



Wounded (Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter 24.5)

Author: *Laurell K. Hamilton*

Category: Vampires, Fantasy, Horror

Description: Be proud of Life's battle scars, it means you were stronger than whatever hurt you, and you didn't die—and Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter and U.S. Marshal will be the first to show you hers in this sweet and sexy story of celebration and connection from #1 New York Times bestselling author Laurell K. Hamilton.

Anita attends the wedding of her close friend but finds that even on the happiest of days there are wounds that need healing. She and the wereleopards Micah and Nathaniel are asked to talk to the bride's thirteen-year-old brother, Tomas, who is struggling to recover from a recent gunshot wound. Depressed and demoralized, Tomas isn't doing his physical therapy and could spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair...

How can Anita, Micah, and Nathaniel convince Tomas that he can heal when he's given up? They tell him about their own scars and how they took back their own lives after they were wounded. And Anita will realize how lucky they are to have not only survived their pasts, but to now be able to make their own formal commitment to each other— and the vampire in her life...

Total Pages (Source): 14

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

FROM THE AUTHOR

First off, if you have not read my novel *Dead Ice*, this story is full of spoilers. Seriously, if you read this before you've read the novel, some of the mystery will be ruined. Hell, just reading this introduction to the story has spoilers in it, now that I think about it. Please, stop reading now if you have not read *Dead Ice*! Are you still reading? If so, I'm going to have to assume you have read *Dead Ice* and nothing I write from this point on will spoil the plot for you. If you have not read the novel and you've read all these spoiler alerts but you are still reading this, then that is all on you. You have been warned! Second, *Wounded* is not a complete story; it's more an outtake scene from *Dead Ice* or maybe an extended epilogue. I finished writing the novel and there just wasn't room to see the wedding on screen or to go into more detail about what happens to Tomas and Connie after the book ends. A lot of fans contacted me online to say that they were wondering the same thing and really wanted to see at least a little of the wedding. So I decided that if we all wanted to see more of the story, maybe I could make that happen. Here, because you guys wanted to see it on stage and so did I, is Anita and the loves of her life at the wedding; and we get to see Jean-Claude dancing with Manny's wife, Rosita. He made her blush in a good, "part of me is still that teenage girl" way. It made me happy to write the scene, so I could read it. Seeing more of Manny's family on stage at last was fun, poignant, and reminded me how much I love all my characters. They say that there is no such thing as a small part, only small actors. I feel the same about my characters, which is why I wrote a novelette to share some of the minor-major characters that don't get enough screen time during the novels. If you guys love *Wounded* enough, then maybe I'll be able to do more stories like this one to show you events that never make it into the main novel, but that we'd all like to see somewhere.

THEY SAY WHEN your friends' kids start getting married, it makes you feel old, but since Consuela Rodriguez was only six years younger than me, I wasn't really worrying about it. It was the first wedding I'd gone to since I hit puberty where no one asked me when I thought I'd get married, because I was wearing an engagement ring on my finger big enough to signal airplanes from a deserted island. I actually didn't like wearing it in public; it made me feel like I was asking to get mugged. In a perfect world I should have been able to cover myself in diamonds from head to foot and walk anywhere alone, but the world wasn't perfect and it just seemed mean to wear something so tempting when I was usually armed with two guns and multiple knives, plus a badge that said U.S. Marshal on it.

Today I was only carrying one gun. I didn't think the wedding reception would get that out of hand. I almost never went anywhere unarmed, but I hadn't thought about dancing at the reception and whether the gun would stay concealed. I'd just been happy to find another dressy outfit that I could conceal any handgun on. The little Sig Sauer .380 fit nicely in the Galco Tuck-N-Go to one side of the short red skirt, with the red top that came down over the belt loops that I'd had tailored onto the skirt. The loops were wide enough for my gun belt to slide through and fasten around front tight enough that the Sig stayed put, so if I did have to draw the gun, my hand would find it from body memory and not have to go hunting around. I'd been carrying at the small of my back when I wanted to be ultraconcealed, until I'd done some training drills and discovered that if the gun wasn't at my side where I usually carried, it took me a few extra seconds to draw, aim, and fire. Those few seconds could cost me, or someone else, their life out in the field, so I started having belt loops put on my skirts, and the very unfeminine belt slide through all of the waists, because that was what it took to hold the gun, any gun, in place. I could change my holster, my gun, but the gun needed to be at my side for my hand to find it automatically. I was just glad I'd found out in training and not in the field. In training you could fix it; in the field you got dead.

Nathaniel Graison stood beside me in a gray tailored suit that showed off the broad

shoulders, slender waist, and nice ass and slid over the swell of his thighs like a polite glove: tight enough to show off, but not so tight it was obvious. The lavender dress shirt was buttoned up to the smooth line of his neck and gave his skin just a little color and the hint that he'd probably tan if he ever tried, but he didn't bother. The shirt also deepened the color of his eyes so they were more intense than the shirt, like violets to the shirt's paler lilac. His driver's license said his eyes were blue because they wouldn't let him put purple down as a choice. His tie was silver with a tie bar that looked silver but was actually platinum because it wouldn't make his skin react, since like most shapeshifters he was allergic to silver. His almost ankle-length auburn hair was back in a tight braid so he didn't trip me when we danced. His hair never seemed to get in his way when he moved--maybe it was practice; he was an exotic dancer, and the hair was often loose while he worked.

He was smiling and moving ever so slightly in time to the music. I had enough dancers in my life, from exotic to professional ballet, to know that they all moved, even when they thought they were standing still, as if their bodies couldn't help but make grace out of the noise of everyday life.

Manny had been standing next to his slender daughter, gazing up at her, because Connie had gotten about five inches of extra height from her mother's

side of the genetics, but now he was dancing with his wife. Two of her brothers had been dragged onto the dance floor by their wives. Rosita's brothers towered over most of the other men in the room, not just tall but wide, like big, burly refrigerators who smiled often, bright smiles in dark faces. They hugged more as the afternoon reception wore on. At least two of them had gone to college on football scholarships, though I wasn't sure which of the six it had been. Another ran his own heating and cooling business, one was an accountant, and another did something about freight hauling. They'd been introduced to me in a mass as "These are my brothers." Rosita had rattled off their names and jobs too fast for me to follow all of it. I figured the names were more important to remember than jobs, so I concentrated on that. I could

name four out of six. At one point she'd tried to fix me up on a blind date with one of them, back when she was convinced I'd end up an old maid at twenty-four. Lucky for me that I was engaged at thirty-one or Rosita would have been having fits.

Rosita was built like her brothers, though I'd seen pictures of her wedding to Manny and she'd been a tiny slip of a girl, but that's what can happen when you marry a girl before she's stopped growing taller. She'd been a couple inches below his five foot six once, but now she was five-eight or maybe five-nine, and three children plus several miscarriages had broadened the rest of her, but Manny gazed up at her as if she were still the delicate girl he'd fallen in love with as they danced, his head resting on her ample bosom. The drinks had been flowing enough that she didn't make him move his head now.

Connie, the bride, and Mercedes, her sister and maid of honor, were built like Manny's lean and wiry frame, but tall like models thanks to Rosita. They were talking excitedly across the room. Their brother, Tomas, sat in a corner across the room in the wheelchair that Connie had finally persuaded him to use. The crutches he'd used to walk up the aisle were leaning by the chair, his hand on them, so he'd know he could get back up. He was thirteen and had never been badly hurt before; the first time is an eye-opener. He'd used crutches to stand in church, proud to be on the groom's side, but by the time the ceremony was over he'd been pale and sweating. Getting shot will do that to you, even if it was a few weeks ago. He'd missed going to State with his track-and-field team because a bad guy had kidnapped Connie and him. I'd been part of the team that had stopped the bad guy and gotten them out, but not before he'd shot Tomas and left him for dead.

