

Primal Wilde

Our carriage bumped and jolted its way down the road to Paris. Jack and Teresa were beginning to look disheveled. I'm sure I remained the very picture of grace, even if my hat did keep slipping down over my eyes. Another bump rocked the carriage and Teresa clutched the pillow she was sitting on all the tighter. Rather absently, I began to fear for the pillow's integrity.

Now, this was no ordinary journey. On an ordinary journey I would not have risked my carriage or my team of horses by having the driver push them to such a breakneck pace. No, we were on our way to visit the ladies Selina and Vanessa. If Selina were my sister, as I often think of her, then by the same token, Vanessa would be my mother. Not that I love her or really even like Vanessa (although I did both at one time) but she was the one responsible for my condition and 'mother' was what she would be called in the circles I frequented. Selina on the other hand, I do both love and like. It was her poor treatment at the hands of Vanessa that had caused us to travel with such purpose and haste.

To understand the whole situation one would have to begin with one not so simple fact: Vanessa, Selina and myself are vampires. Vanessa brought me into her 'family' some time ago. Selina, another 'child' of Vanessa's, has been one of my best friends for what seemed like ages. Indirectly, she was the one who first led me to Vanessa so many years ago. A detail I have never held against her.

From this point we move on to more simple facts: Vanessa is spoiled, holds life in low regard,

and will have her way no matter who got hurt in the process. For supernatural creatures we certainly have a way of holding onto the baser aspects of our humanity. In a way Selina ransomed herself for my freedom some few years ago. Now she too wanted to leave... but Vanessa would not allow her to do so. Circumstances being what they were, I could no longer stand aside while this intolerable situation continued.

A small village began to include itself in the dark scenery that jolted by and my good friend, and daytime protector, Jack Cosgrove, yelled for the driver to stop at the first inn. A few moments later we thankfully came to a halt. I could hear the driver getting down to tend the horses. The dreadful trip really wasn't his fault despite Teresa's vehement insistence of his incompetence and stupidity. Considering the late hour, the condition of the thoroughfare, and the speed we demanded of him and the horses, he was doing well indeed simply keeping us on what passed for a road.

Jack followed me out of the carriage, and while I helped Teresa out into the fresh air, he worked on straightening his back. I sympathized entirely. Maybe we could acquire more pillows inside the inn for the remainder of the journey. At any rate there was no way I was going to finish the remainder of the trip inside that infernal coach and be sober too if there was anything at all I could do to prevent it. I looked over at Jack as his back made a series of loud popping sounds.

As you may or may not have guessed, Jack and my driver were not vampires. They were what our dark little cliques would call 'soulless'. It's really something of a misnomer. Like vampires, I believe they retain their souls when they undergo the great transformation but unlike vampires they do lose a great deal of the emotional baggage that most of us (humanity in general and supernaturals in particular) seem to carry around. The uneducated and ignorant equate this lack of emotion with the loss of one's soul. Jack has always been a regular at church services, and vampire-bitten or not,

I felt his bright soul was destined for the pearly gates the next time he died.

Teresa, a relatively new friend of mine and a long-time mortal friend of Jack's, muttered something under her breath about the driver and tried to rub her backside without looking unladylike doing so. I pretended not to notice and walked around a bit to work out some of my own kinks.

I was just about to suggest we head into the inn when I heard a grunt from the driver and I felt a ghost of his pain in the back of my head. This was immediately followed by a sudden, terrible sense of nothing from him. He had been standing on the other side of the coach. And now he was on the other side of life. Spinning around, I found a man rushing at me, and continuing the momentum of my turn, placed a hard kick to the side of his head. It flipped him over sideways and I heard his neck snap somewhere in the process. One down and I assumed more to follow.

Jack's sword hissed out of its sheath somewhere behind me. Two more thugs were on their way from around the horses. I wasn't going to be able to protect Teresa and fend them off at the same time, so I tossed her up into the driver's seat. She looked surprised and shocked at the same time. Neat trick that.

Someone let out a screaming gurgle from Jack's direction. Two down. The two men had made it around the horses and were now on top of me so-to-speak. I caught the first one's arm just as he started swinging his axe towards me. My shove sent him flying into his cohort and sent them both to the ground some distance away. Another scream from Jack's direction. I turned to assist when I saw the other axe blade. It was too late for me to move despite the speed I was now capable of moving. With a sort of hopeless, stunned fascination I watched almost helplessly for the fraction of a second before the axe struck me. The lamplight reflecting on the sharpened edge and the rust that covered the rest of the blade were incredibly quick impressions that I received. The terrible

moment stretched out as I desperately tried to move knowing that it was already too late.

Even superhuman speed had its limitations.

One of the vile brigands had crawled under the coach and had swung his axe one-handed from his hands and knees. The blade seemed to move ever so slowly yet at the same time fast as lightning. I had noticed the thug and the blade too late. While I was able to move far quicker than any human ever dreamed, I would have needed just a fraction of a second more notice. An instant in which to move. A small eternity of not being able to move. With a sickening jolt it hit me in the right arm just above the elbow. I was almost but not quite calm as I watched the axe bury itself in my side and my arm drop to the ground quite separate from me.

There was no pain. Only shock. An awful sensation of vertigo and horror washed over me as I fell to my knees. The man who had struck me gave a twisted smile and jerked the axe out of my side. He started to draw back his axe again for another swing. Then the horror I felt came bubbling up from within me and the most terrible sound I've ever heard screamed and grated against my ears and my soul. The horses bolted on the spot causing the carriage to run over my attacker. Only moments had passed but it seemed to me that his leer had departed long before the wagon wheel took his life.

Away went the coach... and with it Teresa. I didn't see her again for a long time afterwards. The horror I felt began to change in such a disturbing way that I found myself quite unable to satisfactorily explain it. The insufficient, short version was that the world turned the bright red of new sprung blood and my consciousness gratefully dove headfirst into it.

Awakenings were sometimes slow and languid and sometimes instant. Dreams and memories of the eastern wars and the mangled bodies they'd produced haunted me through my unconscious. Then suddenly I found myself awake, although the sorrow and dark feelings that the dream had brought on followed me into my waking.

Despair washed over me as I contemplated my maimed arm. My left arm seemed to reach out of its own volition and touch the elbow. It was pink and sunken-looking and extremely tender to the touch. At the moment it wasn't bending so I twisted around so that could see the stub.

No bone was visible; only an odd-looking, puckered scar tissue. It ached and itched abominably. The wound in my side had already closed but looked raw and nasty. I wished Jack were here and in through the door he came as if summoned by magic.

"Night has just fallen," he began with no preamble. "We are in the guest chambers of Count Louis du Chais. The party doesn't start until eight so you'll have to wait until then to feed. I haven't been able to locate Miss Foxworth yet and considering our limited resources and the circumstances involved with her departure, I very much doubt that I will be able to for some time yet. Knowing Theresa, I rather suspect that she'll take the carriage and lay low until we find her or until some time has passed."

Except for his first sentence, the rest of his statement was too far away from where the center of my being was busy brooding for me to really hear. Jack was here. That was all the comfort I would allow myself. Instead, I contemplated my upcoming life as one of those poor, weary... *maimed*... soldiers walking through the mud on their way back from the war. That image was very close to where my soul was centered. No spirit left within those poor mangled soldiers. No will to

live. It was as if life had forsaken them and had forgotten to tell their bodies that they were dead. In the eye of memory, some hobbled on crutches and some had arms tied up with slings that were much too short. Some were guided by companions, unable to see because of the bandages on their face. Some few, with no friends or no self respect crawled. I could see myself among them. No hope. No will to live.

