the role of Gunslinger, someone subversive and unshackled by the traditions of the past. But take care not to veer too far from the trodden path, or you may find yourself without a light for guidance.”

“I’m a troublemaker,” I muttered to myself. “There’s a surprise.”

But she wasn’t paying attention to me and was already turning over the next card. “The Six Of Wands. This case means more to you than you may even want to admit to yourself, and you have banked a great deal of emotional investment on its outcome, one you are hoping will be nothing shy of complete and total success. Are you hoping to provide someone else a happy ending for fear you may never see one? Or is this simply the default in which operate – go until the job is done or lost, and no room for in between?”

I found her insight a little jarring, just because I’d always tried to project that a case, while important, would neither make nor break me, but there was something about Gao’s eyes that I kept seeing when I closed my own, a desperation, a longing, a needing to be reunited with she who held his heart. I’d never been in love like that with anyone or anything before. Something inside of me needed to bring these lovebirds back together again.

She turned over the third card and looked up at me. “The Ten of Cups in reverse. You fear that if you fail in this case, your client will never recover, dying young, a broken man. Not to be harsh, but your fears in this do not seem unfounded – this man has staked his entire mental well-being on your skills and success, and to fail him will be to doom him.”

Great, like I needed *more* pressure other than the calls and texts I was getting from Gao on the regular. Now she’s telling me his mortal soul’s bound up in this. Just great.

The fourth card is flipped, forces in my favor. “The Queen of Swords. Complexity. Insight. Perceptiveness. Focus. If anyone is capable of solving this mystery, Dale, it’s you, and you are the bloodhound upon which the case will rise and fall, but your skills should be more than up to the task.”

As she continued talking, I noticed a sense of electricity tingling up my arms, and I almost wondered for half a second if the table is rigged to an outlet or something, but lifting my hands off the table did nothing to quell the sparks and uncomfortable sensations raking up my arms.

The fifth card turns over, forces against me. “The Two of Wands in reverse. Your opponent in this matter is stubborn, afraid of change, a poor planner who does not adapt well to new things and new ideas, and they are so stuck in the past that they will drag down everyone and everything with them, if it helps them achieve their goals. They will do anything to prevent some potential change that lingers upon the air, undecided but likely.”

Glancing around me, I thought I could see ghosts of my ancestors surrounding me, the Gunslingers of generations before, before they started to blur together and my vision became slightly clouded with a diffuse light, obscuring details and blending everything into a sort of kaleidoscopic soup.

With the sixth and final card, the Tower in reverse. “Well, there’s a surprise. You’re going to get your victory, Gunslinger, but it’s going to be more complicated than you anticipated, as it’s going to affect a lot of your life in ways you can’t possible foresee yet. Just be prepared... a victory won’t be quite as clear cut as you’d want it to be... but you’ll make out fine in the end...”

The room snaps back into focus and suddenly all the strange sensations and weird lights and colors disappeared, and I was simply back in Bella’s office once more.

“Any time you want another reading, Gunslinger, it’s on the house...”

“Yeah... Sure... I gotta go, Bella...”