Tomas was trying to sit up straight, but he was in pain, hiding it, but hurting. He'd been almost as tall as Connie's six-foot groom, though still willowy, with big hands and feet as if he hadn't finished growing into himself. He was still pretty like his sisters, with heavy black hair spilling forward in a sort of bad-boy I-just-rolled-out-of-bed-like-this style, which I knew took a hell of a lot of hair product to pull off.

Apparently, the men had gotten their hair done, along with the women; I liked that--even-handed worked for me.

Micah Callahan, our other sweetie, was standing beside Tomas, and since he was five-three, my height, he didn't have to bend much to talk to the young man. Micah looked elegant and dapper in his tailored black pinstripe suit. Nathaniel could have pulled off an American off-the-rack suit--it wouldn't have looked as good as the Italian cut, but it would have worked--but Micah was swallowed up in American suits, even tailored ones. This suit, however, showcased his athletic build and musculature. He had that upside-down triangle going, like a swimmer, though his sport of choice was running. He'd already started tanning again from running outside, even though it was only May. He tanned dark, and he never quite stopped being dark, as if it were a blush across the perfection of his skin tone, made richer by the forest-green dress shirt, with its black tie and gold tie bar. He couldn't wear silver for the same reason Nathaniel couldn't.

Micah leaned down a little farther, the movement spilling his dark brown braid over one shoulder. His black-lensed sunglasses hid his eyes completely and made his face look a little less sympathetic than I knew he was being as he got Tomas to talk. Micah was good at listening and helped a lot of people deal with trauma as the head of the Coalition for Better Understanding Between Human and Lycanthrope Communities, but he was also a survivor of the attack that made him a wereleopard. He had his own scary story to share with Tomas. Rosita had told me that she was worried that the boy wouldn't talk about it, that he wasn't eating right or sleeping well, and did I know anyone who could get him to talk. Connie was talking, why wouldn't Tomas? Manny and I had both told her, Because he's a boy, but that didn't satisfy her, so I'd talked to Micah. He'd said if the chance came he'd try to talk to Tomas, but he wouldn't force it at the wedding. Apparently, he'd found his chance.

The music changed to something slower, and Nathaniel took my hand. "Dance with me."

It bothered me to dance in public, I wasn't sure why, but it did. I used to refuse to do it, but all the men in my life seemed to love to dance, so what could I do? I let them practice with me in private and I got over it. "Sure," I said, smiling, and steeling myself for that initial nervousness.

He took my hand in his and led me onto the dance floor. I hung back a bit and was a little stiff as he tried to twirl me into his arms, but he got me into the circle of his arms, one hand in his, our other hands at the small of each other's back. All right, his was at the small of mine. I couldn't quite reach around and had to settle for the side of his lower back. It still meant we were closer than a lot of people on the dance floor, but not as close as the people who were doing the high school prom thing of pressing their bodies as close as possible and moving in little circles. We had daylight between us, because Nathaniel danced-danced. I watched his chest and shoulder area, not because the view was great, but for the same reason I might in a fight, because you have to move the core of the body before you can move the rest. I watched for the first movement, so I could move with his hands and arms, rather than be a step behind.

I'd learned to follow him on the dance floor and trust that he would lead me through the dance. If I just trusted his body, his hands, his arm as it tightened and guided, the brush of his leg, all would direct me as surely as he did sometimes in the bedroom. There, sometimes I liked to lead, and he was good with that, too, but on the dance floor he was the boss, because he was so damn good at it.

He glided around the dance floor, and if I didn't overthink it but just followed his lead, I glided, too. Of course, the minute I thought that I missed a step; he was patient and swept me around for another turn, so I could catch up and come back to the circle of his arms as if it had all been planned.

I finally gazed up into those amazing eyes of his and was able to just feel his body without having to stare at it. I could feel the sway of his body and go with it; a slight

pressure of his hand and I knew where we were going. It was like magic to dance with Nathaniel; he could make almost anyone look good. He gazed down at me, smiling, face eager, his body so excited to move to the music. His enthusiasm was contagious--Nathaniel's happiness was one of my happy thoughts. I loved seeing his eyes shining, lips slightly parted as he half-laughed and sort of glowed down at me, because I was dancing with him, and because he knew what it had cost me to learn to do it with him.

He dipped me, which he'd finally gotten me to do without either making a surprised squeak, which I hated, or going stiff in his arms, which he hated. He'd thought the squeak was cute. We finished the dance, and a new song came on. People began to line up, so it was a line dance, no partner needed.

"Do you know the dance?" I asked.

"No, but . . ." He shrugged those great shoulders of his.

"Line dancing is still above my skill set," I said, laughing, "but you go dance."

He smiled at me, eyes shining. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'm sure." I gave him a little push toward the other people already starting to move, and he ran out to put himself in line. He maneuvered himself to be standing beside a woman who seemed to know the dance perfectly. He watched her move and moved with her; within two repetitions he was moving in perfect ti

me as if he'd known the dance forever. I'd seen him do it before, but it never ceased to impress me.

Micah had moved down to be closer to Tomas as the boy talked. Micah didn't kneel, but balanced on the balls of his glossy leather dress shoes so that Tomas was actually

looking down at him from the chair. Being taller would make him feel more in charge, and apparently that was what Micah wanted. I trusted him to make the most of their quiet corner talk.

The groom's mother came over to me. She was tall, blond, though it was a little too blond to be natural. Nothing wrong with that, but I always wondered why people who dyed their hair chose colors just slightly off natural most of the time so that they fooled no one. The base she'd chosen made her skin look orange to me; maybe it was a spray tan, but surrounded by so many people who were actually Hispanic, the fake tan just looked fake. She'd also chosen blue eye shadow to make her eyes look bluer, but it didn't work. Even Elizabeth Taylor hadn't been able to pull off chalk-blue eye shadow, and if Liz Taylor couldn't do it, it couldn't be done.

"Are you wearing a gun, Ms. Blake?"

"Why do you ask?" I asked, smiling.

She did not smile back. "It was seen when your . . . boyfriend dipped you on the dance floor."

I didn't like the way she hesitated over the word boyfriend, but I forced myself to smile and be pleasant. Her son had gotten married today to my friend's daughter; I could be pleasant.

I fought the urge to smooth my top over the gun, because nothing attracts attention to a concealed carry like constantly touching it. "Well, then, Ms. Conroy, you know the answer to your question, don't you?"

"It's Mrs. Conroy; I have no desire to be a Ms. anything."

"I do prefer Ms., but have it your way, Mrs. Conroy."

"I'd like you to take the gun off and leave it with the coats, please."

I smiled a little harder, trying to keep it up in my eyes. "I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

"Can't, what do you mean you can't?"

"I can't hand over my firearm to a coat-check girl like it's a purse."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

"How dare you bring a dangerous weapon into my son's wedding?"

"You do know I'm a U.S. Marshal, right?" I was having to really work at the smile now.

"I don't see what difference that makes."

"First, I've had firearms training, so trust me, it's a lot safer on me than in the coat room."

"It's my son's wedding, and I don't feel safe with it in the room, so I'm going to have to ask you to put it in with the coats."

"Second, I am required by law to be able to respond in a satisfactory manner if an emergency arises, and that may require a gun."

"I must insist that you take that thing out of this wedding reception."

"The only way to do that is to leave the reception altogether, Mrs. Conroy."

"I don't know why you're being difficult, Ms. Blake; just put the thing away where it's not a danger to everyone."