Suddenly my head jerked around and the side of my face hurt. Concurrent with this, I heard a resounding slap. My head rang and I found myself looking through my own watering eyes instead of that dreadful combination of memory and imagination that my mind had conjured up. Once again my eyes fixed upon the ruin that was the remains of my right arm and I was again unable to move or think of anything except remorse and self pity.

With another sudden jerk of my head, I realized I'd been slapped again.

I suddenly had a teary-eyed view of the window and a very sore face. Jack had a hand on each arm of the chair I was sitting in and had a look on his face that bespoke both anger and fear. It was a look I hadn't seen on his face in a very long time and never wanted to see again.

"Listen to me man!," he whispered intensely. "Alexander, I need you *here* and in *complete* control of yourself. You need blood to continue the regeneration of your arm. Your body knows this and will continue to draw more than the normal amount if you're not in complete *control*. Do you understand what I'm saying to you Alexander?" His whisper seemed to hold an undercurrent of actual emotion. Slowly but surely, my mind started to work in a useful manner.

Come to think of it, I really couldn't remember a previous time that he'd actually called me by my full first name twice in one statement. It would have been truly remarkable under other circumstances.

"Jack. What did you say about my arm regenerating?" I'd heard something about it but my attention had been wandering. With that in mind, I thought I'd better hear it from a more reputable source than myself. While my mind was working at the moment, I had been known to delude myself at times. In the past those delusions had typically revolved around Vanessa. Despite the fact that she wasn't around, at the moment I felt quite delusional.

"Alex. I need you thinking at your best," he looked me in the eyes and didn't seem too thrilled by what he saw. "This will have to do I guess. I'm glad to see that you're at least partially back. I'll start at the beginning.

"The axe cut off your arm above the elbow. You lost a lot of blood then and your body went into a kind of shock. Probably brought on by your *scream*.

"After you screamed, most of the villagers ran for the hills. While I grabbed a couple of horses, you crawled over to the downed assassins and drained them. You definitely weren't yourself. It was obvious from quite a distance that your primal self had taken over. And that is exactly what you must fight against tonight. You must control the primal urges that your wound will cause... is causing. If you don't, innocent people will die."

His mention of feeding had made my eyes turn red and my fangs come out. It took me much longer than normal to fight the reaction back down. However, he had one fact wrong. The scream hadn't caused a shock reaction to my body... it had caused a shock reaction to my mind... my spirit... my very soul. Memory came back to me sketchily, but I think the scream may have been worse than the axe wound. My shock over the wound had brought to mind one of the more traumatic battles I'd ever been through. Considering how many battles I'd fought, that was saying something. My army had been victorious that day. However, my mind had played a dark trick and had put me in the

place of those retreating survivors I'd ridden past on the way to my goal. My soul had rebelled at being on the other side of that memory. I tried not to shudder at my reaction to those memories. Or my own maiming.

Jack continued, "I put the corpses into the inn which had harbored them in life and burned the whole thing to the ground." At my noise of protest he explained further, "I saw them come out of the inn but at the time I didn't realize their evil intent. The innkeeper knowingly harbored those murderers. He was probably getting a cut of whatever was taken from us but even if he were not, no God loving man would allow such in his establishment. No love of God, no establishment. Justice is served."

I had a sudden flashback to another time. Jack sat upon a huge white charger looking down at a knight whom he had just unseated. Jack ordered his men to burn the castle and they ran to do so. The knight started to protest and Jack set the tip of his lance against the fallen man's neck. "You have shown yourself to be a godless man. You are unfit to lead dogs, much less these villagers. You have put fear into the hearts of those who love God by the raising of this unholy castle and the feats you have performed within. No love of God, no castle. Justice is served." Jack had turned his horse and had begun riding away when he stopped and turned back around. "If I ever see you again, I shall revert to old testament justice and cut off your genitals as well as your right hand. Your noble exemption only goes so far. Remember, there is justice and there is *justice*." Perhaps the innkeeper had been lucky after all.

My mental flashback ended as quickly as it arrived. Jack spoke on and I had to sit and wonder how much I'd missed.

"...from there we traveled across the land to le Chateau du Chais. Louis was happy to house

us in our time of distress and for the majority of our traveling money was even happier to arrange a ball on extremely short notice."

"A ball. On short notice. Of course." He'd completely and utterly lost me. I hoped I wasn't still participating in a delusion or dream because if I was, this had become too weird. This level of strangeness was usually reserved for my waking mind and the real world.

He flashed me a ghost of a smile. "I'm going to drug the guests. In their euphoria I'm going to escort them up here to you where you'll drain just a bit from each. Just a bit. I'll say it again Alexander: you must have complete self-control or you'll kill someone. Worse, if you kill them it will be murder and I'll be damned to hell with you for my part in this."

"I'll be careful," I promised. Jack considered transforming someone equivalent to murder if conducted without the person's permission. So did, I except under certain circumstances. And this wasn't one of those circumstances. Tonight I would be careful... as if my very soul depended on it. Because it did. And Jack's too.

Hmm. All in all it was not a bad plan for such short notice. All the talk of feeding threatened to bring out my fangs again and I had to fight the reaction down... again with difficulty.

"I'm glad to hear that and to see that you haven't lost control," he continued. "I wasn't looking forward to the prospect of going to hell." He turned around and started for the door.

"Jack." He stopped and half turned. "Thanks for all you've done and for bringing me around," I told him quietly and sincerely. "For a while, all I could see was the train of wounded from that damned eastern campaign. You know the one. I kept seeing them with no hope and me trudging through the mud with them, also with no hope. I didn't want to be like that."

"Alex. Where there is life, there is always hope. Hmm. Let me rephrase that. Where there

is consciousness and a love of God, there is hope. Those wounded weren't dead. They were hurt, Lord knows; they were badly hurt. But the worst hurt of all came from giving up. They gave up on life, they gave up on God, and they gave up on themselves. You really can't be like them Alex - you're just too stubborn to give up on anything.

"Also," he continued, "You forget that there were several of your own men who lost limbs. Yet many of them wished to remain with the army. Not even the loss of a limb could stay their courage or determination. Despite the fact that your arm will grow back, you are much more like those men than the dregs of the rabble we defeated."

He opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

"Alex. Your arm will be good as new soon. I promise." The door closed on his retreating footsteps.

I sat and thought for a long while. I had to fight off hunger pangs and my reaction to them twice. The urge to go out, find the closest person, and to drink their blood was very strong. With difficulty I fought the desire. No primal urges were going to get the best of me. And if I had my way, they never would again.

Waiting was difficult and became more so with the passage of time. While I can be as patient as the next man, I must confess that impatience is sometimes a weakness from which I suffer. To distract myself more than anything else, I began thinking of the gifts I'd been given and about how I was truly much more fortunate than most. The thought became more than a distraction and I spent quite some time in serious contemplation. Maybe I even grew up a little but that might be stretching things a bit far. At any rate, I no longer felt sorry for myself and instead of feeling badly for those benighted souls we'd left in the east so many years ago, I decided to do something about helping the

local multitude of benighted souls...starting with myself.

