

## Wilde Life

Springtime in Georgia, the North American version, was gorgeous. The air was warm, the sun was bright, all the land shining green and vibrant with young life all around. Mother nature filled the air with the sweet music of spring.

I found it pure misery.

Hmm. Perhaps, that might be going a little too far. Actually, there was one bright spot in all this misery. I'll get back to it in a moment. Right now, I still have more bitching and moaning to do.

All this sunlight may have been doing wonders for all the young life in the area but it wasn't doing me a damn bit of good. Quite the opposite in fact as I continued dehydrating at what seemed to me an alarming rate and I remained on the verge of developing blisters upon my delicate skin. Still more than an hour until sunset and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make the time pass any more quickly. And believe me, I tried very hard. Despite my misery, the birds continued with their chirping and the sun most certainly continued brightly shining. I found the birds to be both soothing to the ears and a further annoyance. Until lately it's been quite some time since I' had heard or even seen day birds.

We sat under a huge oak tree next to our newly renovated mansion with it's brand new pool. Due to the sunlight, the scene was very brightly lit despite my new wraparound sunglasses and it was only with an effort that I kept from squinting. My skin felt hot and dry despite the

lotion that the author of my current situation, my wife Sasha, kept rubbing into it. Sasha was the bright spot (aside from the big one in the sky that was trying it's best to melt me) I mentioned earlier. Despite her pleasant company, sleep continued to be a constant, nagging desire. With an effort, I managed to keep the yawns at bay. Mostly. Instead, I took a breath, sighed it back out, and took another sip of my cold drink. A-B negative would have been much better. For some reason it seemed to better keep it's flavor when chilled.

Sasha cocked an eyebrow at me. "Was that yawn a comment on my company, Mr. Wilde?"

"Absolutely not, my dear. A man simply couldn't ask for better company. I would just appreciate starting these little outdoor soirees a little later."

She laid her head down on my shoulder and whispered in my ear, "Alex, as much as you're a creature of the night, I'm still a creature of the day. So far we've done pretty well at meeting each other half way but your adaptation to daylight is going too slow for comfort. I mean, what if there was an emergency or I needed you or something?" She sounded as if the idea was foreign or otherwise alien to her. Shaking her head, she went back to rubbing the lotion into my parched skin. I wasn't nearly as concerned about adapting myself to daylight as I was keeping my new wife from being unhappy. We haven't been much of the joyful couple and this 'project' of hers was a major step towards... well, I don't really know what it's a step towards. Maybe towards working together or even happiness. I've always been a dreamer and I don't plan on stopping now.

A few of our guests swam while others sat and gossiped around pool-side tables. Yet more browsed around the new wing listening to Michael play the piano in the foyer. None of these

were *special* guests, most were just neighbors with a moderate dose of business associates thrown in. I probably shouldn't have been drinking anything, especially when you consider the shock that would be generated if they found out what I was drinking. Still, it helped me stay awake and kept dehydration at bay. Mostly. Occupational hazard of being a vampire and being not only awake during the day but also out and about.

Despite her earlier words, Sasha most certainly was not as much a creature of the day as I am of the night. My abilities started at human normal and went up by at least an order of magnitude with the setting of the sun. Her talents and abilities started far above normal and remain steady day or night. She was just used to working in the light of day.

I took her hand that wasn't rubbing lotion onto me, kissed it, then held to it. Slowly but surely we were beginning to get along. In fact, here recently we had been getting along quite well and I didn't want anything to jeopardize that. Her remark about needing me and my adaptation brought to mind numerous retorts. Retorts that would have done no one any good and would have only driven a wedge between us again. I was beyond the need to always have my way and quite secure with myself. With that in mind, I followed the path of true wisdom and kept my big mouth shut. Never lose sight of your ultimate goal. In this case, mine was living in harmony with my new wife.

Still, the conversation did bring to mind one of the more glaring times since the wedding when we hadn't gotten along well at all. Several weeks ago I had awakened one evening to find that Sasha had bought two of the buildings in town as well as a good deal of land. Up to this point we'd had an unstated agreement that if she was going to buy something big, she would let me know ahead of time. In fact, for most of these trips she took me along with her. And considering

the monetary amounts involved, this purchase was definitely considered a big one. When I confronted her about the issue, she informed me that she wasn't going to tell me about every little thing she did and the 'discussion' went downhill from there.

This led to what I later came to call the Financial Freedom Act. She determined that she needed some spending money and that since she owned half of everything I did, it was her money to do with as she pleased. I didn't mention the million something she had in her secret Swiss bank account but it certainly came to mind as a good source of spending money to me. At any rate we yelled, pouted, and carried on for some time until we eventually decided on a stipend for each of us to do casual buying with. Major purchases (anything which exceeded the stipend) would be discussed and agreed upon in advance by the both of us. The arguing got a lot out of our systems and we've been much more relaxed together since.

Unfortunately, she still had a point (albeit a minor one) about my daytime problems. We were not the only supernatural creatures living in Georgia. Atlanta's night side was ruled by some kind of consortium of mixed supernaturals. Although most supernaturals come out only at night, a few like Sasha work just fine during the day. At the moment our standing with the consortium continued to be a bit vague. We were not living in Atlanta thus technically not under their authority. But, Atlanta sat not too far away... especially as the vampire flies. And that apparently made a lot of folks nervous.

Our estate currently had eight supernatural creatures other than myself and Sasha in residence. All of them were soulless. No, not as in 'without a soul', rather as in the appellation that has been placed on them by other supernaturals. Soulless were those who, following the vampiric blood drain, didn't become hunters, vampires or corpses.

I suppose I should explain a bit more and then I'll get off this tangent. 'Hunter' was another term we in the supernatural world used. This referred to a specialized form of vampire of which my own dear Sasha belonged. Hunters were vampires who preyed on other vampires and had no problems at all with daylight. The very word 'Hunter' gives vampires the world over the willies. Sasha was currently working to expand her diet with the help of yours truly. That's *my* little project.

As a side note to my tangent, I'll mention that vampires did occasionally have to deal with hunters. Note the small 'h'. These were humans who have found out about the true existence of vampires and hunt them down. This happens at roughly the same time that the vampires were hunting them down because it violates most laws of the supernatural world for humans to know about our existence.

Soulless on the other hand become immortals without the full load of cumbersome emotions which tended to bog the rest of us down or otherwise lead us from one calamity into another. Within the supernatural community this represents quite a force. Vampires were extremely powerful creatures when aroused. Soulless usually do the bidding of vampires and were not only tireless but also extremely difficult to kill. For some reason, other supernaturals tended to be apprehensive when dealing with such a group. Apprehensive people have been known to perform irrational acts.

Which brings me back to building up my tolerance to daylight in particular and daytime in general. Being able to function almost normally during the day was a huge improvement for me. And I had to admit that should a situation arise, it might be nice to be able to actually do something other than sleep.

Only fifty two minutes and thirty eight seconds left 'til sundown.

Reluctantly, I forced my attention away from my watch as one of our guests (this time a neighbor and not a business associate), an older-appearing lady by the name of Mrs. Joanna Applebee, stopped by our blanket to chat. She was a nosy individual to be sure, asking all manner of questions about where we were from, who our families were, and so on. Sasha didn't seem to mind though and chatted with her about all those things plus the local churches, the local watering hole, where to buy the best produce, and other domestic items. I can't exactly say I was fascinated but I was interested. I've never really been exposed to the domestic side of life (at least not in the last couple of centuries) and it helped pass the time until sunset. At one point in the conversation I must admit to surprise when Sasha asked about old cemeteries. For some reason I am rather sensitive about discussing matters concerning the dead with humans. Joanna (as she insisted we call her) laughed at the surprised expression I evidently failed to cover up.

"You do grave marker etchings, don't ya, honey?" she said in her quaint southern-honey drawl. At Sasha's shy smile she continued on, "I used to do 'em myself, right up 'til last year. A group of us from the historical society would travel all around the countryside looking for old headstones to make our charcoal etchings from. Ray, my late husband, never could figure out why we'd want to go tracking out to old boneyards just to make a few scratchings on paper. Ray was always one for the here and now." Ray was obviously an intelligent man but I once again kept to the path of true wisdom and remained silent. I was learning that the path of wisdom was not an easy path to walk.

As the conversation continued, I began to get a strange feeling - one that I didn't take long to identify. An outside supernatural was approaching. Still thirty minutes until sundown. Damn.

I hurriedly quaffed the remainder of my horse blood (I didn't particularly like the taste anyway) and excused myself from the charming company. As I walked quickly across the lawn, I mentally summoned Jeff to me. Fifty feet is an awfully long walk when your skin felt as if it were on fire and you had to maintain concentration to psychically call someone.

Jeff came out from the kitchen area pulling off an apron and looking annoyed which surprised me. Not that he came out of the kitchen area but that he looked annoyed. I kept forgetting that he's a new soulless and hadn't gotten around to constantly wearing his 'poker face' yet. I stopped in the blessed shade of another oak tree.

"What's up Alex, I was just in the middle of helping Emma with a souffle?" Jeff was a far cry from Jack, my recently dead best friend (ouch, it still hurts to think that), but he did show promise in his own special... odd... American way. Jeff was a good planner, smart, inventive, and had horrible taste in music. Despite the last, we got along quite well.

I leaned forward and whispered, "There's at least one supernatural approaching. Have Tommy armor up and get a rifle ready... just in case. Then come meet me by the front door. Oh, and Jeff - be sure Tommy has the silencer on the rifle. We wouldn't want to disturb our guests." He nodded and walked quickly away.

You may wonder about what kind of criminal I am to so coldly have one of my people prepare for the possible necessity of killing someone (not to mention illegally owning a silencer; the tip of the veritable iceberg, to be sure). Having encountered a great many monsters in my long lifetime, I have come to the conclusion that sometimes the only way those who value life can protect it is to kill those who hold that life in low esteem. I do not do this lightly. The moral implications bother me a great deal more than the legal implications. Laws varied greatly with time

and place. My morals did not. I hoped it would not be necessary to kill whoever approached, but I was not going to risk the lives of my wife and guests on the hope that this particular supernatural had good intentions towards us.

I made my way through the guests in the new wing with a 'hi' here and 'glad you could make it' there and arrived at the front door at about the same time that Jeff did. David was ushering one of the guest's chauffeurs away from the front so that he wouldn't see whatever happened. Just in case. In answer to my inquiring look, Jeff cut his eyes up and to the right. A quick glance showed an open window on the third floor of the old wing but no more. Good. I doubted that our unexpected guest would see anything else either, though it was possible that whoever it was might sense Tommy's presence. Paulena walked into the hall with a blanket, a bucket of water, some rags and a large sponge. Again, just in case. Good thinking on Jeff's part. She also carried a battle axe that she'd evidently plucked from the wall in the armory. Good thinking on Paulena's part. I must say I was very pleased with the way everyone was handling this. You'd think they'd been trained well or something. Supposing everything went well, I'd have to remember to praise their preparedness.