"It's not a danger to anyone on my hip, but handing it over to a coat-check girl who probably has never handled a gun in her life makes it a serious threat to her and others."

"You're just being stubborn."

"No, I'm telling you that legally and responsibly I cannot give up my sidearm to a civilian stranger because you're having a moment."

"I'll send my husband over to speak with you about this."

"You do that; it won't change my answer. A gun is not a magic wand, Mrs. Conroy; it isn't a danger just by being near people, it's only a danger when it's in the hands of someone who has no training, or not enough training."

"I'm sending my husband over."

"Suit yourself."

"You are spoiling this reception."

"I'm doing what I'm legally required to do; you're the one who's being difficult."

"It's my son's wedding."

"It's my friend's daughter's wedding, too."

"I'll tell Rosita what you're doing."

"Go ahead, she'll be on my side."

"She will see it as a danger to her children and everyone here, just like I do. For heaven's sake, her son was just shot this month."

Since I'd been one of the people who saved Tomas and made sure the bad guy got

shot dead for his troubles, I thought her argument lacked validity. "You obviously haven't heard all the story," I said.

"I've heard enough."

I shook my head. "Go tell Rosita that you want me to give up my gun to the coat-check girl; go on."

She gave me a doubtful look, not liking how sure I was that Rosita wouldn't agree with her. "I'm telling Rosita and Manuel and sending my husband over," she repeated.

I'd never heard anyone call Manny Manuel before, though I knew it was his first name. "You do what you think best, Mrs. Conroy."

She huffed off with a billow of long blue skirts. The groomsmen had all been in black tuxedos, white shirts, and royal-blue ties and cummerbunds. The bridesmaids were in royal blue, which looked good on everyone. The dresses hadn't even been too horrible; they didn't look good on everyone, but they didn't make anyone look like a blue flower had exploded all over them and then frozen in place.

Nathaniel came over to me smiling, tie undone and a few buttons open to show more of the strong lines of his throat and just a hint of chest. "Great DJ," he said.

I kissed him, and he hugged me close enough that I could bury my head against his chest. I let him wrap me in the warmth and vanilla scent of him. He always smelled like vanilla to me, which was part his choice of shampoo, soap, and such, but underneath that it was just the sweet scent of him. I wasn't sure if it was the vanilla, but I remembered a snow day before my mother died when we'd made sugar cookies and spent the day decorating them. That was how he made me feel, like my mother's sugar cookies on the perfect snow day, when there was icing everywhere to lick, and spread over those hot cookies, and my mother was still alive and smiling down at me.

It seemed silly that someone who made me think of sex almost every time I touched him made me remember my mother and a snow day, but he did, in that moment he did.

He pulled back from the hug first, which was unusual, but when he put out one arm I knew why he'd done it. Micah was there to walk into the other side of Nathaniel's hug. Micah put his face next to mine and we wrapped an arm around each other, the other one going around Nathaniel's waist. He was five foot nine, so we both fit under his arms, our faces pressed against each other so I could nuzzle Micah's face while Nathaniel leaned down over both of us. Micah smelled warm and spicy like cinnamon and things I couldn't name, and suddenly I was back in my mother's warm kitchen. She'd fixed us Mexican hot chocolate that day, a mix of regular American hot cocoa and that much spicier, darker, richer drink. She'd made it full strength for herself, so dark it was bitter. I could still remember the taste she'd let me have, but mine had been sweet chocolate with a hint of the spices and heat of hers. Micah's skin smelled like exotic spices, cinnamon, and dark, rich chocolate, and a memory that I'd almost forgotten. My mother would die the summer after that snow day. I'd been eight.

I held them as close as I could and for some reason I felt my throat tighten, my eyes hot with tears that weren't quite falling yet. Micah said, "Are you crying?"

"Almost," I said.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing."

"So why the tears?"

I looked from him up to Nathaniel, and the first tear slid down. They both looked worried until I laughed and quoted something Nathaniel said sometimes back to both

of them: "Sometimes you're so happy you can't hold it all in and it spills out your eyes."

They smiled and hugged me then. I finally broke from the hug, dabbing carefully at my eyes so I didn't smear the eyeliner. I didn't usually wear this much, but Nathaniel liked it when I dressed up top to bottom; he'd taught me to dab at my eye makeup, not just rub and smear it. Having boyfriends who wore makeup onstage had made me much better at the girly side of being a woman.

"I hate to be the one who breaks such a great mood, but Tomas is really hurting."

Neither of us asked if he meant the gunshot wound, because that was a given, but it wasn't what Micah meant. Nathaniel asked, "How can we help him?"

"What he said," I said.

"We need to talk to Manny first."

I looked up to scan the crowd, but the dance floor was full again and I was too short, even in heels, to see over everyone. Micah didn't even have the heels, so it was Nathaniel who started leading us around the edge of the floor. We just trusted he'd seen Manny and followed him.

He was dancing with Rosita, his head resting on her generous bosom like it was his favorite pillow. She looked embarrassed and pleased, as if she felt torn between setting a good example and enjoying the fact that after nearly thirty years of marriage they still danced like teenagers at a prom in need of a chaperone.

Nathaniel put his arms around both of us and said, "I want us to be like that in twenty years."

I gave him a one-armed hug, resting my head against his chest. "I can't imagine twenty years in the future, but yes, yes."

Micah smiled at Nathaniel, but there was something in his eyes that didn't match the happiness of the moment; maybe it was talking to Tomas? "Twenty years is a long time, but I'll do my best."

If Nathaniel heard the hesitation in his tone, he didn't show it. He just gazed at the happy couple, face almost shining with the potential of marital bliss that could really last for a lifetime. I caught Micah's gaze, and he said, "I hate to interrupt them with serious things."

Ah, he didn't want to ruin their happy moment or take any of the joy out of Connie's wedding day. Me, either. "Can it wait?" I asked.

He thought about it very seriously, the weightiness of it darkening his face, filling his leopard eyes with thoughts that would never go through the eyes of a real cat. They didn't weigh other people's happiness against their immediate needs, or maybe they did; I was more a dog person.

He nodded.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

"I'm still looking for someone who makes me feel like that," a voice behind us said. It startled me, but neither of the

men reacted; maybe they'd heard her coming. Mercedes Rodriguez, maid of honor, looked great in the royal-blue dress. The color made her skin seem even darker, as if she had that perfect, dark tan that other people risked skin cancer trying to achieve. She had her mother's height but her father's slenderness, so that she looked model-like, but with too much of her mother's curves to truly look like a modern model. The vampires in my life had told me that thinness that extreme was only for the poorest of people, those who couldn't afford food. If you had money, you didn't starve yourself. Times change, I guess.

The last time I'd seen Mercedes had been in the hospital with Tomas. She'd looked younger and a lot less finished. Today with full makeup, she looked like she and Connie could have been twins; without makeup she looked younger, but didn't most of us under thirty? Mercedes had graduated with a degree in nutrition and was actually working in a doctors' group that specialized in helping athletes, and us ordinary folk, after an injury. Last I'd heard they'd partnered with a gym whose trainers specialized in helping people after injuries, or helping them prevent injuries through smarter exercise: work smarter, not harder. I hadn't even thought about it, but it was almost designed for helping her little brother. Sometimes karma plans way ahead of the game.

I moved closer to Mercedes to say, "I thought you were living with the tall, dark, and handsome that's been at your side most of the day."

"Frankie, Francisco, is great."

The tone alone took a lot of the positive out of the "great." I raised eyebrows at her but didn't want to say anything she wasn't ready to hear. You can realize someone is wrong for you a long time before you're ready to say I quit. Mercedes and I chatted, but we weren't like besties or anything, so it wasn't my job to say the hard, awkward things.