The first part of the ball was an ordeal I'm only going to discuss briefly. I had dressed up in what finery Jack had managed to acquire and at his suggestion I draped a coat over my shoulders. It helped hide my missing arm which hopefully wouldn't be missing too much longer. Appearances were most important as we didn't want to risk bringing a witch trial brought down upon ourselves or our benefactor who was a longtime friend.

Donor after donor came through my room and after their visit Jack carried each one into a different guest room to sleep off the effects of the blood drain. The first was a bold woman with wide pupils who arrived under the impression that this was an amorous rendezvous. When I began kissing her neck and my fangs came out, Jack held up a crucifix spinning and dancing on a silver chain. Not to drive me away as the cross affects some few of our kind but rather to remind me of what one man was capable of doing if he desired. There was more to it, but that was my first impression, as I sat there with this woman in my lap and my lips on her pulse. Even with the crucifix and its immortal lessons as an ever present reminder, it took all my willpower to only drink a little of her blood. Stopping with the hunger upon me in earnest was agony. My stomach tried to cramp and my fangs wouldn't retract. After a brief infinity of internal conflict I managed to get myself under control.

So went the rest of the evening.

By the time the fifteenth or so donor (I must confess that I lost count) was carried out, I realized a few things. First and perhaps foremost, my wounded arm was now itching like madness

itself. Second and of only slightly less import, we were rapidly running out of donors. About this time, I came to the sudden and surprising realization that I was no longer starving. Hungry, oh my yes I was hungry, but no longer starving.

Jack again returned only this time he brought a tray with clippers, a pair of scissors, soap, water and a shaving knife all upon a stack of clean hand-kerchiefs, I had quite a collection of bloody ones hidden behind the divan upon which I sat. In answer to my puzzled look he simply waved at one of the rooms mirrors. Curious, I walked over to have myself a look, gingerly flexing the new growth of my arm as I went. My cursory examination of my desiccated arm and it's wrist-stub ended with my glance into the looking glass.

I was horrified. My hair was an absolute mess as were my nails.

Hmm. I don't wish to give you the idea that I'm some kind of fop or pretty boy so I believe I'll explain that last statement in a bit more detail. Vampires have no need to expel bodily wastes. What little waste from a vampire's feeding go into producing hair as well as finger and toe nails. My hair, which I generally prefer cut quite short, was down to my waist and the hat Jack had borrowed from Louis looked ridiculous perched upon such a wild mop. Just as bad, I now had a beard and mustache... both of which were actually touching my chest. The fingernails on my left hand, and my toenails as well, I simply refuse to discuss. I looked like a wild man dressed up in fine clothes. I determined then and there to be wary of wild binges in the future. Fortunately, Jack was quite the artist when it came to cutting hair and removing unwanted whiskers. A mere ten minutes later, I was out and visiting those guests who'd managed to pass out downstairs before seeing me. After that, I sat and flexed my right hand which was very pink and very tender while Jack cut my hair and nails again and gave me yet another face scraping.

My hand hurt but I was certainly glad that it was back so that it could hurt like blazes and keep me awake half the day. Very glad. With luck I'll never have to be thankful for something this painful ever again. Still, I gave thanks for what I had before I laid myself down for the day. Life is a joy to live...so to speak.

Like most who attended that wild ball (as it later came to be remembered) at le Chateau du Chais, I slept away the entire next day. I mingled a bit with the chateau's other holdover guests prior to our departure the following evening and I must say I was rather surprised. Most were quite eager to attend the count's next party. Several of the women smiled quizzically at me as if wondering if we now shared a secret. None asked aloud but I made a point of smiling that we did indeed share a secret - it just wasn't the one they thought. One even mentioned having a dream of me with a beard and mustache. We all got a good laugh out of that.

No one thought it odd that everyone who left the chateau wore scarves or high collars. That due to Jack's learnings in the art of suggestion and a hint that such were the latest fashion in all the finer courts of Europe. Small, fading teeth marks on their necks never entered into their thoughts.

We rode from the chateau with the Count's sincere thanks for our sponsoring such a fine ball and his hopes that we might sponsor another on our return trip. We left him with a non-committal answer and a great deal of concealed amusement.

It was a long road to Paris and traveling it gave me too much time to think. Sean, my driver, had been one of my special followers for about three years now. Truthfully, I could not say that I liked the surly Irishman, but he had been loyal and he had Faith. Both qualities had to count for something in the grand scheme of things. I may not have liked him but I came to realize that I did miss his somber face and dour personality. Gone was another solid soul in a world of chaos.

For most of the remaining trip we slept in towns, churches, or farms. Anywhere we could rest from the rigors of a long night. Some of the places had been abandoned; some were very much occupied and their inhabitants were concerned about taking in strange guests. A little work was usually enough to have the former agreeable for my rest and a little silver enough for the latter.

I took no blood from those people who sheltered us. Others did bear the brunt of my hunger though I killed no one in keeping with the oath I'd taken upon realizing what I'd become so many years ago. A solemn vow that I would kill no one to slake my thirst. This was not the first time that keeping that oath had been a challenge to keep. But this had been the most difficult. My recuperating body hungered for more and more blood. I deeply and truly longed for the return of my normal, modest appetite.

Working with my right arm became progressively easier but it still hurt a great deal. At this rate it would be good as new in a few months. That thought was a goad that helped me work through the pain.

Leagues passed and the closer we came to Paris the more I became aware of Vanessa. Three days away from the city and I could have pointed straight to the place where she stood despite the intervening distance and landscape. As we rode, I became anxious, paranoid, triumphant and furious

for no reason. Eventually it dawned on me that these weren't my feelings at all - rather they were Vanessa's emotions bleeding through the mystical link which bound us together. Most likely these emotions had to do with my impending arrival. As matters stood, I was only having moderate success at screening her emotions out of my mind which annoyed me to no end.

Therefore you understand, it came as quite a shock to me when she suddenly died. We were cantering along when out of the blue a horrendous pain between my shoulder blades left me quite certain that I'd been shot in the back. I fell over the saddle, then the next thing I knew I found myself kneeling on the ground trembling with the aftershock. Jack rode up with my horse in tow. He was looking around but not with a great deal of concern. He'd probably felt some of the backlash himself but recovered more quickly than myself.

"It would seem that someone has negated the need for the rescue we'd planned." I managed after shaking for some time. "I can't be sure but I think Selina's all right." Then it hit me. "I'm free. Jack! *I am free!*" I shouted to the heavens my arms raised in exultation.

"I'm happy for you Alex. You've attained a major goal in your life. Now, not to rain on your harvest so to speak, but I think we should continue our journey. Selina may be in a great deal of danger depending on the circumstances surrounding Vanessa's death. We should make all haste to be there for her... just in case."

"Right you are!" I agreed, springing into my saddle. "Don't just sit there man - we might still have a lady to rescue. Let's ride!"

Jack muttered something droll under his breath and followed me at a gallop.

I walked into the building only an hour before dawn. It was a huge, sprawling place that might once have been a museum or a powerful lord's chateau. According to Selina's letters, Vanessa had moved here after I'd left. I wasn't sure what condition it had been in then but tonight I found it to be a rundown mess and entire sections seemed to be on the verge of collapse. It struck me as a fitting symbol of Vanessa's reign as the queen of the dark side of Paris.