Not two minutes later a red lotus pulled into the driveway. I could tell that the driver was soulless but I doubted Jeff or Tommy could yet so I stated the fact aloud barely above a whisper. Paulena, now discreetly out of sight, probably wouldn't have been able to sense the fellow's supernatural species at this distance either. Aside from Sasha and myself, they were all a bit too new to the business.

The car pulled up and out stepped an immaculately dressed immortal. His eyes widened slightly for an instant upon seeing me but only an instant. I had a feeling I'd just lost some

advantage. He walked over to greet us.

"Mister Alexander Wilde I presume?" he said, extending his hand. He spoke with an English accent. Probably from somewhere near London.

"Yes, I'm Alex Wilde," I replied, making no move to take his hand. During the daytime he would be far stronger than myself and I was not the trusting sort. Vampires were among the most cunning creatures on earth and some weren't above sacrificing one of their agents for a shot at killing an enemy or a rival. When you live as long as I have, you tended to acquire some enemies along with the friends. Additionally, it was easily within the realm of possibility that someone in Atlanta might mistake me for a rival. Naturally, he did not appear to be offended by my lack of manners but with the older soulless that's hardly surprising.

"Please allow me to introduce myself," he began, "My name is James Hughes and I come to you at the request of Madam Tonya Wilkins. Madam Wilkins is the vampire representative on the Atlanta Council of Eight. As you and your wife are new to the area, she felt it would only be polite to invite the two of you over to her home for a quiet dinner." As a general rule I'm very leery about dining with other vampires. As I mentioned before, I have a strict moral code from which I do not deviate. Ever.

On the other hand *some* vampires become horribly jaded and warped over the years and get the most peculiar notions: mortals are only cattle, life is cheap, the strong must feed off the weak - that sort of silliness. For the most part I preferred to keep out of other vampires' private concerns as the conflicting morals frequently led to combat when I was around. Too much of that kind of thing and a body gets a bad reputation. Therefore, as a general rule, I preferred to simply stay away.

"Dinner? Why we'd just love to!" As the saying goes, I jumped half out of my skin. I hadn't heard Sasha's approach. She's one of the few people who could sneak up on me and it really gets me sometimes. Then what she'd said sank in. Damnation. She'd accepted the bloody invitation and now we were bound to attend. I couldn't contradict her in public. Not when we were just starting to get along. Damn. Damn. Damn. I forced myself to smile.

"Wonderful," declared Mr. Hughes not sounding as though it were wonderful. "The helicopter will pick you up an hour after sundown tomorrow. If that's alright, of course?"

"That will be fine," my wife replied warmly. I vaguely wondered how Sasha had come to lead our portion of this conversation. She shook hands with Mr. Hughes, he returned to his car and he drove away. I gave out a quiet sigh of relief and gave Tommy a small signal that he could come back down.

"What's the matter Alex?" She took my arm which oddly enough made me feel better. We went back into the house and down a hall that wasn't open to the public.

"You may have just jumped us right into the middle of a strange and perhaps very prickly political situation. You may also have just signed Madam Tonya Wilkins death warrant."

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about or where you get these ideas, Alex." We began making our way down stairs to the cubby where the secret door to our real rooms was located.

"Tonya Wilkins is a hedonistic plotter," I explained quietly. "She's always scheming for the power to enable her lifestyle to go a step beyond it's current threshold and she sometimes gets what she seeks. At least that's the way she was last time I heard anything about her. I will admit that my information is somewhat dated but I sincerely doubt that *Madam* Wilkins has changed her

spots so to speak."

We walked down another flight of stairs to a wonderful little fountain and art exhibit that Sasha had put together. I looked up at Jeff who had discreetly followed us. He nodded and then left. This indicated that the way was clear, so Sasha pushed the tile which opened the secret door. I bowed gallantly and she stepped through before me, rolling her eyes as she went. The steel-backed door closed silently behind us.

"As for her death warrant, that would have more to do with her culinary habits and her treatment of mortals than anything else. That part is really up to her but I had hoped to avoid any confrontation over any issues that may arise... at least until we'd had more time to get settled. Should she and her troupe turn out to kill mortals as part of their diet... well, I would feel obligated to do something about that. Historically speaking, it would probably be something permanent. Hmm. It's entirely possible that she knows that about me and is inviting us over to get us out of the way before we have time to put down roots. I suppose we'll find out.

"Well," I continued, "No use crying over spilt milk. Let's start planning what to do tomorrow evening."

We started across the sitting room over to my suite of the master bedroom.

"Now wait just one minute, Alex. I do not understand you at all." When she's upset Sasha's Russian accent re-emerges as it did now. It's really very sweet. Reminded me of my early years. "I thought you were against killing vampires. Now you are talking about maybe killing our first supernatural neighbor who comes along? Please explain." She crossed her arms over her chest and gave me a hard look which clearly said, 'this had better be good'.

I took a deep breath which gave me a moment in which to gather my thoughts. "Sasha,

dearest. I *am* against killing vampires as a general rule. However, when someone comes along who desperately needs killing, then I'm not at all averse to taking the responsibility upon myself and doing what needs to be done. It's just the idea of killing all vampires indiscriminately that I'm against."

"The idea really frightens you, doesn't it?" I guess she heard something in my voice. I'm normally very reticent about discussing my fears and hopes and other such private matters but I've never had any trouble talking about anything with Sasha. Well...not since the first month or two after the wedding. Not much anyway and it was getting even easier.

I took another deep breath. "Yes. The idea frightens me very much. Not just because of the fear the idea of trying to defend myself against someone as powerful as yourself during the day presents. Someone deciding that all of any group of people should die is frightening. Look what it lead the Nazis to do in World War II. The Khmer Rouge. Muslim extremists. With the probable exception of ghouls, I don't think any group needs to be exterminated. It also worries me because an indiscriminate killer would likely be in a position to hurt the ones I love." I gave her a hug and a kiss on the forehead to show her who I meant by that.

Very quietly she said into my collar, "I used to be such an indiscriminate killer. And not so very long ago at that."

I took her chin and tilted it up and waited until her beautiful green eyes looked into my own. "There is some truth to that but it is not the whole truth. You lived as you were taught - to kill all who feed upon blood. How could you know any other way, when that was what you had been taught since childhood? When you were shown the worst of our kind as an example of us all. You were every bit as much a victim as those whom you hunted were. I also think that the

difference between hunter and vampire instincts probably influenced your actions. Hunting vampires is in your blood to a large extent. However, like most vampires do with their humans, there is no need for you to kill them when you dine. You never knew that. But now you do and you've changed your behavior to match that knowledge. That's a true sign of personal growth. No, do not regret, Sasha dearest. Simply learn from your past and move on. I'm afraid that pathos goes hand in hand with being a vampire but there's no need to dwell on it." I vaguely remembered that pathos went with being human as well but that didn't really seem pertinent.

We stood that way for several minutes until she finally told me, "You set very high standards for yourself - and for those around you. What if I decide that I do not have the... moral fibre, to live up to those standards?"

"I believe that you do. I can see it in your eyes and I can feel it in your heart. You have the strength of a tiger. And now you are an enlightened tiger. It is up to you to decide how you use that strength." We stood holding one another for several moments.

"Oh, Alex. What have I gotten us into? Tomorrow night, you might kill our dinner host because of how she prepares her meals and I might kill her because I want to taste her blood. I am afraid that we will turn out to be very bad neighbors." I remembered Jack's parting advice to me about living life instead of watching it pass me by. A good deal of my apprehension over the upcoming meeting faded away.

Suddenly grinning, I picked her up, spun her around, and kissed her soundly. Smiling my brightest smile, I laughed, "I don't know my beautiful Sasha. Perhaps we will turn out to be lousy neighbors. Don't take my worries too much to heart, my dear. It has been a long time since I truly lived and such extreme caution is something of a carryover from my time as a hermit. I don't

know what will happen, however, whatever does occur should make for a wonderfully interesting dinner! In the meantime lets get some more of that lotion and get back to our guests."

Not surprisingly, the helicopter arrived right on time. We hurried across the lawn and the wind stirred by the thing mussed our hair badly. James Hughes sat inside and assured Sasha that she would get a chance to fix her hair before meeting Madam Wilkins. I rolled my eyes and received a narrowing of hers in response. Oh well. A fool such as myself can only follow the path to wisdom so far.

While James was talking to the pilot, Sasha nodded out the port window. It took me a moment but I finally noticed what she wanted me to see. There, several hundred yards away standing by the back fence, stood our neighbor, Joanna, with a pair of binoculars. I resisted an urge to wave at her and instead cocked an eyebrow at Sasha. She shrugged one of her lovely shoulders and gave me a look that clearly said that she had no clue. We set curiosity aside for the moment as the helicopter took off.

Soon we were flying high over the countryside. I turned to Mister Hughes. "Tell me about this coalition that's running Atlanta's night side. I believe you called it the Council of Eight yesterday." I already knew quite a bit about it. Still, it might be insightful to hear his thoughts on the subject.

"Yes, that's quite right Mister Wilde. The council is made up of seven different supernaturals and a human representative as well. As I mentioned at our earlier meeting, my employer, Madam Tonya Wilkins, is the vampire representative. There is also a werewolf,

doppelganger, troll, ghost, wererat, awakened mortal, and a free soulless on the council. A very disparate group representing their disparate peoples."

"What? No ghouls?" I quipped. I have at several points in the past found myself brought up against most of the above mentioned supernaturals. As a result, I do not tend to think of them in the kindest of terms. I must admit though that I was rather curious as to what an awakened mortal might be though. If they turned out to simply be informed humans, this was quite the break in tradition. Not being a big traditionalist, I gave an internal shrug and put the matter aside. Sasha discreetly elbowed me in the ribs for the ghoul wisecrack.

Hughes didn't seem to mind my little comment. Not that he'd have shown it if he did. "I can certainly understand your feelings Mister Wilde. However, all the council's representatives manage to behave in a civilized manner...most of the time. Let me assure you that to my knowledge, *no one* likes or really even tolerates ghouls, so they have been excluded from council decisions and indeed are free game for those who wish to take the time to hunt them down." Soulless have no sense of humor. Well, most don't... not much anyway.

"How long has this Council of Eight been operating, Mister Hughes?" Sasha asked. She put her hand on my arm. I'm not sure if this was a sign I was forgiven for my earlier witticism or if she wanted more leverage for applying her elbow to my ribs. At any rate, I took comfort from the contact and hugged her to me (conveniently pinning the arm and her bony elbow to my side).

"The council formed shortly after Sherman left in the late 1800s. It was originally a council of three. In those days it was made up of the shapechanger Randolph Mitgaur, the ghost Dana Brown, and the werewolf Fiona MacTavish. Over the years the council has grown with the city until it has reached it's present size. There is no fighting among the supernaturals of Atlanta -

ghouls and other mindless creatures notwithstanding. All differences are solved within the council chambers and it's attendant court systems. The council also places maximum limits on the number of new recruits that may be gathered from the population. Unfortunately, the council's restrictions on our own kind have started to hold us back. This affects you in that some of the council have grown concerned about your little reservoir of vampiric power so close to our fair city." Reservoir of vampiric power? "Some of the council feel that you being so close to the city should count against our vampire recruitment. Madam Wilkin's is growing concerned that the rest of the council is not willing to give us our proper breathing space - so to speak. There must be a balance and the council is allowing it to tip in the wrong direction."