"I don't think I realized until tonight that he doesn't make me feel like that"--she nodded at her parents on the dance floor, and then turned to me--"or make me feel like the three of you."

She'd said it, so I took the opening. "Then why are you living with him?"

"He's handsome, charming, athletic, a doctor specializing in sports medicine with an emphasis on rehabilitation after injuries. My degree in nutrition will help us treat the whole patient, not just the injury. Professionally we're great."

"But professional isn't everything," I said.

She gave me a smile that was more irony than laughter. "Maybe not."

I was debating on whether she wanted more girl talk, or if we should just tell her about Tomas, but she saved me the trouble, stepping forward and including Micah and Nathaniel in the conversation. "I saw you talking to Tomas. He hasn't wanted to talk to anyone in the family much, but he seemed to be talking to you."

"It's part of my job to talk to people afterward," Micah said.

"After what?" she asked.

"Usually it's after they, or someone in their family, has been attacked by a lycanthrope, but violence is violence, and how people react to it is pretty similar."

She nodded, as if that made sense to her. "Let's go somewhere we can talk without spoiling the reception for anyone else." She looked up, then nodded and smiled at her live-in boyfriend, Francisco, because that was what he'd introduced himself as, not Frankie. She took my arm and pantomimed that we were going somewhere together. He'd probably assume we were going to the bathroom. Men were always willing to accept that women weren't capable of going to the restroom alone, because most women moved in packs for the powder room. I'd never understood why; I was okay on my own, but in the blue formal you might need some help with the skirts. Connie's gown with its layers of lace and hoop skirt was lovely, but I was betting she'd need all the bridesmaids to hold the skirts if she wanted to use the bathroom. It was one of the reasons I was not wearing a hoop skirt for my own wedding.

The moment that Francisco wasn't looking she dropped my arm, picked up her skirts, and just started for a door in the far corner. Micah followed her with a glance back at us. I nodded him onward and he caught up with Mercedes. She was moving pretty good in the dyed-to-match high heels.

Nathaniel and I brought up the rear. I glanced back and found that Manny and Rosita had been joined by Connie and her new husband. The four of them had the dance floor to themselves while everyone beamed at them, happy to see thirty years of happiness alongside the beginning of more. It was a nice visual, but as usual when there was something nice, I was walking away from it to talk about things that would have spoiled the happiness behind me. At least now I wasn't alone when I did it. Nathaniel and Micah were willing to leave the easy happy stuff behind to deal with the hard stuff that you had to do so other people could be safe and happy. Hell, the three of us spent a lot of our couple time discussing hard topics with the rest of the people we were involved with so we could keep being happy. Ignoring the hard things doesn't make them go away. I was glad I had people in my life now who were willing to work at things.

Mercedes led us to what looked like a break room, complete with vending machines,

small tables and chairs, and even a couch against one wall. It was blissfully quiet. I hadn't thought the reception was loud until we got away from the noise. My shoulders dropped and let me know I'd been hunching them a little, like I did when I was tense. I expected Mercedes to go to a table, so we could all sit, but she turned to us as soon as the door closed. I guess we were standing.

She turned to Micah. "Tomas talked to you longer than he's talked to any of us. He's started with a counselor, but I don't think he's talking to her either."

"He might do better with a male counselor," Nathaniel said.

Mercedes looked at him; her eyes were solid brown, but it was a pale brown like milk chocolate Easter candy. I realized that my eyes were darker. I was all mixed heritage, but my mother's nearly black eyes came true.

"What difference would a male counselor make?" she asked.

"He's a thirteen-year-old boy," Nathaniel said.

"So?"

"Tomas is just learning, or trying to become, the kind of man he's going to be. While he's trying to figure out what it means to be a man, he's kidnapped, shot, and he couldn't protect his sister," Micah said.

"Connie is our older sister; she's always protected us," Mercedes said.

"But that was when Tomas was a kid; he's not really a kid anymore," Nathaniel said.

She made a face and rolled her eyes. "He's only thirteen, he is a kid."

"And that's why he won't talk to you," Nathaniel said, "because to you he's still your little brother, but inside his own head he's trying to be more than that."

She frowned and studied Nathaniel's so-serious face. "I don't understand that, because he'll always be my kid brother, but you're right; he's at the age where we all try to figure out what we'll be as adults. You're saying as his family we can't see him clearly."

"Something like that."

"You think he'd do better with a male counselor, because he's learning to be a man and suddenly everything that society tells him is manly just got taken away from him."

"Not away, but he's hurt," Nathaniel said.

"How bad is the physical damage?" Micah asked.

"What did Tomas tell you?"

"That the doctors aren't sure he'll walk again."

"That's not true, he will walk again."

"How about run?" I asked.

Mercedes looked serious and then sad; it was not a good sign.

"That bad?" I said.

"He got shot in the stomach, but there seems to be nerve damage down one leg. It's

just bad luck that the bullet hit what it did. A one-in-a-million issue, the orthopedist said, but he also told Frankie and me in private that if the bullet had gone a few inches the other side he might have bled out and died before he got to the hospital, so it's all so . . . Tomas's whole future hung on a few millimeters inside his body, and what the bullet hit, or didn't hit."

Her eyes got shiny with unshed tears, sparkling in the dramatic wedding eye shadow. She took a deep, shaking breath, visibly steadying herself. Her voice was almost eve

n as she said, "They think if he does his physical therapy religiously, and adds even more weight lifting than he was doing for track, that he should recover enough to run."

"Recover enough to run like he did before?" I asked.

She shrugged. "No doctor is going to say yes or no right now. There are too many variables. I've tried to explain it to Mama and Papa, but they want definite answers and it's just not that easy."

It took me a second to realize that Mama and Papa were Manny and Rosita.

"I understand the reasoning," Micah said. "They can't know for sure what will heal, and they can't control how hard Tomas works at his physical therapy."

"He's young, so that will help him heal, but he's started the very beginnings of PT, and he's not working at it like he should."

"He's depressed," Nathaniel said.

"Yes, but if he doesn't do his PT then it's almost a guarantee that he won't heal enough to do track again. Damn it, if he doesn't put effort into recovering, he could

end up crippled permanently."

"What will make the difference?" I asked.

"Following doctor's orders, being serious about PT, and in a few weeks if he does that Frankie and I will help him start adding weights and other exercises. This is the kind of thing we both wanted to do to help people. We, I, can help Tomas, if he'll let me." The tears started trickling down her cheeks now.

I glanced at Micah, and then Nathaniel. One looked at me, and the other one made a small motion. I sighed and hugged Mercedes, letting her fold herself down so I could hold her while she cried even though I was inches shorter. Why was it always the girl who was supposed to hold people when they cried? Shouldn't whoever was best at it, regardless of gender, do it? But I patted her back and made comforting noises, not sure if it did a damn bit of good, but sometimes it's the best you can do, or the best I can do.

"Have you tried introducing him to someone who's recovered from a similar injury?" Micah asked.

It made Mercedes stand up straight and wipe at her eyes. She wiped too hard and smeared her eye makeup. I'd tell her before she went back to the reception. "We've got some patients who are pro athletes. It's not the same kind of injuries, but Tomas loves sports, and hearing about how hard they're working to recover might help him work harder at PT. That's a great idea, Micah, thank you."

"Yes, it is, but what about Anita talking to him now?" Nathaniel asked.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

We all turned and looked at him. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Doctors told you that you might lose the use of your arm, but you hit the gym harder than ever and were fine."