Stopping just inside the outer doors, I sensed that there were several supernaturals ahead. From this distance I couldn't tell what they were or even exactly where they were but I could feel their presence somewhere nearby. The fact that I hadn't been greeted by now, I took as a bad sign. I almost regretted that I'd flown ahead of Jack; he was always useful around conflicts. But... this matter concerned vampires and deep down inside of me I felt that it should be resolved by vampires. Besides, I was still embarrassed enough about riding for that additional two hours after Vanessa had died before remembering I could fly without having Jack here to remind me. Not that he'd say anything, but his presence alone would be enough to make me blush with my foolishness. Was I compounding it by being here alone? Time to find out. I began walking through rubble-strewn corridors.

A short time later I heard, "Who are you and what is your business here in the Hall of the Night Rulers?" This echoed out to me from behind the fourth pillar to the right by someone who thought themselves clever or perhaps haunting and mysterious. The only effect it really had on me was to pique my annoyance. Hall of the Night Rulers? Whoever came up with that either had a dark sense of humor or far too much irony in their blood.

"My name is none of your concern and my business is my own. Now come out from behind

there. I like to see those with whom I speak." I had stopped my advance when he first spoke but now I continued my march across the great, rubble and puddle strewn floor.

"You are incorrect, whoever you are," he declared flowing out from the shadows and into my path. "I have appointed myself to watch this way for intruders. You intrude. Therefore, it is my business." He now stood before me with his arms crossed. His circular logic combined with previous stress and a long flight annoyed me to the point that my fangs came out and I was now able to see in shades of hot and cold. He sneered which further annoyed me.

"I don't know who you are and I don't truly care. However, I've had a long night and you're between me and the person I'm here to see. You have two choices before you. You can either move out of my way or you can slake my thirst and then be moved out of my way. The choice is yours." He looked surprised. Vampires did not feed on other vampires except under certain special circumstances. That was one of the rules passed down to us from the Grandfather of Vampires. This may have been a special circumstance to me but it certainly wasn't what the Grandfather of vampires had in mind when he'd listed out the exceptions to the rule.

Someone probably should have warned this fellow that I sometimes made my own rules.

His self confidence returned quickly. "You don't scare me with your aackkk...." Which was as far as he got before I had him in my grasp. Even one armed I was stronger and quicker than most of my kind and now I was back to two arms. His vampiric powers faded away as I used my strongest vampiric talent, what we sometimes called the sinking. The Latin name was cessatium potentus. It meant the end of strength. I used it to do just that for him. And his powers sank away as I shut them down.

It occurs to me that this might be a good place to explain about high control and sinking. High control is the reason I left Paris in the first place. Members of certain vampire families have the ability to control or influence those beneath them in the family hierarchy. Magical or at least psychic in nature, the ability is stronger the closer ones relation is between controller and controllee. In our family high control is usually of mentionable strength only between parent and child (as the vampire colloquial goes). Vanessa was much stronger than the family norm and her high control over me had been interfering with my life and the plans I had for it. She had always been a domineering woman and she had become painfully so once she'd inducted me into the family. So I left. End of story? Not by a long shot.

As previously mentioned, when I left Paris I was forced to leave Selina behind. Granted, Selina was one of those encouraging me to leave, but neither of us liked it. Next to Jack, she's probably my best friend in the world and leaving her in Vanessa's grasp really hurt. So what was I going to do about it you might reasonably ask? Indeed, what could I do about it? That's where sinking came in.

Sinking was the ability to magically or maybe psychically 'turn off' another supernatural's talents for as long as concentration could be held. It was a rare talent among any family of vampires (it's even rarer among most other supernaturals) and to my knowledge was almost never used. For some peculiar reason supernaturals react badly to having their special abilities taken away and this also tended to cause great upset among any supernaturals who might be spectating and wondering upon whom the talent might next be used. Here lately I'd been using it a lot. To be truthful, a whole

lot.

With Paris behind us Jack and I had turned to the Emerald Isle to find sanctuary. Rumor had it that there were a lot of supernaturals there, and if I was to increase my already potent talent of cessatium potentus, I was going to need someone to practice it on. I could have practiced on Jack but the little bit of high control I possess would have confused the issue. Besides, Jack almost certainly would not have appreciated being used as a practice dummy anyway. Rumor about the Emerald Isle turned out to be right for once. I'll make a long story short by saying that there used to be several more packs of werewolves and a larger sprinkling of doppelgangers than there are now. Most supernaturals were reclusive by nature but if one keeps an ear to the wind, an eye out for even the most minute shred of evidence, and a mind on correlating the available clues, one could usually ferret them out.

I couldn't reliably do any of the above so I followed Jack.

We had been in the middle of unearthing a troll (literally) when Selina's latest letter finally found me. The letter had been written four years prior to its arrival. It detailed some of the abuse that Vanessa had heaped upon her and asked for my assistance in freeing her. It could have been a trap; Vanessa could have forced her to write the letter. It didn't matter. My desertion of one of my best friends and the guilt it had produced crashed down upon me a hundred fold. We left an hour later... just as soon as the troll's huge body had fallen back into the earth we'd dug him out of.

Along the way, we picked up Miss Teresa Foxworth. Teresa was a lady of confused ancestry who had met Selina at a party some years ago. Aside from being a friend, she was also my financial agent for the area and insisted on going along. For some reason I had agreed. I can't for the life of me imagine why.

We had just debarked from our ship, Brest having been the only available port of call from Galaway when we left, and had passed our first evening traveling by carriage when the ambush which eventually led to this fellow's present predicament occurred.

Frantically, the self-appointed guardian pummeled me with arms that now only held mortal strength. I barely noticed. He struck me as a boor and my first instincts were usually right. I bit his neck and drank enough to sate my thirst and pacify him thoroughly before tossing him into some rubble.

Strength flowed through me and my right arm underwent a new round of itching which quickly stopped. Vampire blood was much more potent than the blood of normals (the obvious reason why it's the basis of bloodwine) and is therefore better for ailing and tired vampires who recently have been on long journeys and undergone some trying emotional scares. I almost felt like my old self.

Huge double doors bound with rusty iron bands marked the doorway to the lady I'd come to see. As it had while guiding me here, I could feel my friend's presence now only a short distance away. Flickering light seeped out from the edges of the door and as I approached I was able to smell new oil on the doors hinges. Stepping forward, I pushed open the doors.

Before me I found an open expanse of floor beneath a great dome along with evenly spaced support columns. Torches around the edges showed several more doors scattered evenly around the edge of the dome. There appeared to be a large, sunken area in the middle, directly beneath the

dome. Perhaps this had been a room for balls or perhaps court had been held here. Now, it saw a much darker use.

Upon the dome walls were dozens of people. They were all supernaturals and most were only barely alive. Chains held their arms spread above their heads and spikes nailed into the walls under their bare feet were all that held them up. Most had the marks of fresh vampire bites upon them but I could smell no blood. Someone wanted these people kept severely weakened. Oddly enough, those few who were conscious looked neither frightened nor hopeless. For a long second I didn't understand, then the answer came to me: Soulless. Everyone on the dome wall was one of the soulless. Simultaneous with this recognition I became sure that Selina was in the sunken center area beneath the dome; I could feel her presence clearly now but she had been greatly weakened. Other vampires were also there and their presences felt much stronger. Not a good omen. Good omen or not I once again began moving forward towards the sunken area in the center of the chamber.