Ah. The mists part and Tonya Wilkins latest scheme is revealed at last. And how typical this appeared already. With an internal shake, I reminded myself that no vampire scheme was typical. Even if they did seem to be an ordinary power grab.

"How long has Tonya been part of the council?" I asked. For some reason Sasha stiffened slightly; probably trying to figure out how to elbow me again should the need arise.

"Madam Wilkins has been on the council for the last thirty years. She's a very distinguished member as befits one of her status. Let me assure you that when she speaks for the vampires of Atlanta, people listen."

"I'm sure they do, Mister Hughes. I'm sure they do. I take it that part of the inequality that you were referring to involves the number of... recruits... that the other supernaturals are allowed?"

"Indeed, Mister Wilde. That is at the very heart of the matter," nodded Hughes.

Sasha gave me an odd look which I failed to interpret and would probably not have

understood anyway. The secret to understanding women is a puzzle I've worked on for a long time and didn't really expect to solve anytime soon.

The remainder of the flight was without conversation and, other than a brief aerial tour of the city, was of no real interest. We landed atop the Plaza Tower shortly before eight o'clock. James led us down a short flight of stairs and into a quaint little garden. We paused for a moment while Sasha stopped at a mirror to touch up her hair and mine. From there we moved directly into what appeared to be a very modern living room. Tonya Wilkins lounged on one of the recliners. Several handsome young men sat around her. They seemed oblivious to our presence, having eyes only for Tonya. Amused, I looked to Sasha with a raised eyebrow and she rolled her eyes at me. I allowed myself a grin and turned to further survey the people arrayed before me. Two of the men were very young vampires (as we count such things), probably younger even than Jeff, Tommy and the rest of our soulless crew. The other three were what I judged to be normal humans nearing a hormonal overdose (Tonya wasn't wearing just a whole lot of evening gown). James stood off to the side showing no expression. No surprise there. Nearby but out of sight, there were at least five more soulless and three more vampires. Not so nearby I began to get the idea that there were many, many more.

And then there was their mistress.

Tonya Wilkins. A vampire who'd survived at least four centuries of existence in a world that has an aggressive love-hate relationship with our kind. That alone bespoke something and I

could testify to the fact that it was no mean feat at times. From her couch she watched us with a smile playing across her lips. She rose languorously to her feet and sashayed over to us. Clearly, she was as amused by our reactions as we were by her actions.

"Ah, Mister and Mrs...Wilde. I am so glad that you could join me this evening." She held out a hand, the back of which I kissed. She then shook hands with Sasha. "It's so good of you to come on such short notice. Won't you please take a seat?" She motioned towards a couch opposite the one she'd just occupied. Once we were seated she took up her lounging again.

"You know I've wanted to meet you for a long time now Alex... you don't mind if I call you Alex, do you?"

"No, of course not." Actually, for several reasons it annoyed me but I wasn't going to be rude and say so. Not yet anyway.

"Good. I do hate excessive formalities. As I was saying, I have wanted to meet you for some time now. A mutual friend once described you to me after seeing you on some battlefield of long ago. Had time permitted, I would have looked you up then. Alas, the spider who leaves the web, loses the web.

"Prior to his long overdue return to London, my friend, had been a part of an army to which you belonged. Watching you, he said that he thought that maybe the ancient Greeks had it right when they described their pantheon. That Ares, the god of war, had descended to extract vengeance upon the enemy. He said you were magnificent, unstoppable, a terrible force upon which the enemy broke. A vision in polished armor. Gleaming steel splashed in blood. A true hero of old." Something in her voice made my skin crawl. She seemed excited by descriptions of a battle that I would much rather have forgotten. The hand that Sasha had casually resting on my

arm tightened to the point where I would have been badly bruised had she gripped me so during the daylight hours. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable and Sasha's grip had nothing to do with it.

Tonya began running her fingers through one of the young men's hair. The two vampirelings were throwing dark looks my way. Evidently, they too understood their mistress' excitement and I could plainly see the jealousy floating just behind their eyes. "Please, tell me," she asked, looking up through her lashes at me, "were you immortal then?"

I put on my own poker face. "That was a long time ago. A time best forgotten. Tell me - is Ian Bleissfeld still around? It's been some time since I've heard tell of him."

"That's not an answer but that's okay. And I won't ask how you knew it was Ian who told me the tale. In answer to your question, I'm afraid that our dear Mister Bleissfeld didn't make it past the French revolution." She sighed theatrically, "Those were the days." Her hand dropped to the shoulder of one of the other young men who did his best to look as confident as possible. Considering the conversation, he was doing a decent job... better than his companions anyway. They looked like they needed a hug from mama. New vampires usually take a while to fully comprehend what it means to live forever. Sasha had her poker face on too, which bespoke quite a bit to me as I was getting to the point where I could read her expressions, and lack thereof, pretty well. She was not enjoying this turn in the conversation, but at the same time it seemed to hold a fascination for her. Not a good mix in my book.

Tonya sat up straight and shooed away the boys with a motion of her hand. They melted away like shadows before the light. "Before we move on to dinner, there are a few things I'd like to know." She was all business now. "You have something of a reputation for trouble Alex.

Your little coup in Paris so long ago was said to be the work of a master manipulator. You walk in and two weeks later a friend of yours is suddenly ruling the darkness cast by the city of lights.

"Let me be honest with you. You and your family are a cause of concern to me Alex. You live only a brief skip away. In the short time you've lived here you already have six soulless with you. Granted, you had been pretty quiet since the world wars, but you have proven that chaos still follows you for immediately after you leave Dallas the same friend you set up in Paris those years ago suddenly has sole control of what used to be the Tripartite Cities. It would appear that your reputation is well deserved. Chaos follows you like a puppy or perhaps an ill wind. Are you here to oust me? Is that why you suddenly packed your bags and moved into my neighborhood?" Tonya had a very good poker face. In another room I heard the safety click off on a weapon. Not a good sign.

I sat on the edge of my seat, leaned forward and looked her in the eyes, "Since we're being honest, let me say that if I were here to oust you, you'd already be on the other side and we'd be redecorating this place." I paused for a long moment. "We're here because we like it here. Period. No plots. No schemes. No power plays. I don't give a tinker's damn about your little plan to grab control of the Atlanta council. Ruling a city is far more trouble than it's worth, believe me I know, and I have no desire to do so again.

"As an aside, though I doubt that it will make you any happier to know it, I had nothing to do with Dallas. Selina Dupree did that all on her own. I was... incapacitated at the time." I leaned back into my seat and put my arm around Sasha's shoulder. Tonya didn't exactly look thrilled but she did relax back into her couch and she started a slow smile. For some reason this pissed me off.

"On the other hand," I began and Tonya suddenly stopped relaxing and smiling, "If your little scheme doesn't work, and historically speaking I doubt it will... no offense but you don't have the best track record in this area and from what I can tell you're facing well organized opponents... if it doesn't work your problems might overflow over onto my family." I looked her in the eyes again and allowed my eyes to turn red for just a moment. "If that were to happen then *I* would become upset. Very upset." Another short pause to let that sink in. "I just want to make sure we understand each other. Too many tragedies come about through miscommunication."

"Very well Mister Wilde. As you like it. I won't ask how you know about my plans. Our kind don't live long without being well informed.

"My plan *is* going to happen and it *will* succeed. You and your family can be on the inside or on the outside. If you're on the inside, you'll gain significantly by my takeover. But, if you're on the outside - well then, you'll be treated like an outsider. We are one big happy family in Atlanta... and we don't take kindly to outsiders. The decision is up to you. Decide which side you're going to be on. But I warn you, you don't have a lot of time."

I leaned over and whispered into Sasha's ear, "Darling, would you mind if we declined Tonya's invitation and dined out instead?" She gave a wry smile with the left side of her face and said aloud, "We'd hate to make a hasty decision and since Alex might decide to drink you if your culinary tastes aren't on par with his own, please excuse us as we leave to contemplate this most serious... and unexpected... offer you pose." Smiling sardonically, Tonya gestured grandly towards the way we'd come in. I noticed that Sasha didn't say anything about *her* drinking Tonya's blood.

We rose and had James escort us to the elevator instead of the helicopter. "It's such a

lovely night and we'd like to enjoy it for a while," I explained at his raised eyebrow.

James just nodded and said that the helicopter would be waiting for us later. We thanked him but declined. We'd fly home later on our own. Gets back again to my whole distrustful nature. Helicopter crashes aren't that difficult to orchestrate.

We walked out into the night air and James came with us. I started to ask him just what the hell he thought he was doing when he started telling us of the demarkations which indicate certain supernatural's territories. I'd heard a little about these but not enough. This would be important. Assuming he gave us correct information. You see, most supernaturals have preferred hunting grounds which they get touchy about others interfering with. Obviously, we were in the vampire's district now. The werewolf packs were located as far away as possible with the doppelgangers in between. The ghost's haunts (those that were mobile anyway), troll dens, and the miscellaneous supernaturals not directly represented by the council were on the outskirts.

James went on for fifteen minutes about how to recognize each territory as we entered it. Some sounded familiar but most seemed to be variants and adaptations of various American and oriental gang zone demarkations. I'd have to take James' word on what demarked what for the moment. Since I didn't trust James' mistress, I didn't trust James and therefore didn't like taking his word about anything.

"Sir, if I may ask?" He began after winding down on the subject of territories. He continued when I nodded, "What to you honestly think of madam's chances?"

"As I said earlier, I doubt she'll succeed. There are elders here of at least two significant supernatural species. They will know her reputation and will have spies and informants to keep tabs on her. From what I hear, Tonya has a habit of underestimating her opponents and

overestimating her own cleverness. Keep in mind that this is based on hearsay, uncertain facts, and a previous conversations with people I've not seen in quite some time. There is certainly a great deal of room for error and the unknown."

"Thank you sir. Now if you'd both be kind enough to excuse me, I'll leave you to this lovely night." Sasha smiled, I nodded and he returned to the building.

"Which way, my dear?" she asked loudly with more than a hint of mischief.

"Why, whichever way pleases the lady," I answered with a broad sweep of my arm indicating the city at large.

"Good. In that case, we'll go... hmm... that-a-way," she declared, waving her to one side. Smiling broadly we went off into the night.

Sometime later we walked down the steps into a quiet, basement club from which the faintest strains of quiet blues music could be heard. As we entered the place, I noticed that the people were dressed well and that the place was clean. It looked like a comfortable combination of a bar and a dancehall. Several couples were slowly dancing to the quiet music which was being performed by a band on the far side of the dancefloor. It was a nice change from the thunderous noise and poor character of the bar we had just vacated.

Just a few supernaturals here. From our brief instruction on the local territorial markings I gathered that we were somewhere near the corner of vampire, doppelganger, and the ghosts' areas.

Hmm. This seems like a good place to have a brief discussion on ghosts. As I understand such things, ghosts don't really need territory as do most other supernaturals. Privacy is what most are after.

