

Joyeuse

By Rory Dunton.

A black van sits on Spedina Avenue in front of a glass building that a sign out front proclaims as “Community Living Toronto”. However, it is not this edifice that those inside the van are focused on, as through a camera built into the van’s hubcap, they observe the three-story, brown brick building, with light spilling out from between closed curtains into the night. The building sits nestled between its twin on the left, and a small Montessori school on the right.

Within the van, one of the three figures in tactical gear, for now helmetless, turns to another. “So,” she says, “What’s our intel?”

The greying, dark-haired man she addressed keeps his eye on the screen as he responds. “Looks like a group of suckers calling themselves the ‘Sanguine Brotherhood’, marketing themselves as an, and I quote, “alternative religion.” To the rest of us, that’d be a cult, with a particular focus on the “sharing of lifeblood to reinforce the bonds of brotherhood.””

The woman’s mouth quirks upward in a sour smile. “Seems familiar.”

The man chuckles. “I think that’s why the brass sent you, Jean. You’ve got experience.”

The third figure, a blonde young man with sharp features and eager eyes makes an impatient noise. “Come on Roland, what else do we know?”

“Right, sorry Mike. There are seven to ten fully fledged vampires in there, and an unknown number of thin-bloods.” Roland looks at the contents of a manilla folder, and frowns for a moment. “Says here that one of them might be an Old Lord, with capitals. I haven’t come across *that* before.”

At his words, the woman pales. “Old Lord? It says there’s an Old Lord in *there*?”

“You know what it means?”

“It means that there should be a lot more than the three of us here! Brass should’ve sent the whole goddamn order, not just the three of us!.”

“Jean, keep calm.” Says Roland. “It only says might, and besides, the Order sent us with a little surprise for them.” As he speaks, he reaches down beside him, and picks up a long, black case, with unobtrusive lettering on the side, labeling it as JYS.

Mike’s eyes widen. “I thought that was in the Louvre.”

Roland grins. “A replica, and not a good one either. If you saw them side by side, you’d never mistake the display piece for the real deal.”

By way of example, he opens the case, and draws the sword, Joyeuse. As Jean looks at the sword, she realizes that Roland is right. Oh, they had gotten the hilt right, but the blade, nothing could have replicated. It was smooth steel, but shone like a faceted jewel, a hundred colours at once, changing as the light hit it in different ways, never the same colour twice.

“Yeah, that might do it.”

Mike looks outside. “But why are we doing this at night? Wouldn’t it be safer to just go in during the day?”

“We’ve tried that. The vamps have some sort of go-away spell on the place during the day, we can’t even get close. Now, do either of have any more questions before we go in?”

Moments later, three helmeted figures step out of the van, and form up, weapons mundane and legendary at the ready. They approach the building, the night unusually silent. As

they reach it, Jean pulls a thick disk the size of a dinner plate off her belt, and fastens it to the door before stepping back and raising her weapon at the door.

A red ring flashes twice on the disk, and the door collapses inward. The three soldiers surge through the doorway, taking in the scene in an instant. Four pale figures stand in the well-appointed foyer, a long hall with doors on either side ending in a rich-looking staircase, armed with nothing but their natural gifts.

The vampires attack, putting the hunters on the defensive. Two enter a dance of blade and claw with Roland, Joyeuse flashing out at them like bursts of sunlight. The other two pair off with Mike and Jean, and that's all that Jean notices before having to fight for her life.

For a moment, all that matters is dodging the vampires strikes and making probing strikes with her knife, trying to get past its defences. It had strength, and speed, but it wasn't the oldest she'd fought, and it had clearly seen no point in training, and relied too much on sheer power. Jean, on the other hand, had been training to fight things like the vampire for a very long time. A few scant seconds after the fight began, it ended with a well placed strike to the chest, and a slice across the neck, leaving the vampire on the floor, its head some distance away. Looking around, she sees the others have completed their own fights. Roland signals to advance, as they move towards the stairs at the end of the hall.

And then the thin-bloods arrive. Thin-bloods are vampires that have not yet reached a year of undeath, and are, for the most part, animalistic beasts in human flesh. The tide of skeletal undead, pressing in from the side rooms and down the stairs, urged forward by older vampires, prove no exception.

Jean brings up her weapon, prepared to meet her end fighting, before Roland thrusts Joyeuse in the air and shouts “Close your eyes!”

Obedience drilled into her by long hours of training, Jean squeezes her eyes shut, as the world seems to go red, to the accompaniment of animal shrieks and hisses.

All is silent. She opens her eyes, and sees the floor covered in ash. She turns to Roland, a question in her eyes.

“Don’t you know the stories? Joyeuse outshines the Sun.” He grimaces. “It can only pull that trick once a day. I hope there’s nothing nastier up there.”

And so they begin creeping up through the house, checking rooms as they go. The house is empty, and silent. The first floor seems to consist of pens for the Thin-bloods, covered in old blood and bones. The second floor appears to be more public, possibly where the cult that serves as the vampire’s cover performs their rituals. This conclusion is supported by a number of altars and blood-stained chalices. All that’s left is the third and final floor.

Roland leads the way up the stairs at one end of the house, bringing them into a single, large room, lushly appointed, lined with eight coffins. In the instant they enter, they take in the several sitting areas, the large table at the back, the shelves of ancient tomes, and the blackout curtains at the windows, sheltering the occupants from the deadly rays of the sun. They take in all this before their attention is drawn to the man standing at the far end.

He should have been handsome. He had sharp features that could have been from anywhere, dark eyes, and hair like black silk. But something was *wrong*. Those features didn’t sit quite right on his face, like his smile was impression of something he’d heard of once. And his eyes, they held something dead, and predatory.

He was just like the last Old Lord she had met.

Mike raised his rifle and shot him, a short bark of gunfire.

The old lord seemed to... dissolve, was the only word for it. For an instant, he was little more than man-shaped mist. He reformed, and locked eyes with each of them. As his eyes met hers, Jean felt her very blood freeze, pull against her, making it impossible to move.

Seeming satisfied with their conditions, the vampire turned back to Mike. "Well that was rude." He spoke with a North American accent, but his voice seemed to carry an indescribable quality of age. "We can't let you lot get ideas." He nodded at Mike. "Snap your own neck."

Jean heard a wet snap to her left, and a dull thud.

"Now I've taken care of that," the vampire was saying, "I'd like to thank you. You've shown me that I've been getting sloppy, if I left enough of a trail for you lot to find me. As thanks, I think I'll let you li- "

In that instant, Roland moved, making lunge that would have impaled any vampire, let alone one in the presence of Joyeuse, the blade that outshines the sun.

The Old Lord was faster. In an instant, he's behind the team's leader. The vampire reaches out, and *breaks* him. The man's veins glow, as he begins to contort this way and that, is arms and legs shattering under the strain.

"Hm, I thought that would hold you longer. I suppose that sword of yours is powerful enough to offer some protection." He glances down at the sword. "If I could touch it, I'd get it out of your hands. Can't have you cockroaches with something so powerful."

And then he did something. With a word and a gesture, the blade seemed to dull, as if a cloak was dropped over it. “That’ll have to do.”

Roland lets out a moan of pain. The vampire clicks his tongue at him. “Come now, did you really think that would work? I walked the earth long before the Son of Mary was born, and I will walk it long after He is forgotten. Now, where was I? Ah yes, my generosity. As thanks for showing me how sloppy I’ve become, I will let you live. Take care though, this is not an offer I extend twice.”

With that, the world blurs around him, and he disappears, leaving nothing behind but the dead and the broken.