I glanced down at my arm as if I'd forgotten it was there, because I knew exactly the injury he meant. The bend of my left arm was a mound of white scar tissue. It worked just fine, but it was the worst scar I had, and the one that had made the doctors talk about permanent disability.

Mercedes said, "Anita is almost a shapeshifter herself, without all the metaphysics. We've talked about her healing abilities; it's not human normal."

"Tomas asked if becoming a shapeshifter would heal him," Micah said.

"He's too young to make that call," I said.

"Yes, it's illegal to contaminate anyone with lycanthropy who's below the age of eighteen, even with their permission, but Tomas is asking, and I thought his family should know," Micah said.

"I wasn't all vampire and shapeshifter super-healing when I got my arm torn up, Mercedes. In fact, they thought I would probably lose at least some use of my arm. I healed like a normal human back in the day."

"What did you do to heal?" she asked.

"Physical therapy like it was my new religion, and I hit the weight room really seriously for the first time. I lifted in college a little for judo, but putting muscle around my elbow . . . one of the doctors told me that it could make all the difference. PT was strength and flexibility, and the weights helped keep the scar tissue from foreshortening the ligaments and tendons as they healed."

"You're like a walking example of what Frankie and I do, and how much it can help people. Frankie likes working with the pro athletes, and I do, too, but I really like helping ordinary people be more athletic, healthier, especially after an injury. It's like they don't know what their bodies can do until after the accident."

"It's more that after you come so close to losing the use of your body, you want to use it more," I said.

She nodded. "That makes sense."

"Anita could talk to Tomas," Micah said.

"Only if you're there to help me communicate the message," I said.

"I'll help, too," Nathaniel said.

"I appreciate the moral support," I said, smiling.

"It's not just that, Anita. I've been the victim as a child and a teenager, and survived. I know what's it like to be hurt, bad, and not know if your body is going to come back." I didn't know every injury that Nathaniel had endured before I met him, but I knew that he'd run away from home after he'd witnessed his stepfather beat his older brother to death with a baseball bat. Nathaniel had been seven when it happened; by ten he'd been on the streets selling the only thing he had--himself. Saying Nathaniel had had a hard childhood was like calling the Titanic a boating accident.

"You weren't a lycanthrope as a child," Mercedes said.

"No, I was just human."

"How old were you when you became a shapeshifter?" she asked.

"Eighteen."

I'd met Nathaniel when he was nineteen, only a year after he became a wereleopard. I hadn't really done that math in my head. He'd always seemed so controlled, like he'd had years of practice with his beast when I met him. Enough control that he was already stripping and changing shape on stage at Guilty Pleasures with nothing between him and the audience but his self-control and club security, though that was more to keep the customers off the dancers than the other way around.

"God, not even twenty; you were just a kid, too," she said.

"Everyone's a kid once, Mercedes," I said.

She glanced at me. "You were about my age when you started working with Papa. I thought you were all grown up, but you're only what, eight years older than me?"

"I'm six years older than Connie, so I guess that's about right."

"You're my age," Nathaniel said.

She looked at him then. "I didn't know you were that much younger than Anita, or maybe it's just that she so doesn't look thirty."

"Thirty-one," I said.

Micah took my hand, smiling. "Anita and I are the same age."

"Neither of you looks thirty," she said, and she studied our faces as she said it.

I looked back at her and wondered for the first time, Did we look younger than Mercedes? Lycanthropes age slower than human normal anyway, and thanks to surviving several attacks by rogue shapeshifters I carried several strains of lycanthropy in my bloodstream. I shouldn't have been able to "catch" more than one strain of lycanthropy, because it protects its host body from almost all illness and injury, including other kinds of lycanthropy. I was a medical miracle because I didn't change shape either. That might change someday, but so far I was a first for the medical journals, or so a few doctors had told me. We thought that my ties to the vampires, both metaphysically and romantically, had protected me from changing shape somehow, because vampires couldn't catch lycanthropy, just like a lycanthrope couldn't become a vampire. The two supernatural medical conditions canceled each other for modern lycanthropy and vampirism. Thousands of years ago, lycanthropes could catch vampirism and be both, but something about one of the two conditions had changed enough over the millennia that it didn't work that way now.

I'd met a few vampires who were old enough to carry both, and they'd all been either scary as hell or not human at all, ever. Humanoid, but not Homo sapiens, which had been a surprise--okay, a shock. Most of the scientific literature had thought that vampires didn't even exist as a disease/condition until Homo sapiens. Some scientists thought maybe it went back to the Cro-Magnons, or the Neanderthals, but that was seriously disputed. I knew that vampires went back further than that, but I kept having to kill any vampire I met that old, because they were all crazy as hatters and more evil than Hitler's plan to "better" the human race. They were also so powerful it could make my bones ache just standing close to them. Dead was better for them, and safer for the rest of us, but it would be nice to find a sane one who could talk to the paleobiologists, archaeologists, paleoanthropologists, and all the other "ists."

Mercedes and Micah talked to Tomas out in the reception area before Nathaniel and I went over. We didn't want him to feel like we were ganging up on him. He agreed almost right away, which I hadn't expected, but as Nathaniel pointed out, I had just saved his life. That might give me more street cred with anyone.

We went back into the break room. Mercedes wheeled Tomas beside the couch, so we had a conversation grouping, though I got one of the chairs from the table, so I could sit on the other side of Tomas, rather than on the couch. It was too low for me to sit and have good eye contact with Tomas without one of us turning our heads oddly. I liked eye contact, and for important talks I liked it even more. Micah sat on the arm of the couch, Nathaniel beside him. Mercedes took the far corner of the couch, not sure Tomas would talk in front of her, since he hadn't talked to any of his family much yet. She'd already told Micah that if the boy wouldn't talk in front of her, she'd leave us to it.

Tomas had been the smallest kid in school for years, taking after Manny, but he was all arms and legs in his tuxedo now. He had to be at least his mother's five-eight, but since her brothers had all turned out to be six-five, except for one who was six-three, nicknamed Bambino not for his birth order but for being "short," Tomas would probably hit at least six feet someday. The brothers looked like a defensive line on the edges of the dance floor, until their wives dragged them onto the floor, and then they were surprisingly graceful, like watching bulls pirouette through a china shop.

His black hair was short, but with enough length so someone had used hair gel to style it back from his face in one of those careless wavy hairdos that some men can pull off. In a few years, when he filled out to his new height, the hair would be a serious selling point, but his face still looked like a little boy's face, so that the combination made him look pretty in a way that most thirteen-year-old boys don't want, but he seemed to be fine with all that hair framing his face. It probably meant the hairdo wasn't just

for the wedding, but something he did regularly, which meant he cared about his hair more than my own little brother had at the same age, a lot more. I remembered Manny telling me that Tomas was already starting to cut quite a swath through the girls in school, so he probably cared about a lot of things that I didn't associate with thirteen. I'd been hopelessly backward at the same age.

He sat slightly crooked, favoring one side heavily. There was a tightness around his eyes, even on the baby face, that said pain. He was hurting, but the kind of meds he was probably getting for pain would have drugged him up or made him sleepy. He was going to hold out from pride. I'd have done the same thing, so I couldn't really throw stones.

Tomas gave me a look out of big, brown eyes, the nice hair spilling forward a little so it framed his face on one side. The gesture reminded me of how Asher used his golden hair to frame his face to such good effect. That let me know that it was on purpose for Tomas, too. He knew he was pretty. It was a level of self-awareness that I didn't associate with most boys his age.

"Hey, Tomas, I won't ask how you're feeling."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

He grinned suddenly. It made him look years younger and more real than the careless, almost-flirting look of seconds before. "Then you'll be the only one who hasn't asked."