Basically speaking, a ghost is someone who died before their soul was ready to pass on to the other side (be that heaven, hell, or someplace else). Unfortunately, the event which caused this premature death was usually caused by another's misdeed - at least that's been my experience thus far.

From my own observations ghosts seemed to be limited in the area they can cover or perhaps the people they can cover (haunt seems like such a cliched word, even if it is accurate). A friend of mine, who goes by the name of Armin, has heard probably every rumor or scrap of ghost lore ever written but so far as I know, that worthy scholar has never encountered one to verify any of it. Instead, he's absorbed mine and Jack's encounter as well as the other tales he's heard as his own.

I'm not really sure what drives most ghosts to stay around on this side. From personal observation, it certainly seems that insanity in one form or another is definitely a key contributing factor. Believe me, the years are long enough without staying in one place and bewailing the same old complaint all night, every night, down through the ages.

Take Alice for example. She was a lovely young woman who lived in France quite some time ago. Alice was in love with and was to be married to a fellow named Gerard. Gerard was in love with the idea of becoming rich and eventually found a wealthy woman to care for him... a

woman other than Alice. The only problem was Alice's family. If Gerard called off the engagement, then Alice's brothers would hunt him down and kill him for staining their sister's honor.

So, Gerard came up with a simple answer to his dilemma...he pushed her off a third floor landing. Alice didn't die instantly. She held on long enough for her fiancé to come down and apologize for the inconvenience his ending her life may have caused her. "But," he explained, "I really must be taken care of properly and your family is just not rich enough to do that. I really will miss you my dear."

Then she died.

Unfortunately for him, he never really got the opportunity to miss her. From that day forth, every time he looked in a mirror, he saw Alice looking back at him. No matter where he went, anyone who was playing or singing would soon be playing or singing the song he and Alice danced to at the party to announce their engagement. When he looked down from virtually any high place, he would see her corpse as she had laid when he'd murdered her. Occasionally, he could hear her voice on the wind or feel her cold, cold touch in the dark of the night.

I guess at first she stayed around to avenge herself. The area she 'haunted' was the area of Gerard's person. After his suicide, she stayed around to mourn his passing. Perhaps she'd hoped that once he'd died he'd join her. I don't know. For fifty years after Gerard's death she haunted her family home with her crying. Eventually, the family abandoned the place. Sometime later Jack and I came around trying to track down an insane vampire and found Alice instead. It took approximately two years of haunting Gerard and two hundred years of crying about it before Jack was finally able to convince for her to move on to the other side. Unfortunately, Jack had

to die to do it.

That's nice you might say, but what did the more active and aggressive supernaturals care about a ghost's privacy so much that they'd give them valuable territory? A pack of werewolves was horrendously powerful as were groups of doppelgangers and vampires. Why would they care about the restless dead?

Let me explain.

When a ghost became annoyed, the tricks Alice played on Gerard were just the tip of the very dark and cold iceberg. Most of the ghosts I've heard tell of seemed to be quite elusive. However, the other truly active ghost I'd heard reliable tell of from the people who actually survived the encounter was so evil I won't even discuss it. Suffice it to say that with their powers to possess, cast illusion, and cause hallucinations, ghosts could make even the strongest supernatural's life miserable or short. When you throw in an innate mental instability and the fact that they cannot be killed (after all, they're already dead), one's choices became rather limited in dealing with them. If a ghost wanted to be left alone, it's usually best to do just that.

All this was leading to one rather unimpressive yet eerie fact - there was a ghost in the club playing a flute. It was a quiet, peculiar tune which meshed surprisingly well with the music the living were producing. No one else seemed to notice.

Sasha chose a place at the bar and sat down. She continued to look around the bar for quite some time. Eventually she asked, "Alright, what is it I'm missing? Something's not quite

right here and I can't figure out what it is." Before I could mention the ghost, she continued, "I've spotted the doppelganger at the other end of the bar, the two werewolves at the far corner table, and the vampire that's been following us in mist form by the coatrack... but I'm still missing something." The werewolves and doppelganger appeared to be normal people to the human eye. Sasha and I didn't have human eyes.

Sasha sat there looking puzzled while I stretched my arms to hide my looking back at the coatrack. Sure enough there was something there. It looked like a heavier haze of smoke but it did kinda feel like a vampire... now that she mentioned it. This did a bit of damage to my ego as I hadn't had a clue to his or her presence. Perhaps it was time my ego was taken down a notch, as they sometimes say around here.

It suddenly re-occurred to me that my wife was one of the most beautiful women I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. With her still scanning the room I put my hands on her shoulders and kissed her behind her ear. "Lovely wife of mine," I whispered, "have a look at the band. What do you see?" I then took the opportunity to kiss her neck all the way to her beautiful, bare shoulder.

"Alex, I'll give you exactly two hours to stop doing that," she replied, leaning into me. "The band, huh?" She looked while I began working my way back up to her neck.

"Hey, buddy," the bartender interrupted, speaking with some kind of coarse yankee accent. "You goin' ta buy a drink or what?" I threw him a slightly annoyed look. He gave it right back. "You know this *is* a bar. Sure the music's good but if that's all ya want the motel down the street's got radios built into the headboards and they're a lot more private."

I pulled a twenty out of my pocket and placed it slowly and carefully on the bar. The obnoxious fellow smiled and said, "Great, that's more like it. Now what can I get you folks?"

"Peace. Now go away." He did with a shrug and I put my lips back to work kissing Sasha's perfect neck. "Figure it out dearest?" I asked between kisses.

"Mmm hmm," she murmured, running her hand through my hair, "The instrument that isn't there," she purred. "I wonder why nobody else has noticed?"

"Maybe they don't want to notice. Or maybe they notice but just don't care. Whoever it is *does* play well."

From out of nowhere a quiet, windy voice whispered in my ear, "Thank you. The door."

This startled me considerably. I initially thought that someone else had managed to sneak up on me so that my head turned to where the origin of the voice should have been. I found only empty space. Then my eyes moved on up to the bar's entrance.

In through the door walked what appeared to be a biker gang. At least that's what I got from their outfits and the helmets they carried or wore. I also got the distinct idea that these were all werewolves. Fifteen werewolves. All fairly young with a relatively weak alpha leading them. A temporary subpack then. Great. These groups rightfully have a reputation as violence incarnate.

Sasha never looked at the door. She just whispered, "How many, darling?" I kissed her shoulder again.

"Looks like fifteen, love," I whispered into her shoulder.

"And I thought you didn't like tennis," she told me playfully. Tennis? What did tennis have to do with werewolves? Hmm. Maybe this was an American thing. I'd have to ask Jeff when we got back to the house.

"Well, well. What an interesting...*clientele*...you have here," the young alpha male, stated

loudly. His word choice got him several laughs from his cohorts which seemed to goad him on to further and greater feats of wit. "We gots corpses and weasels at the bar, smellin' the place up as their kind do everywhere they go." He paused briefly for a few chuckles from his bunch, during which time the band stopped. It occurred to me that I hadn't heard the flute since the voice warned me about the thug's entrance. "And *look*, over at the back we got one real dumb mother talkin' to *my* girl." He started the sentence light and with a heavy false cheeriness and ended with a tone of deep menace. Several customers including the living band members chose this time to go to the restroom as the only way out of the bar was now blocked by the pack. The last one into that rather questionable refuge closed the door behind her.

Down through the ages I'd seen the same scene played out what seems like hundreds of times. Actually, I guessed it's been going on down through the ages starting with the cave man clubbing the cave woman over the head and dragging her off. This would be some variant of the same theme, I could already tell. Thus far, we had an antagonist with a crowd of followers. If he had not been a werewolf, I'd say he was just a bully and that he'd be nothing without them to back him up... but that was not the case. Any werewolf was dangerous. This normally wouldn't bother me. However, the fact that their confrontation was interrupting our romantic evening put me in an off mood.

Too bad for them.

"Hey Deke," began the young male werewolf at the back table whom one might reasonably assume was the target of that last statement. "Christi doesn't belong to you or anyone else. In case you didn't notice the day's of slavery ended some time back." His talk was mostly bluster. He was controlling his fear so far but I didn't think the control would last very long against the

odds he faced.

The analytical portion of me, the part that wasn't automatically annoyed by the coarse dialog, noted that the protagonist in this sordid little... play... hath spoken. I wondered if I should go ahead and write out their lines for them. I felt sure I could do a better job than they were doing.

"Bobby boy," quoth the rather large, young alpha as he began walking across the floor. "You screwed up big time. I told you to leave and now I find you not only still in town but with my girl to boot. Now, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to kill you."

Ahhh. The plot thickens. Sorta like a nasty, thin gruel I vaguely remember disliking from my childhood.

The bartender chose this time to pull out a sawed-off, double barrel shotgun from under the bar which he pointed at Deke the werewolf thug. "There ain't gonna be no killin' in my bar. Not now, not no time. 'Less'n it's me doin' the killin'. If'n youse got's a beef wit' someone take it outside. If'n it's a payin' customer you got's a beef wit', take it outside after they' done drinkin'. And in da meantime - get the hell out of my bar!" He cocked back both hammers.

It must be act two already. Someone always seems to get shot in act two.

Deke looked back over his shoulder at his troupe, nodded his head towards the bar, and continued walking on towards Bobby and Christi's table.

The bartender declared in a rising voice, "Look pal. I ain't jokin'!"

Deke stopped and looked back at the bartender. He nodded over his shoulder towards his gang. "Neither are they," he replied, continuing on towards the corner table.

Turning his head slowly towards the door, the bartender finally noticed the arsenal of

weapons pointed at him. With a squeaked, "Oh shit!" he disappeared behind the bar.

I tugged on Sasha's arm and eased us behind the bar too. This drew a few snorts of derision from the pack members that weren't watching Deke's approach towards Bobby and Christi.

"You know," whispered Sasha. "That if they change forms, and it looks like they're about to, then they'll kill or convert all the normals that witness." I nodded and gave the room a quick looking over. Not many normals left. Three of which proceeded to pull amulets out from under their clothing. A circle with a triangle inside it; the whole apparently made of silver. The only other normals outside the bathroom were preppie a couple across the room from the amulet-bearing threesome and of course, the bartender. Beyond them and the various werewolves, the only other person other than ourselves was the doppelganger.

"Note the amulets my dear." I breathed into Sasha's ear.

"I noticed. Enlightened mortals, maybe?"

"Sounds like a good guess to me."

Out on the floor Deke now stood before the young werewolf couple, Bobby and Christi. "I told you, Deke!" she began emphatically. "It's over between us. Now get that through your thick skull and leave. If it will keep the peace, then Bobby and I will leave town. Just leave us alone."

The heroine of our dark little play is thrust into starkly angelic relief. But will she stay true to her convictions when it comes down to blood?

"You and me babe, we ain't over 'til I say we're over."

By this time the rest of the werewolves were pretty well spread out all around the place.

As for the doppelganger, there was no longer any sign of him. On a hunch I did a quick head count and found that there were now sixteen werewolves in the bar. Most interesting.

Now I've never liked bullies. This probably had its roots all the way back to my rather sordid, mostly forgotten childhood. I firmly believed that most of my mental hangups originated in my childhood. That is to say, I blame just about everything on my uncle. He certainly caused more psychological problems than any man should. I've outgrown most of the actual problems but certain traits simply would not go away. And I wouldn't trade that for all the tea in China.