A flash of light was the only warning I had of the arcing axe blade. There was a blur of motion and suddenly, as if by magic, I held an axe and watched some strange vampire bounce off the wall ten paces away with enough force to crack the stone of the wall. For a moment I didn't understand the significance of the hat at my feet until it occurred to me that I'd kicked him out from under it.

Anger seethed through my being with an undertone of panic. Seeing no other lurking madmen with axes about and feeling oddly upset that there was no one left to fight, I tossed aside the axe and flew over to check the fellow out. Hmm. I didn't think he'd make it. My family tended to heal fairly slowly by vampiric standards. Still, even counting in very accelerated healing, head and back wounds were the hardest to heal and this guy had both in a bad way. Heart shots weren't the only way to kill

a vampire - only the surest. Hot tracks were making their way from the starred spot on the wall where his head hit down towards the floor. Blood. I hadn't even been aware that my fangs had come back out until that point much less that I could see heat. Shaking from delayed reaction and my own slowly fading rage, I drank a bit from him before I resumed stalking towards the center of the dome and the sunken area there.

The axe blade had once again set off something primal down deep inside me. It seemed as though my body had reacted without consulting my brain first. I had struck out with a strength and ferocity that was literally leaving me shaking. My stomach felt tight and I had a vague urge to throw up my latest snack. Fear, anger and hatred had boiled up from some dark, inner wellspring of my soul that refused to consider even the possibility of a return to my earlier condition. Strength and reflexes I could use... but blind, unthinking anger? No. I was going to have to control myself. What if that had been a child handing me a candlestick instead of some villain with an axe? God help me. For a long moment I just stood there trying not to shake. I had to get a hold of myself and I had to do it now.

Slowly walking forward, I found that the sunken area turned out to be a pit perhaps fourteen or fifteen paces deep and twice as wide. I continued up to the edge and there I looked down.

He was the first thing to catch my eye. Without a doubt the most powerful of the gathered supernaturals, he drew the eyes like a lodestone draws iron. Dark power radiated from him in waves; he was that strong. Strapped down to a marble slab before him were Selina and her soulless companion Miranda. Both looked as though they'd been ground up and spat out. Half a dozen mixed vampires and soulless stood with the really powerful one around the slab. Four braziers burned at the compass points and the pit walls were lined with varied instruments of torture.

"Ahh. Another arrival," the strong one announced pleasantly. "Have you come to watch the dispensation of justice upon this foul, murderous offspring of mine? If you have, come down and be welcome. If you have not, flee this place or die the last death." He set the poker he held into a brazier.

Murderous offspring? Of his? Just who was this guy?

Selina turned weakly to look up at me. "Aleshh. Geh ouu. Arkushinshi is shoo powerfuu. Go... bevore hissh evil overwhelmsh ouu shoo." Selina's words sounded like so much mush. Her jaw must have been broken. Fury bubbled up once again from that dark spring within me again and it took all my control not to fly down and attack them immediately and directly. Just as the braziers burned hot from the fires, so did several of the instruments on the wall. A burning rage boiled up again at the implied atrocities and I was almost carried away this time. I barely held on to reason.

"Who are you and why do you do this?" It came out more a growl than anything else and certainly wasn't recognizable as my voice. Holding my anger in check was horribly difficult.

The vampires and soulless were beginning to spread out and move closer to me; the soulless with their blades half-drawn. Supremely confident, he walked towards me several paces before stopping with his hands on his hips. "To answer your first question first, I am Dominic Arkusinski. I am Vanessa's father. These are my companions: Miss Telena Petrokovitch, Mister Hans Glessler, and Count Markus Weller." Evidently, he didn't consider the soulless to be people. "To answer your second question. I am here to avenge my daughter's death and to take over her holdings and assets. To avenge your own loving mother, for you must be none other than Alexander. Your own dear mother has been treacherously slain by this foul creature whom she cradled to her bosom. I guess that poor, trusting Vanessa was unaware of the evil which she loved and cared for as her own

daughter. Now, Vanessa will be avenged and this evil removed from my fair city."

I'd never heard of Arkusinski. Vanessa had always said that she was the head of her own family and I think she believed it. Either he was lying or she had been mistaken. Regardless of which were true, I had the feeling he was here to fill the power vacuum and that everything else was secondary to that goal. I now truly wished I hadn't left Jack so far behind. Instinct screamed to me that this was about to get rough. And I certainly hoped it wasn't wrong.

"Vanessa got what Vanessa had coming to her. She was a lot of things but a loving mother was certainly not one of them. As for you. I've never heard the name Arkusinski... and I was Vanessa's favorite." That last put the memory of bile's taste in my mouth. "Leave here now and your crimes will be forgotten." I didn't think he'd go for it but I felt a certain perverse need to try the easy way out. Or not so easy. I wasn't really sure I could forgive his obvious crimes against Selina.

Although Arkusinski looked slightly miffed at my never having heard his name, he and Count Whats-his-name threw their heads back and laughed at my offer. The woman, Telena, looked as if she'd rather be somewhere far away. The fellow named, Hans, looked mildly unhappy. They were all close enough that a quick jump or short flight would put them all right on top of me. I let the rage bubble up and smiled. Abruptly their laughter was gone. "Well upstart," Arkusinski began, "Looks as if we'll have to teach you a lesson about respecting your elders. Markus, if you'll do the honors."

Suddenly, Markus was up beside me and swinging for my face with a beclawed hand. This time I truly amazed myself. I grabbed his arm, jerked him to me with his arms pinned, shutdown his power and had my fangs in his neck before I mentally had time to catch up with what was happening. All that time practicing in Ireland was apparently paying off. I also guessed my recent experience with vampire dining might have been heightening my reflexes a bit. Markus let out a quiet groan and

I watched Arkusinski and company's reaction from the convenient position of looking out from under Markus' mane of hair. I easily held the weakened vampire over the edge of the pit and I believed that the fight had left him. His strength was mine as his blood sang a song of power through my veins. I quit drinking with him on the edge of consciousness and smiled down at those assembled below.

Arkusinski was angry now. I could feel it in the invisible waves of darkness that emanated from him. However, all he did was close his eyes a second and give a small, slightly disgusted, slightly sardonic smile.

All three soulless, acting almost in unison, ran and jumped up to the dome floor. The first one to reach me lunged with a sword even as I struggled to change my balance from the awkward position of holding the vampire out over the pit. Pulling away from the edge, I tried to dodge using Markus as a shield with partial success.

A line of fire ran down my right side and I felt an odd psychic shock that I find myself at a loss to describe. Dropping Markus, I flew straight up to give myself a quick reprieve, find the positions of the soulless who had moved behind me, and see just what had transpired. Looking down, it was immediately obvious what had happened. The soulless had run Markus through and the tip of the blade coming out of his back had scored me along the ribs. Markus sat there on his knees for a long moment. A heart shot. I hardened my heart in anticipation of his last scream but it never came. All he said was a quiet, "Darlene, oh Darlene. I'm so sorry." Then he died. This was not the time for me to grow sentimental as I was naturally inclined to do.

Therefore, I flew down and kicked the soulless, whose blade had just killed Markus, in the top of the head. This caused a nasty crunching and he promptly joined the Count on the other side.