I smiled back. "I know, you get sick of answering the question. When you're still in the hospital people ask the question. I always want to answer, 'I feel like shit, how are you feeling?'"

He laughed then, and it was like the grin, younger. I liked both; it made me see the little boy I'd known since he was in kindergarten. "I like that, I like that a lot, but Mama would have a fit."

"How many of them have asked, 'How are you doing?'"

"A lot," he said, rolling his eyes.

"Next time, say, 'I got shot, how you doing?' See what they say."

"Anita," Mercedes said, "don't teach him to be a smart-ass. He's already bad enough." But she was laughing.

"I still get stupid questions about the scars," I said.

He gave me serious eyes as he said, "Micah said you got hurt bad once."

"More than once, but this is the one that the doctors thought would cripple me."

His eyes flinched, but I'd used the word deliberately. He gave me narrow eyes; it wasn't entirely a friendly look, but it wasn't unfriendly either, more a considering look, like I'd done something interesting.

"Most people won't say the word, they talk around it, but you just say it: cripple. I'm going to be a cripple."

"Bullshit," I said.

He gave me wide eyes, and almost smiled. "Why'd you say that?"

"From what I hear, if you do your physical therapy you'll be walking just fine, and if you add more weights and gym work you'll be running, too."

His face darkened, eyes suddenly angry. "They won't promise I'll run again."

"But if you don't do your PT, they guarantee you won't run again, right?"

He gave me the full force of those angry eyes, his mouth set in harsh lines. He looked bitter. It didn't make him look older, really, but it did something unpleasant to him, as if his entire energy changed. I understood in that moment that this wasn't just about Tomas's body, or even his emotional recovery, but something more profound. Bitterness can spoil you for life. It eats away at all the good things and makes everything seem bad, if you let it.

"I'll never run like I could before, so what's the use?"

I held my arm out to him, flexing my hand downward at the wrist so the bend of my elbow was very flat and the scars were very clear. It wasn't like they were ever not visible if I wore short sleeves, but I'd had them so long that I just didn't think about them much anymore. They ran white and thick across the bend of my arm, mounding

at the elbow and running in thin ropes of scar tissue away from it. I'd been told I should have asked for a plastic surgeon when it happened, but once they told me I might lose the use of my arm I hadn't really worried about scars. Now they were a part of me, like a freckle, or a mole, just something on my skin that had always been there, though of course, the scars hadn't been there always.

Tomas's voice was almost hostile as he said, "I've seen them before in the summer."

"I don't try to hide them, any of them."

His gaze went lower on my arm to the cross-shaped burn scar, now a little crooked from the claw scar that a shapeshifted witch had given me. I pointed to a much smaller scar on my arm near the shoulder. "This was my first bullet wound."

He looked at the slick, white mark. "I know you got shot this year, but you healed it, you healed all of it because you're like . . . magic"--and even to him it sounded lame, because he looked angry, eyes uncertain, as he added, "You know what I mean, you heal it all."

"Every scar you just looked at was before I could heal it all. There's a few more, including one from the same vampire that tore up my arm. He chewed at my collarbone until he broke it."

He gave me suspicious eyes.

"I swear it."

His eyes narrowed, and I wondered where he got the attitude. It couldn't be just since the kidnapping, because it took time to build a bad attitude. I should know, because I had one of my own.

I pulled down the collar of my shirt enough to show the very edge of the collarbone scar.

His eyes widened a little, some of the suspicion fading, but then he said, "I believe you have all the injuries, Anita. But Mercedes just wants you to tell me to be good and do my PT."

"She's your sister, she's supposed to want you to get better, right?"

He frowned harder.

"Would you like it better if Mercedes didn't give a damn about you?"

"No, of course not."

"Then, yeah, she wants me to talk to you about what I did to keep my arm."

His eyes widened just a touch, the sullen teenager slipping around the edges. "Papa didn't tell me you almost lost your arm."

"They weren't going to cut it off or anything, but the doc told me I could lose fifty to seventy-five percent mobility from the joint, which meant I'd basically be down an arm."

His eyes stayed big, face serious, not sullen as he stared at the scars. "What did you do?"

"What the doctors told me to do, physical therapy, and hit the gym like it was my new church. I'd never lifted weights or worked out so hard in my life, because I was saving my arm. Screw skinny jeans, or looking good in a bikini. I wanted this." I made a fist for him and flexed the muscles of my forearm, even the ones underneath

the scars.

"You have more muscles than any girl I know." He was sincere, eyes still wide as he stared at all the scars on my arm. Then he grinned suddenly. "I bet you look great in a bikini, too." His eyes swept up to my face briefly and then down to my breasts, which was a little disconcerting coming from someone I'd known since he was six years old.

"Eyes up here," I said, motioning with my other hand.

He had the decency to blush.

Mercedes said, "Anita!" like I'd done something bad.

"If he's old enough to look, he's old enough to get called on it, and he's old enough to start learning how to do it without being pervy about it."

"Anita's right," Micah said.

Nathaniel nodded, and added, "You can look without being creepy, it just takes practice."

Tomas raised his hands in front of his face to hide the blush, or because he didn't know what else to do. It was like a holdover gesture from when he was a much younger kid. He brought his hands down and his eyes were angry again, as he tried to rebuild the sullen too-cool-for-school attitude.

"I'm sorry I stared."

I liked that he didn't ignore it all, and even more that he apologized. "I appreciate the apology, Tomas."

He shrugged, the potentially pretty face not pretty at all as he let the attitude take over. Maybe I'd embarrassed him and maybe that wouldn't make him want to listen to me, but screw it, he'd had it coming.

"If you apologize for something, you don't get to keep giving someone attitude about it after the apology," Micah said.

&nbs

p; Tomas looked at him. I think it was supposed to be a hard look, but he was a suburban teenager who'd had his first violent experience less than a month ago; his hard look wasn't that hard.

Micah gave him calm eyes. "An apology means you're sorry you did something; continuing to be a shit after the apology means you aren't sorry."

"So which is it?" I said. "Are you sorry you stared, or was the apology just something to say because you thought you should?"

Tomas looked from one to the other of us, then said, "You guys are weird."

"We're preternaturals," Micah said.

"That's not what I mean." He still looked sullen, but there was something in his face beside it. He was looking at us as if we'd done something interesting, or at least something unexpected. He looked at me finally. "I'm sorry I stared and that it was creepy. I didn't mean to be creepy."

"Apology accepted."

"Were you able to lift as much after your arm got better as you did before?"

"More," I said.

He gave me those suspicious eyes again.

"I could lift more because I worked harder in the gym than I ever had before, so I got better and stronger than ever before."

He nodded then, eyes thoughtful. "I get that."

"If I'd just given up, then my arm wouldn't be working, and I wouldn't have all these muscles, and I would have stopped hunting vampires about eight years ago."

"Anita would never have met either of us," Nathaniel said.

Tomas looked at him then. "What do you mean?"

"Anita met us through her connections with Jean-Claude. She had just met him when she got attacked, and if she'd given up hunting vampires, she might never have seen him again. If she'd never dated him, she'd have never met us."

"Are you saying that if I do all the stuff my doctors want me to do, I'll find true love?" He rolled his eyes and was suddenly very much a thirteen-year-old boy in his reaction, as if "true love" meant girl cooties.

"Are you saying you don't want to be as happy as Mama and Papa?" Mercedes asked, one hand on her hip and her face matching the serious attitude.

He rolled eyes at her, too. "Everyone wants to be as happy as they are."

"Everyone, but not you?" Micah asked.