At any rate, I always seemed to feel the need to stick my nose into situations such as this where some might say it doesn't belong. My thinking ran something along the lines that if I wasn't meant to get involved, the situation wouldn't crop up in my vicinity. I guessed it was about time for the real hero to show up and save the day. That way this play could go ahead and get rid of the unwanted extras and the hero could get back to kissing his wife.

I gave Sasha an apologetic look and flew around quickly to stand beside Christi. After smiling a quick hello to that startled individual, I turned to Deke who was busy circling with Bobby around on the dancefloor. Several of the werewolves who'd accompanied Deke seemed to be watching Bobby's back pretty closely - almost as if they planned on wreaking violence upon it. The lovely dialog they had been having seemed to have broken down somewhere along the way. I found it extremely odd to be on the same side as a couple of werewolves.

What was this crazy world coming to?

"Excuse me Deke? Might I have a word with you?" I asked politely.

"I'm busy now, corpse. But if you'll wait a few minutes I'll be happy to attend to you then."

"Very well, I really just wanted to warn you that I can't just stand by and watch a one-sided

fight."

"Then I guess me and the crew will have to mess you up worse than you already are." I patted my hair down just in case that was what he was referring to. I hadn't really expected him to listen anyway.

Suddenly, Deke's clothes ripped apart as his musculature, bone structure, and body hair underwent a rather dramatic change. At approximately the same time Bobby changed but his clothing simply vanished. That gave me some faint hope that Bobby might survive this fight; from what I understand, the discipline that allowed the werewolves to phase away their clothing was difficult to master. If he could do that, then perhaps he had a chance. So, maybe he did have a prayer against the larger Deke... but only if the others didn't all jump in on Deke's side. Since they were all starting to change as well, that seemed unlikely.

Bobby and Deke crashed together and blood began to fly as tooth and claw tore flesh and bone. One of the others made a move to join in and Christi, now a brindle-colored killing machine, intercepted him and began yet another melee. This made the others who appeared tempted to join in pause for a moment.

The scent of blood was having its usual effect on me and I did nothing to stop it. My vision sharpened and my eyes turned red as heat became a visible rainbow of colors. As my incisors dropped down to jut slightly over my lower lip the rest of my senses caught up with my eyesight. I could sense the mist-formed vampire by the door much more clearly now.

In short, dinner time had arrived.

"So, how does werewolf taste?" Sasha asked from right beside me. I had just caught a glimpse of her arrival out of the corner of my eye and that was all that kept me from jumping right

up to the high ceiling. Again. No one else that I know of could sneak half so well... with the possible exception of Miranda (who's another story entirely).

Trying to act as if I wasn't the least bit surprised by her presence, I replied, "Gamey. Gamey but quite satisfying." Four of the pack members jumped in to help both Deke and the one who was beset by Christi. "Shall we dine my dear?"

"Yes, hon', let's do. The bitches fighting the girl look pretty tasty to me. What do you think about the ones around the young man?"

"Mmm. Yes, they do look tasty. I believe I will indeed start there. Meet you in the middle?"

"You got it handsome," and she was away in a blur of motion.

I flew up behind two of the ones that were trying to hold Bobby. I say trying because they were meeting resistance from all sides. First of all, there was Bobby himself. He was moving around quite fast and claw and fang seemed to proceed him. Then there was Deke. Deke was in a berserk rage and was attacking everyone near him including his own people. Last of all, they were totally unable to coordinate their efforts. First one would grab at Bobby, then the other would make a grab... but only after Bobby had already dealt with the first one. As of yet, none of the werewolves were down. This did not come as much of a surprise. In case I didn't mention it, werewolves could absorb a great deal of damage and they healed very quickly.

I reached out and clamped hold of the two I'd chosen and began using my most powerful innate ability upon them. Sinking was what some of us creatures of the night call it. The older, more official name was Cessatium Potentus. The end of strength. In the space of a heartbeat the two were returned to human form. I simply bled away their supernatural powers... for a few

moments anyway. Nifty talent, eh? I really hoped that the werewolves appreciated the centuries of practice it's taken me to perfect it to this level.

While snacking upon one, I tossed the other into some of his friends sending them all to the floor. Bobby and Deke were going at it just a bit too energetically for me to feel comfortable in their near vicinity so, after dropping this now unconscious snack, I moved off to the right in search of another.

Unfortunately, there were a couple of werewolves in the way and they hurt themselves bouncing off my hands and feet and then crashing into the walls and furniture. Since everyone had now departed this area, I tried moving to the left instead. As I passed by Deke and Bobby, I couldn't help but notice that they were making quite a mess of each other. Blood sprayed onto my jacket as I went by which annoyed me to no end. I took some of my frustrations out by taking a moment to beat the next werewolf I came across into a state of unconsciousness. He looked familiar so I may have already beaten him once already. Did I mention that werewolves were able to absorb a great deal of damage? This fellow evidently reached his limit as he stopped moving. I've noticed over the years that breaking a werewolves' bones slowed the healing process down greatly. It did on vampires as well but I'd rather not go into that.

Just as I was turning to see how my wife was doing, something large, hairy, and heavy landed on my back. A mouthful of very sharp fangs then tore into my right shoulder bringing agony while fire seemed to lash the back of my left leg. I'm not sure if I screamed or not. If I didn't, it was only because I was too busy trying to get Rover off my back.

The bastard was clawing my leg with his toe claws while he was attempting to gnaw off my arm where my right shoulder meets my neck. Now not only was the jacket ruined but the pants

too. That did it. They'd gone and made me mad. Too quick for the eye to see, I reached around and grabbed the top portion of his muzzle. Then I squeezed. He tried pulling my arm away but he wasn't strong enough to do so. I could be very strong when I needed to be and I found pain to be a good motivator. And speaking of pain, it was written all over his snout by this time. Well, that made two of us. At least *I* wasn't whining. A friend of his tried to come assist but I handily kicked him off into the rafters. Finally, Spot was in so much pain that he stopped biting me entirely which was what I'd been waiting for.

As he tried to bite off my fingers, I moved my hand away in a blur of motion and as his teeth snapped together I moved just as quickly to reassert my grip on his muzzle holding it closed. With that done I kicked away another of his companions that had run up with thoughts of rescue in mind. Moving further around to my left, I began to move in circles. Hand clamped firmly on Rover's muzzle, I turned faster and faster. A moment later my furry companion's feet left the ground and his clawed hands assumed a deathgrip on my wrists. My new associate was kind enough to knock down several of his friends for me as I went looking for Sasha. More knocked down werewolves and several broken chairs and tables later, I found my lovely wife snacking with some bitch.

I no longer had to turn as I had cleared a space where I could whirl my fuzzy friend over my head. My right arm was starting to feel normal again and my anger was fading along with the pain. Still, there was this really annoying itch in my shoulder and my leg. I tried to think of something else rude I could do with him. About this time Sasha looked up from her meal; her red eyes met mine as blood ran around her lips and down her chin. "Alex, what in the world are you doing?"

Tossing Rover across the dance floor into some of his semi-conscious friends, I walked on over to her, "Nothing dear. Just looking for you." I stopped and grabbed one of her victims and together we supped. We took our time about it. Shortly into the meal, my shoulder and leg began to itch worse as the healing process was sped up by my intake of more supernatural blood.

Sasha dumped the unconscious bitch on the floor. "You were right...they do taste a bit gamey. Gamey but satisfying I believe you said. Quite true." She finally took a good look at me. "Oh, Alex... look at your suit. It's ruined."

Dropping my own unconscious snack to the floor, I nodded to her, "Unless your dress is scotch guarded and Emma is better with a needle than I know, it is too. Shame that, I really liked it."

I took out a hanky and wiped the blood off her face. I then took out another which she took away in order to return the favor. I've always found it convenient to carry several around with me. Something to do with my dining habits you understand.

"Damn. I hadn't noticed that," she replied, looking down at her dress. "Well, maybe Emma can do something with it later - like perform a miracle or something." She turned her attention back to me. "How are you? That does look a bit painful." She stood up and began fingering the shredded cloth around my wounded shoulder. After a moment, she began unbuttoning my shirt.

"Don't worry dear, I'll survive," I told her stoically. I've never been one to mind a bit of extra attention when I feel it's warranted.

Quickly surveying the room, I noticed three individual combats still on going - all werewolf versus werewolf...sorta. Bobby versus Deke and Christi versus some bitch. In addition the

doppelganger seemed to be trying to prove that he was a better werewolf than one of the actual werewolves. As all the remaining combats fit into what I deemed to be personal honor matches, I decided that my part was done.

Off to the side, the three necklace wearing normals were crouched down behind their table which they'd overturned. They seemed somewhat on the shell-shocked side. The other two normals were laid out beside their table, unconscious. I could see their pulses quite clearly and decided that the excitement had just gotten the better of them. Of the bartender there was no sign. There were also no signs of the misty vampire or the ghost.

Having pulled my jacket and shirt off, Sasha began to slowly lick the blood off my nearly healed shoulder while I stroked my hand through her hair luxurious copper-red, blood splattered hair. Now while this may sound extremely weird to a normal or even to some of the other supernaturals, this was *very* stimulating for vampires. She became quite excited which in turn caused me to become even more excited. A delightful little circle.

Due to the rather unusual circumstances of our wedding as well as certain other drastic changes in our lives, Sasha and I have had some difficulty adjusting to married life. This is to say that we hadn't shared just a whole lot of intimate moments. We'd been working on becoming friends, but nothing really close. It was obviously time to go find a nice private place where we could change all that. Time to end the play and exit stage right.

Unfortunately, the arrival of a whole slew of supernaturals put a temporary end to those happy plans.

In through the front door walked, sauntered, and ran a variety of vampires and soulless. Not surprisingly, they were led by Madam Tonya Wilkins. James followed just slightly behind her.

There were some others with her that I doubted very much that she knew about but I decided to leave her in the dark on that count, so to speak. I guessed that the large-boned, Swedish looking woman was the one who'd been tailing us in mist-form but I could be wrong; there were several other vampires there and any one of them could have been our shadow. A strong group - very interesting. Sasha and I shared a quick frown. Tonya had lousy timing on top of all her other faults. Annoyed, I put the remains of my shirt back on.

At about the same time that the vampires arrived at the front door, the werewolves arrived at the back door. Now you may remember from my earlier description that there wasn't a back door. While this was probably in violation of the Atlanta city firecode, the new arrivals made it a moot point...they made a new one. Bricks, mortar, and assorted wood chunks flew in all directions as an elder male already in the combat half-form (what Sasha would probably call a level four Alpha or something similar) outdid Tonya's entrance by the expedient means of bashing in a small section of wall with his bare hands. Of course, he fell about eight feet down to floor level but for a werewolf that's nothing. A moment later several were-lemmings took the plunge and followed after him. Some of them in the half form, some in wolf form, and some simply looking human. One of them, a woman with white-streaked, orangy-red hair caught my eye as being someone of power. Not that any of the new arrivals were weaklings, just that she was a step above the other werewolves with the possible exception of the elder male. These people composed another very strong group.