The remaining two soulless charged me. I feigned moving towards the edge of the pit and

when the one on the right raised his weapon in anticipation, I performed a dive-roll which brought me to his side. Using my upward momentum, I swung my left hand into the center of his chest with all my strength. He went sailing through the air as if born to fly. I turned from this spectacle just in time to jump back and avoid being disemboweled by the knives of the last soulless.

She came at me relentlessly, swinging her knives in a constant blur of motion all the while. I bided my time and when she finally left me a slight opening, I lashed forward with my right hand striking her throat. She flipped over backwards and her head bounced off the stone floor with a loud crack. She too made the one-way trip to the other side. I picked up her blades.

A faint click from behind sent me flying straight up as fast as I could. The biggest wolf I'd ever seen jumped through the place I'd been only a second ago. Hans. Even though he missed my throat, he still managed to catch the back of my calf with his teeth and using that hold he flung me crashing down to the ground far off to the side.

Swiftly regaining my senses, I leapt once more to my feet. My right leg had trouble holding my weight but I could make do. A quick look over the area revealed no sign of Hans the wolf. I began cautiously limping towards the pit again. After a moment, the pain in my leg was replaced by a furious itching. The pain was preferable but I limped on refusing the urge to scratch. Arkusinski stood in the same place; I couldn't see him yet but his presence was easily pinpointed by the evil emanating from him. Slowly, I hobbled around the pit's edge with a wide breadth between me and that dark edge. Hans was nearby but just where I could not tell - the room was simply too dark and the flickering of the torches didn't help any - on top of that vampires give off very little heat. Even when they're shaped like wolves.

Moving around the pit to the position I thought I wanted, I kept a constant, if vain, watch out

Hans. Ignoring the paranoid feeling that he had circled around behind me, I approached the pit's edge.

Down in the pit, Markus lay at the ground before Arkusinski's feet. Telena had backed off to the side apparently trying to remain out of mind as she was certainly out of his sight. "I couldn't read your mind, boy." Arkusinski told me without looking up. "I should have realized you were stronger than you looked. It's all my fault. I'm sorry dear friend. My mistake has cost you eternity." He let out a vast sigh.

This wasn't quite the position I wanted so I walked a few paces to my left. Still no sign of Hans. "Leave Paris Arkusinski. There is still time for you to leave and all will be forgotten." God help my soul, I so wanted him to refuse. Peace was not what I wanted of him now. I wanted to kill him for the evil that came from him like a dark tide and take vengeance for the atrocities committed upon my beloved friend... and my dark wish was granted.

"Leave?" Arkusinski finally looked up from Markus' corpse. "I've already paid too heavy a price for this city but it is paid and Paris shall remain mine. Surrender yourself. Submit yourself to my will and I will allow you to join me. Together we will rule Paris as it should be ruled. With power and an iron fist. Or, you can continue to oppose me and die the final death." Click, click. The sound of claws on stone close behind me.

I threw a knife towards Arkusinski and turned my momentum into a forward flip off the edge of the pit. Catching myself in mid-fall, I flew backwards against the wall of the pit. As Hans the wolf flew over my head, I struck upward with the remaining knife. It struck a solid blow and imbedded itself to the hilt in his furry chest. Hans shrieked and curled up into a lupine version of the fetal position in mid-air and landed on his side. He began thrashing about and shapechanging back to

human form. It was a nasty wound but I could tell I missed the heart. Damn! I flew towards the ceiling for better position just in case Telena decided to join the melee.

Telena did not but Arkusinski, having easily side-stepped my knife as anticipated, did. He flew up at me far too fast for me to avoid and we began grappling with one another in mid-air. The fighting was on multiple levels as we tried not only to fly each other into the debris which lined the dome walls and ceiling but also to use our powers of control on one another. Willpower kept me from groveling for forgiveness as he tried to use high control on me. Despite whatever Vanessa had once thought, he was indeed the head of our line. I tried my sinking on him and was encountering roughly the same success he was with his efforts. His powers flickered now and again but on the whole remained solid. There was also the psychological battle as we each psychically tried to convince the other that he was doomed and that death was too high a price to pay for what was to be gained. So on we struggled; slamming into walls, power raging wildly, each trying to convince the other to surrender & to lose hope even as we occasionally managed to tear each other's flesh.

After being slammed into the wall a couple of times, Arkusinski figured out the maneuver I'd been performing of using momentum against him and turned my own ploy against me. Driven by his weight and impetus, I crashed into the stone wall of the dome with enough force to blast the air out of my body with a pained cry. Something was sticking into my kidney and it *hurt*. The shock of our impact produced two other results. For just a moment I could see the reddening sky of morning through a gap in the boards which covered the old stained glass windows. Our combat wasn't going to last much longer no matter what.

The other result was that an amulet with a goat's head inside an upside down pentagram came out from under his shirt. For just a moment I stared in shock. Then shock turned to fury. At my

snarl he glanced down and saw the amulet. "Yes. I am the original bedamned of our line. Cursed to drink blood for survival; attempting to quench a thirst that can never be sated. To willingly lead all I can into the waiting jaws of hell. That is the price I paid for my powers and I would gladly pay it again for what I have gained. I am immortal. Until I see the light or my heart truly repents, I shall live forever. Therefore, I shall live forever. You shall too as I will drag you into eternal damnation after me as I have dragged countless others. You are one of my offspring. As the great demon drained my blood and lead me into damnation so shall I lead you. You are of my blood and cannot help but go where I lead." As if speaking of damnation and his curse was a boost to him, the strength of his control seemed renewed. While the blood of three vampires had strengthened me greatly, I was still not at my strongest and the will to fight was fading as his control began to solidify. I struggled on, high above the floor, but at this rate I would be helpless soon. Arkusinski's smile showed he too knew this. Then there came a *scream* from down below. A vampire had just died beneath us.

His concentration broke. Anger blazed that something so foul as this man with his retched amulet had touched my life in such a terrible way - and that he had come so very close to dominating my mind. My will to fight had almost been snuffed out by this creature of hell and this thought turned my anger to rage. My own determination renewed - I sailed us across the dome into the far wall where I slammed him into the boards which covered what had once been stained glass windows. Glass shattered and boards flew and for just a moment we were outside in the clean night air. Arkusinski must have felt the approaching sunrise for with a force that spun my legs out to the side and nearly dislocated my shoulder, he hurled the two of us back into the dome before more than a couple of seconds could pass. Once more we struggled in mid-air. His burgeoning command over me had been broken and it would take too long for him to gain it back if he even could. But he would

not get the chance. The sun would be up before that happened.

Another scream from below. This wasn't the last scream as the other had been but this one was worse. This one came from Selina. I spun us around so that I could see what was happening to her. What I saw sickened me and my rage increased as from a breeze to a hurricane. Miranda had freed herself from her side of the marble slab and was pulling Selina off now. The only trouble was that four barbed spikes were run up through the bottom of the table to hold whoever lay there on. Blood soaked the table and the two women's backs. Selina fell to the floor apparently unconscious. Miranda staggered around to her.

Off to the side, Hans lay on the floor with a gore-covered knife in his hand and the knife that I'd thrown past Arkusinski to Miranda stuck through his heart. Blood ran down the wall and floor, sprayed there by his final convulsions. There was no sign of Telena. Fury blew through me but this time I forced myself to remain in control. Primal rage wouldn't solve anything now. Anger to fuel, not control. With a sudden inspiration I had an idea that would solve everything. I began flying us down in lowering circles.