"It's embarrassing the way they're all over each other like they're my sisters' age."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

"Everyone should be blessed with parents who behave like teenagers on a prom date," I said.

He scowled at me. "You try it sometime and see how you like it."

"I'd love to, but my mother died when I was eight."

"Jesus, Anita, you have a worse story for everything."

"Tomas," Mercedes said, as if warning him to be nice.

"It's okay," I said. "I do have a bad story for almost any occasion."

"I didn't mean it that way," he said.

"What way did you mean?" I asked.

He sighed, frowned, and slumped in the wheelchair even more than he had been, as if he was suddenly tired. "I'll do my PT."

"And hit the gym," I said.

He scowled at me. "You are pushy, do you know that?"

"I do know that," I said, smiling.

"Tomas," his sister said again, in that tone that older siblings and parents seem to

have.

"This isn't Anita being pushy," Micah said.

"Not even close," Nathaniel added.

I glanced up at them. "Thanks a lot, loves of my life."

They smiled at me from the couch. "Argue with us if you can," Micah said.

I tried to frown at them but ended up smiling, too. "I can't, so point taken, or made."

Tomas was watching us, like he was filing it away for later use. "So if I do PT and hit the gym, then what?"

"Then you stop having to use a wheelchair ever and you get off crutches. You relearn how to walk, and then run."

"Doctors won't promise me I'll run as fast as I could before."

"I've told you, Tomas, the doctors can't promise that, there are too many variables," Mercedes said.

"If you work hard you'll be able to run and you won't be on crutches, which is a pretty good thing, right?" I said.

"Yeah," he said, the sullen tone seeping back into his voice.

"So that's worth working for all on its own, right?"

He frowned at me. "I guess so."

"But for all you know, if you hit the gym harder than ever, you may get faster, and I know you'll get stronger."

"You think I could run faster than before."

"I don't know, but I do know if you don't do the work, you might end up on crutches for the rest of your life or in a chair like this forever."

He looked up at his sister. "Is that true, could I end up like this forever?"

"If you don't do the PT and gym, I don't know, Tomas, and that's the truth, but it could be as bad as Anita is saying. That is one possibility if you don't work to help us help you."

"None of this help us to help you crap," I said. "You're thirteen, that's old enough to help yourself, if you're ever going to."

"What does that mean, 'if I'm ever going to'?"

"This is your moment of choice, Tomas. You can be a stand-up guy, and do your best to help yourself, or you can feel sorry for yourself, do nothing, and by the time Mercedes marries you can wheel yourself down the aisle. Maybe Manny can get you one of those sport wheelchairs."

"You're going to scare him," Mercedes said.

"Good, he should be scared." I leaned in so I could give him very direct eye contact. "You have a choice, Tomas; it's your life. You can cripple yourself for the rest of your life, or you can fight to run again, but don't blame it on the guy who shot you if you don't do the PT and the gym workout, because if you don't work to get better, then it's all on you."

"He shot me!" He sounded outraged.

"Yeah, but you get to decide if you're his victim or not."

"What do you mean? I am his victim. He shot me."

"He shot you, but he didn't kill you. He didn't take your life, which means you still have a chance to have everything you had before, and more. But if you don't put the effort into helping yourself out of this, then the bad guy wins forever, Tomas. He will win if you give up, but if you fight back, then you win, because you take back everything he tried to take from you. He loses if you try, but if you don't even try, then you are his victim, forever and ever."

"I'm not a victim," he said, back to angry again.

"Prove it: Go to PT, go to the gym when your doctors say you can, or should. Work hard at getting better, because that's how you take back your life; that's how you go from victim to survivor."

"I prefer the word thriver, because I'm not just surviving, I'm thriving," Micah said.

"What do you mean? You're like the king of shapeshifters almost, and you've got Anita."

I wasn't sure how I liked being listed as just one more accomplishment, or how Nathaniel liked not being listed at all.

"Now, but when I was eighteen I was attacked by a lycanthrope, a wereleopard. He killed my uncle and cousin and left me for dead. If two doctors hadn't been out hunting on the same mountain and found me almost immediately, I wouldn't be with Anita and Nathaniel, or head of the Coalition for Better Understanding Between

Human and Lycanthrope Communities--I wouldn't be anything, just one more victim of the bastard who killed my uncle and cousin."

Nathaniel leaned into Micah, putting his arm around the other man's waist. Micah put his arm across Nathaniel's shoulders and let himself be held, but he kept his green-gold gaze on the boy in the chair.

Tomas looked shocked, the sullen cool that he'd tried to rebuild falling apart as he fought to deal with what Micah had said. His eyes flicked to the men holding each other, and it bothered him, but he tried to regain his cool, or his anger, something to use against the truth. He looked at Nathaniel and managed to sound disdainful as he asked, "And what's your sad story?"

"Tomas, you are being rude," Mercedes said.

"No, it's okay, I remember being thirteen," Nathaniel said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tomas said, trying for angry.

Nathaniel hugged Micah a little tighter but kept calm, lavender eyes on the boy. "When I was seven my stepfather beat my older brother, Nicholas, to death in front of me with a baseball bat. Nicholas told me to run, and I did, all the way to the streets. By ten I was selling myself for food, shelter, survival; by your age I was a junkie, selling myself to whoever would pay. Gabriel, who was head of the local wereleopards then, saw me on the street. I was seventeen. He was running a high-class male escort service that specialized in shapeshifters to very special clientele. They wouldn't sleep with a street whore and junkie, so he cleaned me up, forced me into rehab, got me sober, and waited to see if I'd stay that way. I'd turned eighteen before he finally made me a wereleopard, because he wouldn't do it until he knew I'd stay clean. It was the same year he took me to Jean-Claude for lessons in how to dress, what fork to use at fancy dinners, so that I could escort anyone to anywhere

and not embarrass them. Jean-Claude taught me how to dance on stage at Guilty Pleasures, not just shake my junk, but dance, seduce, and promise things I didn't have to deliver. He wouldn't let any of his dancers find johns, or janes, at work. We were just strippers, not whores. I still went to certain very special clients through Gabriel, but never at the club. That was separate."

Tomas stared at Nathaniel as if he'd sprouted a second, ugly head. He had nothing to offer to such a list of disaster and pain. Who did?

Mercedes found a chair and sat down heavily in it. I glanced at her and she looked shaken, too, but the main show was Nathaniel and Tomas, with Micah sitting solid and holding him. I would have gone to them, but there was a weight to the three of them, the men and the boy. This was between them, until they needed or asked for me.

"I was still just nineteen when one of the clients tried to kill me. I don't know if he thought I'd heal, or if he just didn't care. Gabriel was dead by then, so I didn't have anyone to protect me. I went to the hospital and met Anita. She made me give up the escort business, but that was okay. I was making good money at Guilty Pleasures, I didn't need to do the other anymore, and I'd stopped enjoying it, so it was easy to give up."

I kept quiet, but I didn't remember the story quite that way. I hadn't actually demanded he give up being an escort, I'd just shut down the business as a whole, so n

one of the wereleopards could do it anymore. It also hadn't been love at first sight for me with Nathaniel, and the story seemed to imply that, but . . . I kept my mouth shut, because it wasn't my story. The story is never about the prince who rescues the princess, it's always the princess's story, and in this version that was Nathaniel. I was okay with that; princess was never really my style.

"I'd say you're kidding, but . . ." Tomas just stopped, staring at the floor as if trying to figure out what to say.

Nathaniel figured it out for him. "But if I were going to make up a story, that wouldn't be it."

Tomas looked up and nodded. "Yeah, that."