Apparently evenly matched, the two opposing groups coalesced and then moved to confront each other in the center of the dancefloor. An intense but quiet discussion broke out between Tonya and the werewolf woman. I would hazard a guess that they didn't like each other

very much. The 'peace' couldn't stand too much of that kind of conversation.

Outside I could feel more supernaturals arriving but I couldn't tell who and what all was joining the party. Only that there were a lot of them and that a good number of them were vampires and soulless.

Off to the side an apparently middle-aged werewolf woman walked around and checked the wounded fools. A couple she dragged over to their side of the room. The rest, who were already regaining consciousness, she instructed in very stern tones to move to their side of the room. The one in the rafters she knocked down with a chair before continuing on.

Amusingly, I noticed that there were suddenly four of the necklace bearing normals. I cocked an eyebrow at the fourth but said nothing. He smiled a bright smile that seemed to say that he was having the time of his life. Then, as quickly as the smile had come, it vanished and he went back to being wide-eyed and frightened looking like the other three. I shook my head and returned to watching the show.

Hmm. The passed-out yuppie couple was missing. That would bear looking into and soon.

On the fringes of the dancefloor a victorious Christi staggered back to the werewolf side of the room while her opponent crawled back. Deke and Bobby were still at it but they appeared to have very little energy left. Both were staggering and wobbling in between swings and clawing attempts. The woman (and yes, she was still in human form) finally got around to them and without breaking stride grabbed an ear on each and led them back around behind the elder werewolves.

I couldn't help myself, I burst out laughing. This attracted the attention of the werewolves

and vampires who'd been trying to stare each other down on the dancefloor. This caused them to turn to me and try to stare me down. Well, I haven't lived as long as I have without knowing when to be meek and when not to be. This was definitely a 'not to be' kinda time. Fortunately, with age comes a certain amount of grace under pressure.

Gathering what presense I had about myself, I sauntered up between the two groups noting a good deal of partly concealed weaponry on both sides. I wasn't surprised in the least. ~~Tying~~ to decide whether to use my age old wisdom or my finely honed, rapier wit to break the deadlocked tension between the two women at the heart of this gathering, I suddenly found my way blocked by a large male vampire and a larger male werewolf. They looked surprised to have had the same idea at the same time. You know what they say - lame minds thunk alike.

"Boys," I said my vast amusement nearly bubbling over again. I appreciated my sense of humor even if no one else seemed to. "The ladies can take care of themselves far better than you ever could. Do step aside so that I might converse with them." Surprisingly they actually looked at each other before crossing their arms across their chests. The irony was just too much, sending my mirth bubbling over and causing me to laugh aloud again. I fear it did great damage to their macho self-images.

From behind the great wall of flesh came, "Finn, move your arse. I would have words with anyone so bold or foolish as to laugh at a time such as this," decreed the orange-red haired woman with a light Scottish burr.

"Yes, Carl, move out of Mister Wilde's way. I do *so* want to hear what he has to contribute." Tonya's sophisticated English accent dripped a cloying syrup of excess sweetness. This very much set my teeth on edge although I tried not to let it show. The woman seemed to

be able to annoy me by her mere presence alone. My wife could do that too but I've found that Sasha has many redeeming traits. Not so with Tonya Wilkins.

At any rate the two bruisers moved aside with unconcealed ill grace and I was able to proceed. Just as I was preparing to do so, I received a psychic message that set my smile firmly in place. Moving forward, I decided that now wasn't the time and allowed my smile to slide away again.

There was a bit more room around and between the two ladies than the other participants to this... esteemed gathering. The werewolf who'd made the new entrance was right behind the werewolf woman. Currently he looked like a very muscular, immaculately dressed, forty-something with short, greying brown hair and a bushy mustache. James was standing his opposite.

I pretended to ignore the men and walked up to the orange-red haired woman who was just finishing looking me over from head to toe. "Allow me to introduce myself, I am Alex Wilde." I offered my hand.

Slowly, she reached out and shook my hand with a firm grip.

"Gwendolyn MacTavish. I am packleader for Atlanta."

"I'm glad to meet you Gwendolyn." Believe it or not I was actually sincere. May wonders never cease. Could it be that some of my age old bigotry against werewolves was fading away? Interesting thought. I decided to save that question for later and get on with the matter at hand.

Chaffing my hands together, I addressed the both of them, "Now ladies, let's do something to avert the little war that you both seem so keen on starting."

"What are you talking about Mister Wilde?" demanded red with her light Scottish accent.

"Yes, Alex. Just what *are* you talking about?" Chimed in Tonya with her British accent.

"Let me lay all your cards on the table so that everyone here can benefit from the knowledge and so that each can make an informed decision," I said with no discernable accent. "I'll start with you Tonya.

"You've been planning to take control of the Council since the first day you came into town some thirty odd years ago. Recently, having finally established the prerequisite power base, you began exceeding the limits that the council has set on vampire recruiting. I should imagine that the suburbs and rural areas within fifty miles of the city have been near to overflowing with newly formed vampires for some time. When I showed up, you decided that the time had finally arrived for you to make your grand move. The little scuffle here was a fine excuse for you to come rushing in to save me. So, you sent out the word and rounded up what you could of the vampire community at large. Then you could continue saving me by having your little army... excuse me... community, slaughter every supernatural that they could find until resistance faded away and you were left in charge of the city by default." Actually the whole thing was mainly guesswork and a bit of knowledge about Tonya's historical *modus operandi*. The look in her eyes told me I was close enough to the target that I didn't need a horseshoe or a hand grenade. It also told me she was not a happy camper again as Jeff so loves to say.

"As for you Miz MacTavish," I continued smoothly. "You've known for some time now that Tonya had designs on the Council. I should imagine that you've been looking for an excuse to slap her down and slap her down hard for quite a while now. When a talented musician, who happens to be extraordinarily sensitive to supernatural movements, told you about the little fray your puppies got themselves into and the unusual reaction of the vampire community, you did some quick arithmetic. Putting two and two together, you and at least one other member of the

council determined that Tonya had finally decided to make her move and that this was the place she would start. Therefore, you came as quickly as you could so that you could be at the heart of the matter while the other council member encircled Tonya's army." Once again I was making some barely educated guesses but her eyes said I was pretty close to the mark this time as well. She wasn't a happy camper either.

At this time I received another bit of news via one of my psychic links that almost made me smile. However, the gravity of the situation reasserted its pull bringing my temporary euphoria back down to earth. Fortunately, it was easy to quash the impulse to smile in their faces. I had enough in the way of trouble here without adding to it. At least now I didn't have to worry about the mortal couple who'd passed out earlier.

"In conclusion, I would like to ask that everyone go home and think about ways to solve your problems without resorting to war." I thought it was very nicely done. Unfortunately, the women didn't. Oh, well. At least I'd given optimism a chance.

"Not bloody likely, Alex. The vampires of Atlanta have been suppressed by the council for too long now. We want our freedom and we want it now!" This statement met with boisterous agreement from the people backing her.

"I'm afraid that your idea won't work Mister Wilde," began Gwendolyn slowly as the vampire crowd fell silent. "Tonya here is so bent on taking what she wants that she won't listen to sweet reason. For years now the council has explained why the recruitment must be kept down 'til we were blue in the face. As I suspected all along, force is the only reason that this witch understands. And force we have in plenty to be sure she learns the lesson right!" This brought forth a burst of noisy appreciation from her followers.

All this talk was definitely exciting the troops. Just a bit more and I'd be at the epicenter of WWIII. I hadn't enjoyed WWII and I doubted that I'd enjoy the next one any more. Time to do something and do it in a hurry.

"Now ladies," they certainly weren't ladies but this wasn't the time to mention that. "Let's be reasonable. I don't think either of your respective peoples are prepared to suffer fifty percent fatalities just to make a point. In my expert opinion that's about what both sides would suffer and I am taking into consideration the little surprises that both sides have in store for the other." Actually, I only knew about one surprise that MacTavish had for Tonya but I was sure there were more on both sides. I noticed that neither side looked quite as ready to fight as they had but a moment ago.

"Who told you...!" began Tonya.

"How could you...!" started Gwendolyn.

I just smiled loudly for a moment before continuing.

"This is actually both of your faults you know. Tonya, you've been leading vampires to the final death in pursuit of More for centuries. How many of your people have to die before you get the idea that you might simply sit back and enjoy what you have?" More of her people looked uncertain.

"The council is also to blame. Your intelligence should have reported how Tonya was building up the number of vampires simply to build up the number of vampires. After that, you should have taken immediate, punitive steps before an all out war became the only alternative. You sat on the fence until the only action left was the worst possible one." Gwendolyn did not look happy. A thought came out of the blue and I almost smiled yet again.

"Just for idle curiosity's sake, does the Atlanta council support the duel of honor?" I asked innocently. If it did, a duel might simplify things and get my butt out of vice these two groups represented.

"Yes, but this cow is too much of a coward to accept," snapped Gwen MacTavish. "I've challenged her thrice now and each time her cowardice has shown through."

"I am not a coward, you whining bitch!" snarled Tonya. "It is simply that it is not now, nor has it ever been in my best interest to fight like a... a *commoner*."

I spoke quietly into the silence that followed, "We can't all be royally born Tonya. Even commoners value their life." Was it just me or was there a flicker of... I don't know... some deep expression within Tonya's eyes, erased as quickly as it appeared? I continued, "It is now in your best interest to fight like a commoner. You intend to rule Atlanta. Prove to your subjects-to-be that you're qualified to rule. Show them that you're fit to lead. Show them that you're willing to fight for them." I know far more about the inherent fallacies in this thinking than you will likely ever know or appreciate. No, I do not believe in this type of macho, militant crap... but most of those in the room did and they were the ones surrounding us. Sometimes the end is worth the means. This seemed to be one of those situations.

"Fighting prowess has nothing to do with being a good ruler. There is no good reason for me to fight this homicidal bitch. I plan for my army to disperse these curs and then take over the city. I will then run it the way it should be run... with power and with those at the top of the food chain in command." She was right about the fighting prowess part but as for the rest... where do they get these ideas? Top of the food chain? Unfortunately, most of the vampires in the room seemed to agree with her.

Noticing that MacTavish was about to do something precipitous, I casually moved around between her and Tonya. I leaned towards Tonya and whispered in a voice that she would have to strain to hear even as close as we were, "There's really no need to kill off so many of your people in this little war of yours. Face her fem a fem. You're powerful enough that you stand a good chance of winning and I know that you personally hate her guts. Why kill off so many of your subjects? Besides which, coming out of mass combat in one piece has much more to do with luck than with power. Especially when modern weaponry comes into play." And as it had with the old weaponry. At least there wasn't likely to be tanks or artillery should fighting break out. At least I sincerely hoped not.