"I don't know what you think you're doing boy but we can continue this battle tomorrow. The night has fled and our powers with it. We have just enough time to flee into the catacombs that run beneath this place and avoid the sun before we both die the final death." He was trying to struggle out of my hold but I had changed my earlier trick to fit the situation and was once again using momentum on my side. While my powers were fading to mortal as the light rose with the sun, I could tell that his were rapidly fading to nothing. The merest part of the price he paid for selling his soul to the devil.

"The final death would be a cheap price for ridding the world of filth such as you Arkusinski.

A part of me hopes that you see the light of God and repent before you die but the rest of me hopes that you burn in hell for all eternity!" I finished with a near shout as with all the force of our dying flight and the momentum of me slinging him by the arm, Arkusinski crashed down onto the table where only a moment ago Selina had lain in agony. Despite my best aim, none of the spikes hit his heart. He lay there gasping in the same agony he'd caused Selina. I tried not to enjoy his pain but to my shame I failed. The straps on this side of the table had not been cut like those on Miranda's side had. I used them to good effect.

Light blazed across the top of the dome from the hole in the roof. Soon justice would be done. Soon.

"I believe that in a short time, you shall indeed see the light, Arkusinski." I didn't want to but I felt compelled to say, "It is not too late to make your peace with God."

"Satan is the only one I will make my peace with and damnation upon you and yours. I am not done yet but when I do go know that from the heart of hell I will find some way to avenge myself upon you."

"The one you follow will give you no peace and you've already done enough damage. There will be no vengeance for you... only eternal suffering." I must confess to an some sadness that another one of God's children had turned from Him so completely. Still, it was Arkusinski's decision to do so and he was about to get all that he deserved for his evil - an eternity of suffering beyond imagining.

By this time even the faint reflected light from the dome's roof made me flinch and I knew that I was much more resistant to sunlight than Selina. Unfortunately, Selina was not in good enough shape enough to move herself. She lay in a pool of blood and Miranda lay across her. The four

gaping holes in Miranda's back told me what was in store for me when I lifted Selina up. I tried not to flinch. Arkusinski spoke for the last time.

"You cannot leave me here like this. Not like this. I am the head of my line, I am power incarnate, I refuse to die like this."

He was right. So I slashed his wrist and set Selina's mouth against it. He made a desperate sound akin to a growl. I ignored his protest. Still unconscious, Selina began to swallow and make small sucking sounds so I left her to it and turned to Miranda.

I'd never liked her before. Not since the night I met her when we immediately grated against each other's nerves, so very long ago. Still, she was loyal to Selina and as her guardian she suffered no ill effects during the day. The bloody knife wound I'd inflicted upon her when I'd thrown the knife past Arkusinski and into her arm was healing, but far too slowly. Her back, by far the worst injury, was healing so slowly that it did not seem to be healing at all. Almost as slowly as I was beginning to move. The full lassitude of day was almost upon me.

Miranda badly needed food and rest. Unfortunately, now was a really bad time for her to rest and the only food around was vampire blood. Not a regular part of the soulless diet (which normally consisted of the same foods mortals eat) but among supernaturals, vampire blood is supposed to be a powerful potion. I decided that it was time to find out.

I dragged Miranda over to Selina's position and wrested Arkusinski's bloody and bechewed wrist from Selina. Blood was seeping out and that wouldn't do. So I slit his wrist the long way as well, forming a bloody cross by so doing. As I put the wrist into her mouth, I took a moment to appreciate the irony. But the night was running out quickly. I grabbed Selina under the arms and began dragging her away from the light over towards one of the passages that led into darkness. She

wasn't heavy but after only twenty slow paces I had to rest. I could barely move and sleep was becoming a constant compulsion that had to be fought down with all my will. I hadn't realized just how large a toll the injuries I'd received had inflicted. Normally, I could have remained awake an hour or two after sunrise. Not today it seemed. I noticed the soulless on the walls of the dome for the first time since entering this place. They watched us but said nothing. It appeared that most of them were now awake. Good for them. Unfortunately, they were in no position to help us nor us to help them.

My body seemed to be turning to lead at a horrific rate. Pulling myself and Selina across the floor, we continued moving toward the passage which now seemed very, very far away. We made slow progress but I struggled on as I was able. Eventually, I noticed that we had stopped our progress and that everything seemed very far away. There was a terrible noise coming from somewhere and this stirred me to further conscious. It sounded vaguely like screaming and after what seemed like a long time it was gone. I made one last effort at moving us again which resulted only in me draping myself over Selina. My consciousness then faded away completely.

I awoke in darkness upon a large feather bed. Looking around, I found many fine furnishings and Selina laying next to me. She looked a little better than she had when consciousness last chose to desert me. She was wearing a heavy, long white nightgown which left her shins and feet bare. Bare that is except for the bandage on her right ankle. I didn't remember any ankle wounds from

earlier but there were so many wounds that one could have slipped by me. Her back was probably bandaged as well but I didn't feel up to checking it.

For myself I felt a bit tired, a bit stiff and sore, but for the most part like my old self. I was wearing only my undergarments. The sword cut along my side was gone as if it had never been. Whatever had happened to my kidney seemed to be healed as well. Things were looking up. I pulled on my trousers and boots and noticed a jagged white line across the back of my calf. The bite had healed nicely (not so the boot which would require replacing at the first available opportunity). Soon the scars would fade and I would be back to normal. It was time to see who was about and where about was.

Outside my door there was a sparsely furnished room lit by candles. In it, sitting upon a stool, I found a nude Miranda who was eating steadily and one-handedly from a large table piled high with food. Jack sat on a slightly taller stool behind her and he seemed to be stitching up the holes in her back. She had several smaller wounds on her as well as a couple of burns but it didn't seem to me that Arkusinski had been at her too long with his torture implements. At least I certainly hoped he had not. Both Jack and Miranda ignored me completely and kept right on with what they were doing. Miranda used her left hand to move a platter closer to where she sat, so either she'd never lost full control of the arm or the knife wound I'd inflicted had not been as bad as I'd first thought. Then again it probably had been that bad. Cutting through a leather strap using a knife stuck in your arm was bound to leave a bad wound. I headed on out of the room.

As I was closing the door behind me, Miranda's voice carried through to me. "Thank you. For my mistress' life as well as my own, I offer my thanks. I owe you." That last sounded as if it had been forced out only with great effort. Considering what it would have taken for me to say the same

to her, I forced myself to respect her words. Swallowing the smart remark that first came to my lips, I replied only, "You are most welcome," and finished closing the door.

This placed me in a tunnel some distance down the passageway I had tried to drag Selina into. There would be time later for answering the question of how we got here. A little looking around the tunnels revealed several empty wine bottles and a little more looking turned up some corks. These in hand, I went out to get dinner for two.

On the way back from getting dinner I wandered down into the pit. A heavy layer of ash covered the marbled table and its spikes. Using a poker from one of the now cold braziers, I sifted through the ash until I found the amulet. I knocked it to the floor and it cracked. I ground it to dust under my boot heel and departed for more joyful pursuits.

When I got back to the rooms we occupied, I found that Jack had taken Miranda's place at the table. I gave him a jaunty salute as I walked through into the bedroom which he returned without jauntiness or looking up from his eating. Hmm. We'd have to discuss just how he got here a little later.