Just as quietly she whispered, "There's too many of them now. Some of my people went a bit overboard in recruiting. We don't have the food base to feed them all and maintain the Great Illusion. Four months tops with the current population and the Illusion around Atlanta shatters. Mass slaughter will solve all my problems for me." She referred to the illusion we maintain that vampires and other supernaturals are merely legends. In other places it's called the Delusion, the Blindness, the Phantasm, the Shadowlife, and numerous other names in numerous languages. In most cases, those mortals unfortunate enough to learn the truth either have their memories tampered with or they are converted to the Shadowlife in some fashion. Or they are killed outright. Tonya had brought not only the city but the supernatural community as a whole to the brink of disaster.

I opened my mouth and closed it several times before I actually managed to say anything.

Gwendolyn was demanding to know how it was going to be and the natives on both sides were getting restless. Tonya looked like she was ready to order her fools into battle any second.

Finally, I managed, "Fight her one on one and regardless of the outcome I'll take care of your excess population."

"Why Alex," she said with a knowing quirk of a smile, "I had no idea you could be so cold-blooded. I do like your attitude though."

"Very well," she declared in a loud voice. "I will fight this silly bitch and take over the city with a minimum of bloodshed. The welfare of my people is my only concern." Evidently, she thought I planned on committing mass murder. Gwendolyn, smiling wickedly, immediately ordered a larger circle cleared and Tonya's people hurried to match.

Once the circle was cleared, I stepped into the middle of the circle and held up my arms. Silence quickly descended upon the room. "For those of you who do not know me, I am Alexander Wilde. By my blood I swear to you that I do not care who wins this contest so long as it doesn't end in mass slaughter. As the eldest third party here, I will referee this duel of honor." Turning to first Gwendolyn, then Tonya, I awaited their nods of agreement before continuing. "Let all remember that this is a duel of *honor* and that interference of any kind is a grave *dishonor* to those being tested."

"Also, let those who would interfere be aware that my assistants Jeff, Michael, Emma, Joe, and Paulena will permanently stop any who try to interfere. Any." I gestured grandly towards the bathroom door which obligingly opened as those afore named entered from there. The five of them were decked out in plain black jump suits with plain-looking black boots. Underneath, they wore enough kevlar and metal plating to build a tank. They also carried a variety of heavy weaponry including a small rotary machine gun, a belt fed grenade launcher, what looked like a flame thrower but was actually a liquid nitrogen sprayer, not to mention a drum fed shotgun and

a man...er...woman portable, carbon dioxide, 30 watt pulse laser. Oh the toys we rich boys could find to play with. Earlier, when the big boys and girls arrived, Sasha had slipped into the restroom with the unconscious couple and cleared out the refugees while the earlier discussion was taking place. Evidently, she'd created a door similar to the werewolf's but much less dramatically. Sasha had mentally been in touch with Paulena and the others who not so coincidentally were in town and heavily armed. I really hadn't been sure about how dinner would turn out so I had sent them ahead just in case.

Sasha had kept Paulena and the others waiting next door just in case our little ruckus with the pups got out of hand. It was good thinking on her part because in the heat of the moment I had forgotten that they were in the city. Some old reflexes died far too easily.

"One other thing you might want to note," I informed the crowd. "Is that if your neighbor looks as if they might do something foolish - oh, say something which might dishonor our combatants - you might want to stop them. If the referee's assistants have to stop someone, you can bet that everyone around them will get stopped as well." I smiled brightly to the crowd which looked a bit less enthusiastic than it had earlier.

"Ladies," I called loudly, addressing the two combatants. "The rules are simple - do not leave the circle. Any questions?" Without so much as a glance at me or a nod in my direction, they immediately launched themselves at each other; Gwendolyn changing to half form in mid-leap.

I really hadn't thought there would be any questions.

Crashing together, they hit, kicked, clawed, bit, pulled hair and rent flesh. Thirty years of suppressed hatred for each other meant they very quickly worked themselves up to a level of such

ferocity that the crowd began backing away again. I needn't have worried about the melodramatics with the heavy weaponry; such was the intensity of this fight that everyone stood as if spellbound.

The spell seemed to suddenly break as the audience began shouting for their champion to win. It very quickly became horrendously loud.

Gradually, the grappling became a more mobile combat as each began to make quick darting attacks. Blood flew from both in fine sprays as they moved about the circle at speeds that became increasingly difficult to see. Both were healing the terrible wounds the other dealt to them but at the expense of their lifeforce and blood. The longer the fight lasted, the slower the healing would be until lifeforce and blood were finally spent. The winner would have to feed quickly and the traditional meal would be the loser. I know it's barbaric and against church doctrine, but it would save some innocent from being used to sate their hunger later that evening. Besides which, I seriously doubted that either of them belonged to the church.

Now the combatants were moving around the circle so fast that they were almost a blur. The shouting and yelling began to quiet down some. Looking around the circle, I saw many faces showing the sick realization of what it would have meant for them to have gone against an elder supernatural if the battle had actually occurred. Unable to move at nearly the speed or with nearly the strength, they would have been as crippled sheep before the lion. Their faces said they now understood. I hoped they really did.

On the other hand, the few elders present seemed on the verge of one of the few things vampires and werewolves had in common. A bloodrage. In case I hadn't mentioned it before, a bloodrage was a very simple thing. It was a cross between a feeding frenzy and a berserker rage. This condition was brought on by our most potent stimulant - namely blood - and a lapse in self-

control. There was an awful lot of blood in the air at the moment and most everyone was still psyched up for fighting. If I didn't do something quick, all those newly enlightened shmucks were going to die anyway.

I looked around for the flute player. As was the case earlier, I didn't see whoever it was but hoped they had returned after informing the Council of Eight of Madam Wilkin's attempted coup.

"Hello?" I called quietly to the air.

No reply. Hmm. So just how does one go about contacting a ghost?

Maybe if I psychically projected flute music the player would get the idea and come over. It seemed worth a shot so I gave it a try.

Now psychic communication, especially outside my 'family' has never been one of my stronger abilities. I can talk to my immediate descendants over quite some distance but for those who are removed by several generations or are completely outside my lineage, it's quite difficult. Thankfully, ghosts seem to be very sensitive to this sort of thing.

"You wished to speak with me?" came from right beside me. I was somewhat prepared this time around and managed not to jump. It still startled the crap out of me, but I didn't jump. Looking towards the source of the voice, I found nothing.

"Can you hear me alright?" I asked quietly.

"Just fine. Why did you call me?" The voice sounded vaguely feminine but was so breathy and diffuse it was hard to tell for sure.

"Numerous elders on both sides are on the verge of a bloodrage. I've gone to a good deal of trouble to prevent wholesale slaughter here and I'd really hate for all that effort to go to waste."

"What do you think I can do about it?"

"For starters I thought maybe you and some of the other ghosts could cool the temperature down a bit. Then maybe you could... I don't know... influence some the elders. I really don't know that much about ghosts but I was hoping that you could come up with something."

"We might be able help. Will we need to restrain yourself as well?" It asked in that breathy voice that could almost have been the wind.

"I'm afraid I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Your own eyes have turned red and your fangs are out. Are you sure you will remain part of the solution and not become part of the problem?"

This startled me a bit. I hadn't really noticed that my fangs were out again or that I was seeing into the infrared spectrum. The potency of the blood that was being sprayed around was affecting even me. I was suddenly glad I'd dined earlier as I noticed for the first time just how good the blood of the two elders smelled. But, I've been tempted towards inappropriate dining before and I have never given in - and I never will.

"Do not worry. I will be part of the solution," I told the ghost firmly.

"Good. I'll go get the others and we'll see what we can do to avoid another pitched battle here." Another pitched battle? Sounded like I need to visit the library and do a little historical research.

For an instant the two combatants stopped as Tonya forced the half-form Gwendolyn to her knees, her arm twisted in a lock hold. Tonya then bit the back of the werewolf's shoulder. A collective groan escaped from the werewolves watching. Suddenly, Gwendolyn managed to tuck her head and roll forward. A clawed hand across the vampire's face and Tonya was no longer

biting her. The fighting blurred back into the mobile combat. The werewolves howled in relief and the vampires sighed.

"Ahem," came from right behind me. I managed not to jump again; I've certainly been getting more than my fair share of practice of late. Turning, I found my beloved Sasha. Her eyes were also a brilliant red and her fangs had put in an appearance as well. She looked so sexy... I hoped this mess would settle down soon so that we could get back to getting intimate.

"I did not want to startle you, dearest," she told me with her Russian accent once again in evidence. "But, I was wondering if you'd noticed the frost that's forming on the walls and on the weapons. If so, might you have some idea why it's happening?"

"Hello gorgeous. Did you notice the... quality... of the blood that's being sprayed about?"

"Yes. It is coming from a elder vampire of approximately fourth degree power and from an elder werewolf of approximately the same potency level. Either would provide nourishment for about month and would taste - extraordinary. Now, answer my question, please."

Someday I'm going to have to get the details on her rating system. In the meantime, I quietly explained about the bloodrage and about the ghosts. She seemed to know about the bloodrage already. Hardly surprising.

Hearing a change in the background noise, I turned to see what was happening. The crowd was reacting to the combatant's slowing down. They were down to merely moving around a bit more quickly than mortals. Time to double my vigilance.

I gave Sasha a kiss that wasn't quite so quick as I had originally intended before flying up slightly so that I had a better view of the crowd and the combatants.

Both women looked like hell. They were covered in blood and Tonya's clothes were cut

to shreds. The blood smell was heavier than ever and many of those on the front row were visibly salivating. It seemed obvious that the closer the women came to ending the fight, the closer the observers would come to losing control.

"We cannot restrain more of them than are already restrained. If more lose control, you will have to intervene," said the breathy voice from right above me. Reflexively I looked up but of course there was nothing but the rafter before me.

So the initiative returned full circle. Time to earn my keep. And I quickly got a chance to do just that.

Gwendolyn faked a forward attack against Tonya's leg and instead raked Tonya's arm from wrist to elbow with her claws. As the blow slammed her arm back, Tonya inadvertently splashed blood upon a couple of taller watchers in the second row.

Without looking away from the fight and nearly in unison, the two werewolves licked the blood off their arms. One after the other, they began changing to half-form and moving the few viewers before them as they began to walk into the fighting area.

I sent a quick message to Jeff so that I wouldn't get shot, lased, or frozen. To build up the energy to move as quickly as I was about to, I spent what seemed an enormously long moment concentrating.

In reality, it was closer to the twinkling of an eye. As the two were just stepping into the circle, I was suddenly with them. I used their mass to help slow my inertia. This had the much desired side effect of propelling them into the back wall. At this point they decided to take a little nap. The half dozen mixed supernaturals who'd been flattened by the werewolves aerial passage got up grumbling. I glared a few daggers at them and they decided that it wasn't worth making

an issue over. Besides, they should have stopped the two without me having to wade in.

Back in the circle the fight was wearing down to its conclusion. I slowly flew over the fighters on my way back to my side of the room, giving the spectators a long look as I went by. I didn't think anyone else would try to interfere. Not before the fight had ended anyway.

Gwendolyn seemed to be in better shape than Tonya but only just. They were now staggering around much as Christi and her unnamed opponent had been just before Christi's victory. Tonya flicked a taloned hand at Gwendolyn's eyes and as the werewolf flinched back, she hooked a leg and dropped into the knee with an elbow. The crunch was clearly audible.