Peeking into the room, I found that Miranda was again clothed and lay asleep next to Selina. Slowly, quietly, I uncorked the bottle and quietly walked in. Selina's nose began to twitch. She

licked her lips and opened her eyes. "Mmm. That smells good." Her eyes turned red and her fangs slid out. Grimacing, she tried and failed to sit up, so, very gingerly I moved her into a sitting position and propped her up with some pillows. "Ooh. I hurt. All over I believe. I guess you finally rescued me, huh?"

"Yes. Sorry for the long delay. Your letter didn't find me until just a few days ago." I poured a generous portion into one of the goblets I'd found and started to hand it to her. On second thought, I decided to hold it for her and did so. She immediately wanted more but it's best to take these things slowly. I poured her another and this one she took from me. I poured one for myself and raised it. "To freedom and the health we need to enjoy it."

She muttered 'freedom' quickly and drained her cup. I poured her several more while I sipped my first. For some reason I wasn't terribly thirsty. I felt like me again and grinned broadly with the enjoyment of the moment.

Over the next several days various layers of the story of just what had happened here came to be revealed. Arkusinski had been right about Selina killing Vanessa. Vanessa had been in the midst of setting up a series of traps to capture me or at the very least kill me and prevent me from the rendezvous that I'd decided upon. Evidently, as much as Vanessa wanted me, she came to fear me more during my absence. According to Selina, my return aggravated some kind of dementia in her which grew worse the closer I got to Paris. Several mortals had already been hired and sent out and she was just getting ready to send out a team consisting mostly of soulless to proceed with her plans

for killing me when Selina shot her in the back with a crossbow. This probably wasn't the whole story but I didn't really feel I had a right to pry. At least not just yet.

At any rate Arkusinski and company had apparently been visiting at the time of Selina's archery debut. All of Vanessa's brood had gone into a kind of shock when she died. Evidently the effect was stronger the closer one was to Vanessa (both physically and psychically). Arkusinski, reacting quickly, took all those he could find and locked them in the nearby dome. The vampires were imprisoned below in the catacombs except for Selina. Miranda, who must have conspired with her, was to be tortured to death with her. The soulless were to witness the new justice that was to rule the night side of Paris. They would spread the word that Arkusinski was a just, if harsh ruler. And if the vampires didn't buy it then the pain their soulless companions felt would cause them to rest poorly and that would give Arkusinski that much more of an edge in any contest of strengths.

Unfortunately for him, not all of Vanessa's brood had been captured. Those still free began all sorts of mischief including two aborted attempts to free their captured comrades. Most of Arkusinski's surviving servants had left to find and pacify them.

That's where I came in.

The point where I faded out is the point where Jack re-entered the picture. Jack, sensing my urgency, had run both horses to death and had then begun sprinting down the road in an effort to get to the battle on time. He was late by several hours and right on time. Jack's always been multi-talented.

Miranda, slightly refreshed by the vampire blood in her, had been re-awakened by Arkusinski's death scream. She had crawled over to where we were and, after dragging us a little farther into shadow, passed out again. Having seen her wounds, I was amazed she managed that much.

Jack, after sprinting for a couple of hours straight, came dashing up sometime around mid-afternoon. The sunlight was just setting fire to Selina's ankle when he whisked the lot of us into a nice shadowed bedroom. He tended Selina's wounds, then mine. Before he started on Miranda's, she insisted that he free the soulless who were stuck on the dome walls. They proceeded to tend their own wounds and to search for and free their vampire charges imprisoned below.

Night had fallen by the time he had returned to tending Miranda's wounds but she had managed to raid the larder and had made good use of the time. That was the point where I reemerged.

As of early this evening the marble table lay smashed to rubble thanks to Selina, Miranda, and a pair of very heavy hammers. I think it was very therapeutic for them both.

Time passes as it was so wont to. All those captured by Arkusinski have now been released. Those few who'd remained loyal to Vanessa even in death have been escorted out of the city and told to never return.

Selina, having inherited Vanessa's coffers, has most generously gifted me with a new coach and four as well as the services of a new driver. The driver's name is Anton. His daughter, Yvette, traveled with him and therefore us. Anton was a soulless fellow from the Tassini line and Yvette a

vampire, also from Tassini. Evidently, the Tassinis owed Selina some kind of favor and the services of these two were part of the deal they'd struck.

We'd had several chats with those who remained and all have come to agree that Selina will be taking Vanessa's place as head of Paris' night side. A few had to be convinced the hard way but they have come to understand their place in the scheme of things. Thus far, no one has had to be persuaded twice.

Despite my insistence that there are no debts between friends, Selina insisted on gifting me with new finery and assorted trinkets. I felt sure I'd tire of it eventually. Say... in a decade at the very most.

She had also said something that both pleased and disturbed me. We'd just gotten through snacking on a pair of lovebirds in the park and were slowly strolling along enjoying each others company. "Alex," she tentatively began, "I know that you're neither fond of nor proud of your last name. In light of your recent performance during my rescue and our long standing friendship, I feel that you should have a name that both suits you and that you can be proud of." She glanced at me and then continued on speaking quickly, "I've thought about it a lot and I think that Wilde, spelled the an 'e' would be appropriate. You seemed a primal force that evening Alex - the chaos from which springs order. I think it befits you and I want you to feel pride in who you are. What do you think?" She seemed very uncertain of herself at that moment. As if she might have overstepped the bounds of friendship. I hugged her to me and thought about it for the rest of our walk. Getting rid of the baggage that came with my original surname would be a gift beyond telling. My uncle had been a butcher of men and a monster of the worst sort. His actions had forever tainted our family name although, in truth, it was not a well known name. I have not used it since I left my homeland in the

east so many years ago but it and the images associated with it have haunted my thoughts since.

Losing all of that would be almost like a having a chance to start anew. Then it hit me. That was exactly what Selina was doing - giving me the chance to start over as I had helped give her a fresh start here. When we reached our rooms I gave her another hug, kissed her cheek, and told her, "Thanks for the new name my sister. I believe I like it very much."

And she certainly turned out to be right about the name suiting me.

Time continued to pass and the nights flew on. Once again, Jack and I were riding in a coach. This time my new had remained in place because Anton knew that we were in no hurry to be at our destination. As we rode past the asylum where the doctors and nurses helped the poor, wounded, and sick, I smiled to myself. I had helped sponsor the place and it pleased me to know that I'd kept my word to myself concerning my promise to help others. With luck and perhaps a bit of prompting from Jack I will continue to keep that promise. We traveled on.

It was a wonderful night and it was made more lovely by the beautiful woman with us; this time, pale-haired Yvette and not dark-haired Teresa. Still, it brought back memories of another coach ride not so very long ago.

Like that ride, this is a special trip if not so urgent or really for that matter, important. We were touring some of the city's apothecaries so that Jack could gather the necessary ingredients for bloodwine. For vampires bloodwine sates the thirst, stimulates the body, and energizes the spirit. It also produces one heck of a buzz. My last bottle had been in the coach that was lost somewhere

with Teresa (may God grant she be safe). Selina's first anniversary as Paris' queen of the night was almost upon us and I wanted us to celebrate this grand event with style. To that end I have been donating blood for almost a month now and Jack says we can make enough bloodwine from it to throw 'one whale of a ball'.

For love we have all been through trials of blood and fire. This time blood and fire shall be on our side and some of our memories of eternity shall be grand.