Tonya then twisted the werewolf's good leg so that Gwendolyn came crashing to the floor muzzle down. The vampiress then clamped down hard with her taloned hands on the good leg to keep Gwendolyn from moving and bit into the back of the werewolf's calf. Gwendolyn howled and half the room howled with her. If this continued for more than a few moments, Gwendolyn would have no strength left to fight, would go into shock, and then die of blood loss. I carefully scanned the crowd but no one seemed on the verge of interfering. Perhaps the two examples napping below the new indentions in the far wall acted as a deterrent. Maybe the will to mindlessly slaughter each other had faded. Or perhaps the targeting lasers that swept over the spectators gave their common sense a wake up call. I really couldn't say which, if any, of these helped but everyone stayed in place and didn't interfere which is all I could have asked of them. The room fell silent for a moment before becoming even louder than before.

From where Tonya crouched, greedily sucking the lifeblood out of Gwendolyn, she couldn't see it. Most of the crowd could though. The werewolf was concentrating mightily. She wasn't trying to get up or move around or otherwise change position. From the way she was

intently staring at her broken knee I figured out quite quickly that she was trying to speed the healing to her leg. It seemed to be working too for the leg began to oh so slowly straighten. A few of the vampire side were trying to warn Tonya about the leg but the werewolves were effectively drowning them out. I kept a close eye on both sides to make sure that shouting was all they did.

One way or another this was almost over and I didn't want a repeat of the near battle. With this in mind I looked around for and found the shapeshifter that had been a man, then a werewolf, then another man, and was currently a vampire. After a moment, he seemed to feel my stare. When he looked up, I gestured him over. To my pleasant surprise he started over immediately.

A quick look down at the fight told me that the battle was progressing but hadn't quite reached it's conclusion. Gwendolyn's leg continued to straighten but she became paler and paler beneath her blood spattered fur. As the doppelganger approached, I descended from the air to meet him.

"How may I help you, oh esteemed vampire lord?" he asked in a normal voice that I had to strain to hear over the roar of the crowd. He still seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

"Do you know the leaders of your community? If so, can you find them quickly?" I didn't have time for games and I was reasonably sure I wouldn't think of an appropriate response to his greeting until I was about to fall asleep this morning. Fortunately, he seemed to be able to hear me as clearly as I could hear him.

"Yes to both o' vampire amongst vampires." I decided that with a little effort this fellow could get on my nerves.

"Good. Go tell them that this is almost over and that the crowd will need to be dispersed

as quickly as possible in order to prevent another fight from breaking out."

"I believe that the whole council is well aware of this and has in fact already dispersed the crowd that had been gathered around this building. If I'm not mistaken, and I seldom am, the council will not want to miss such a time as this for speechifying and inflicting boring discourse upon their erstwhile constituents. If I can be of further service, just ask for 'Martin'". With that he bowed and departed. Martin was definitely a character.

Turning back to the fight, I found that Gwendolyn's leg was healed. She was slowly drawing her now healed knee up to her chest. Tonya didn't seem to be paying any attention. Suddenly, with a motion fully as quick as the earlier portion of the combat, Gwendolyn snapped her leg down kicking Tonya in the forehead. There was a nasty crunching sound and the vampiress slid several feet across the floor smearing an area already covered by a fine, bloody mist. We all looked on in silence.

In my time, I have seen vampires heal worse injuries than Tonya's compressed and likely shattered neck vertebra as well as the depression in her skull. Of course, those vampires were in the prime of health and were from bloodlines that heal quickly. Most of them had ingested some supernatural's blood beforehand as well.

To my knowledge Tonya had none of these benefits other than the blood she'd been able to drain from the werewolf. A thin trickle of blood ran out of Tonya Wilkin's mouth onto the already bloody floor. The surprised look would be the last expression to ever cross her face.

Flying back up into the air, I announced to the crowd that this duel of honor was over. Vampire leaders stay and we would discuss what was to be done. Everyone else go home. Quietly, without fanfare, the crowd began to do just that avoiding the center area as they left.

In the middle of the floor the elder werewolf, who'd created the backdoor, sat holding Gwendolyn. She was again in human form and the garments she wore were only lightly bloodied. However, nasty looking scars now covered most of her exposed skin. As I watched, a young woman brought a small chalice filled with a golden yellow liquid to the man. The big guy took it and began to gently feed it to his victorious leader. Moments later the scars slowly began to fade and the packleader for Atlanta slowly came back from the brink of death.

Beside Tonya's body knelt James. A single tear worked its way down his face. I slowly flew over and landed beside him. Tonya looked the opposite of Gwendolyn. Her body was in near perfect condition due to the healing effects of drinking the werewolf's blood but her clothes were shredded.

"She wasn't perfect," began James without looking up. "Lord knows she was not perfect. But she was my friend for nearly two centuries and I loved her best I was able as I know she loved me." James' voice shook with real emotion as he laid his coat over her still form. I was most impressed that he could still feel emotion after living for so long. Few soulless felt anything at all after living that long.

"Her passing shall be mourned," I told him.

"Will you truly mourn her passing Alexander Wilde? Will you miss her - the person who caused such a mess that you had to all but force her into combat against MacTavish? Will you mourn the lady who wanted to live like a queen every night of her second life because she started every day of her first life in abject poverty. Will you mourn for the lady who watched her family die at the whim of a noble. Who in turn became a noble so that she need never again be on the side of the downtrodden. Who never learned the value of life because the world taught her that

life had no value? Will you truly mourn her?" He looked up into my eyes then. It is a look I have seen before. A soul penetrating stare that is filled with aching, raw emotion. Each time I see that look I pray that it is my last time to have to see it. This was no exception.

"Yes," I told him meeting the pain in his eyes with the pain I felt. "I will mourn her. Mine is not to judge, I leave that to higher powers. All life is precious. It is a hard learned lesson that I continue to learn but I am learning it. All life *is* precious. I will mourn her passing and the part I played in it - but I will also give thanks to the Lord that I need mourn only one this evening and not the passing of scores. Of hundreds if not thousands."

A second tear slowly ran down his other cheek as a long quiet moment passed. "Amen," was all he said as he picked up and carried away the body of his mistress.

As Martin predicted, the council did show up but not in time to catch most of the crowd. I was happy to see that the ancient tradition of eating the loser of these sordid events seemed to have died out some time ago. Gwendolyn was horrified when I mentioned it.

"We're civilized people here Mister Wilde. We're not some rabid animals loosed upon society. We *are* members of society." I would have to do a bit of investigation into that before I was ready to go that far but for the moment I was more than willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. I smiled, nodded, and moved on.

Forty vampires remained. Not many of them were elders but several were. "What do we do now?" One of them asked me.

"That is a good question," came the answer from across the room. "It is a question that the entire council will have to decide." The council stood in a semicircle around the center of the room where the fight had just been waged. To my left stood the troll, dwarfing the others. Next to it was Gwendolyn, now dressed in a kimono-like robe. Then came a thirtyish-looking, blonde man who was a shape shifter and much older than the thirty-something he appeared. A white-haired, old human lady walked slowly around in front of the troll. She wore a necklace like the three men at the table had. To my right a transparent black woman, a blonde woman of indeterminate age whom I pegged as the free soulless, and a shifty-eyed, short, thin fellow whose long nose suggested he was the wererat rounded out the council. The blonde, soulless woman seemed to be the speaker. Each had a fair supply of followers scattered hither and yon.

"Well, don't just stand there. We have a problem to solve... let's get to it," I told them. I really didn't want this to drag on all night.

"Your suggestion is a good one," intoned the soulless woman. "However, we have more than one problem...."

Eventually, we worked it all out. A large portion of the excess vampires were sent to my good friend and near sister Selina. Since she'd just taken over Dallas, once known as the Tripartite City as you may have noted earlier, she needed the extra people to help solidify her position as much as we needed some of the excess people to leave. I had need of a few addition people and it turned out that some of the other elders had distant friends in need of new faces as well.

Between us, we managed to reduce the number of vampires in the city back to an acceptable level.

The shapeshifter, the original Randolph (Randy) Mitgaur, then informed the group that the werewolves had exceeded their pack recruiting limitations in preparing to meet the vampires. Gwendolyn just nodded and made arrangements for Deke and his subpack as well as some others to move to some city in northern Alberta, Canada. I fear that Canada will be some time recovering from this.

Then there was the matter of choosing a new vampire representative. When my name came up I flat out told them I wouldn't do it. Fortunately for me, they weren't interested enough in sharing power with an outsider that they pressed the issue. Once dropped, the request remained dropped. From there several of the vampire elders present batted around a score or so of names. Voting lasted long into the evening but eventually it was decided that a fellow named Miguel Santiago would represent the vampires on the Council of Eight. Miguel was old enough to demand respect yet young enough to be flexible. The rest of the council ratified his election immediately.

With the Council of Eight restored, all remaining business was dumped into the council's lap and we were finally able to go home. Tommy drove us back to the estate in the large van that he and the other arrived in.

I would say from there that things got back to normal but they didn't. From the time we got back Sasha and I began spending a great deal more time in private together. We noticed that

Jeff and Emma seemed to be spending a good deal of time together as well. I guess the spring air was near to bursting with romance. In addition, visitors from the city began to arrive on a more or less regular basis as did neighbors stopping by to visit. Normal was being redefined.

Our first visitors were Bobby and Christi. They arrived one evening around ten. They just wanted to say 'thank you' which they did. After graciously accepting their gratitude, Sasha invited them to dinner. It was plain to see that they were a bit anxious but they did accept, if with a certain degree of trepidation. Once they figured out that they weren't going to be the main course or even an appetizer, the two of them relaxed. I must say that I was surprised to find that I enjoyed their company. They were both polite, intelligent, and interesting young people. We invited them to stay for a few days and after a brief discussion they agreed which added to collective romance in the air.

The next day Joanna came by for a visit (minus the binoculars). She, Sasha, and Christi wandered the grounds talking while I slept in. Jeff informed me later that he liked the young werewolves and that Bobby was a good chess player. I do enjoy a good game of chess. Perhaps later. There had evidently been quite a discussion about the fact that Sasha has no problems in the daylight. Our new friends were persuaded to keep that little tidbit to themselves - the fewer who knew the details, the happier I am.

Other visitors included Miguel Santiago, who was looking for some advice; James Hughes, who came by looking for a job - and found one; Randy Mitgaur and Martin, who came by together and mainly seemed to be just seeing what there was to see; and so on. It was an odd time for someone like myself who'd spent most of the past fifty years in near seclusion. As the days passed, I decided that I enjoyed all the company. Just so long as it didn't detract too much of my alone-

time with my Sasha.

The papers mentioned an altercation in the bar and some collateral damage to the property that would close it down for a couple of weeks. That was it. Without a doubt, the Council of Eight held a great deal of influence in the city.

I believe that I have finally gotten around to following Jack's parting advice to live my life instead of watching it pass me by. So here I am, living life again. Our house has become a home. I find that I am in love with my wife and my love is returned whole heartedly. On top of all that we have a steady stream of interesting visitors arriving almost daily.

I can't wait to see what happens next.