"We've all been hurt, Tomas," Micah said, "but what made the difference is that we all three fought to have a life and not let the bad things that happened to us define who we are, and what our life would be."

Tomas licked his lips. He wasn't trying to be cool anymore, or angry. He had nothing to put up as a shield against all that truth and pain. "What do you want me to do?" he asked, finally.

"Do your PT," Nathaniel said.

"Hit the gym when the doctors say you can," Micah said.

"Work hard at both," I said.

Tomas looked at me, and then back to the men. He licked his lips again, nodding more to himself than to us. "I will."

"Promise," I said.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

He looked at me then, and there was a determination that hadn't been there before; the anger was in there and would be for a while, but there were better things in his dark eyes now, things that would help him more than they hurt him. "I promise," he said, and I believed him.

Nathaniel added, "And if the doctors think counseling will help, don't just say no."

Tomas scowled at him. "I'm fine, I don't need counseling."

"You're not fine, but it's okay not to be fine. If you don't need counseling, then that's great, but if you do need it, that's okay, too. My therapist has helped me a lot."

"I've had therapy," Micah said.

"Me, too," I said.

Tomas looked from one to the other of us. "I don't need it." His voice was very firm, and back to angry.

"We didn't say you did, just that if you do, it can help," Micah said.

The sullen look was back, so I said, "Work your physical therapy and leave the rest for later, or never. Body first, and sometimes the rest takes care of itself."

Something flickered through his eyes; maybe it was doubt. "Really?" he asked, managing to sound both suspicious and a tiny bit scared, which let me know that he'd already wondered about the other kind of therapy even if he didn't want to admit it.

"Really, a lot of people treat the mind and body like one is more important than the other, but they're too interconnected to ignore one for the other. Physical stuff can help the rest a whole lot."

He studied my face for a second, and again I saw that unease or small fear peeking out. "PT first, then."

I nodded. "Yeah, PT first."

I liked that he left it open for other things later, if he needed them. It made me hopeful.

Mercedes took Tomas back out to the wedding reception. The three of us took a moment to hold each other, and kiss enough that I had to redo my lipstick in the small mirror on the wall. Then a cooler energy slid over my skin, and I watched the two of them shiver at the touch of it, too. It was finally dark enough for the vampires to join us.

We went back out to the party and found a crowd at the doors. Whispers spilled out from there and into the rest of the crowd. Mrs. Conroy and a few others might not approve, but the excited buzz in the room said clearly that having Jean-Claude, the first vampire king of America, as a guest was a serious social coup.

We went to him hand in hand, me in the middle of the other two men, because Jean-Claude had his own sad stories to tell, and we knew that the thin scars on his back were whip marks from when he was a live human boy, younger than Tomas. He was king of all the vampires in America now, but he had been a survivor long before and, like us, learned how to thrive.

He was all long black curls, white lace shirt, and black jacket, so that the shirt and his own pale skin made a dramatic contrast. It was his usual colors, and no one seemed to

mind that he'd worn black to the wedding reception. He had to be wearing heeled boots, because he was taller than the bodyguards that flanked him, and I knew they were six feet, but in the heels he was taller.

His long black curls melted into the shoulders of his black jacket, the high white collar of his shirt setting off the paleness of his skin, but there was a flush of color to all that pallor, like a hint of healthy blush, which meant he'd fed on someone before he came to the wedding. It didn't take much blood at a feeding for a vampire to be "full." The movies that made out that a vamp had to drain a person dry to feed were just using fearmongering or dramatic license. Feeding meant that when he took Rosita's hand to raise it against his lips, his skin was warm against hers. Making sure your skin wasn't ice cold used to be a way to pass as human; now it was just a politeness.

Rosita's dark skin blushed even darker. She was tall, only a few inches shorter than Jean-Claude, and though her daughters had gotten her to exercise with them she would always be a big woman, as she was meant to be, but she simpered and flustered as if she were the most delicate teenager.

Micah laughed. "That's something I never thought I'd see."

We laughed with him.

"The first time Rosita met us, she was afraid to shake hands, because she thought she could catch lycanthropy from just touching us," Nathaniel said.

"We've all come a long way," I said. I put an arm around both their waists and enjoyed the moment that let Jean-Claude be invited to the reception and be an honored guest.

He looked up over the crowd and I met his gaze. It wasn't vampire powers that made

me catch my breath, my body tightening as if it were far more than just a look that passed between us. It was just him. If that was magic, it was the same kind that made me react to Nathaniel and Micah, but then love is a kind of magic, after all.

Micah laughed, and moved away so he could take my hand. "Let's go greet him, so you can touch him without thinking that hard."

I blushed and hated that I still did that, but Micah started leading me forward, and Nathaniel took my other hand so it was like a very slow game of crack the whip.

Micah actually reached him first. We'd worked out the logistics of who kissed who first a while ago, especially important in public, because any confusion was seen as a sign that things weren't working well between us all. Jean-Claude was the public face for American vampires, Micah was the same for the shapeshifters, I was in the news often as a zombie expert and for some of the more newsworthy U.S. Marshal cases, and Nathaniel as his stripper alias had his own Internet fan sites--in one way or another, we were all celebrities, which meant sometimes total strangers took things they saw, heard, or made up and turned them into rumors. We'd learned that one stumbled kiss, or Jean-Claude not greeting both the men, or a dozen different things, caused the rumor mill to grind faster. I never thought that famous people needed to discuss and then practice how to interact with their lovers in public to keep the craziness down, but if we did, then some of the people who were in the news a hell of a lot more than we were had to do it, too. Or maybe they didn't, and that was why they were in the news so much more. It was weird to be famous, weirder to date someone famous, and weirder still to deal with the public about it.

Jean-Claude bent over Micah, and it looked for a moment as if they would kiss for real, but just as their lips would have touched, Micah turned his head slightly to the side and Jean-Claude brushed his lips against his cheek. The only man that Micah kissed for real was Nathaniel. Micah turned his head a little more to the side and Jean-Claude ended with his mouth against the curve of Micah's neck, kissing just

over that warm, pulsing point where the blood ran hot and close to the surface of the skin. It had become something of a signature greeting for them. What the people who thought it was so intimate didn't realize was that it was also a way of Je

an-Claude asserting dominance every time he touched Micah publicly, because among vampires, whoever gave up their blood was admitting they were less dominant, and among the lycanthropes there were versions of offering your neck to a leader that were a way of saying you're dominant to me without having to argue about it.

The men had started doing the greeting after the vampires started talking about Micah being the true power behind Jean-Claude's throne. This was an easy way to fix that rumor, and the human media loved it. "So intimate, so sensual," they wrote. If they only knew it was purely political, they'd be so disappointed.

I was in Jean-Claude's arms then, my hands sliding underneath the short jacket to knead and caress over the cool smoothness of his shirt. He'd won me over to the feel of cloth that was not only washed often, but ironed. It gave a sensation that was smoother, crisper, cleaner, and all of it covering the solidness of his back. He'd once told me that he knew his near-obsession with clean, fresh clothing came from starting life in a peasant home with a dirt floor, and spending centuries either in the lap of luxury or broke. When he could afford nice things he wanted them, and he could afford pretty much anything he wanted at this point.

I went up on tiptoe to meet his lips with mine. His arms wrapped around me, smoothing down my back and hesitating at my waist, not because of the gun that he knew was there, but more like he was wanting to touch my ass and wouldn't do it in public. It meant he really liked the new red skirt and how I looked in it. I could carry concealed, and Jean-Claude liked the way my ass looked in it almost enough to forget himself--serious bonus points!

It had been a careful kiss in many ways--one, so my red lipstick didn't smear like clown makeup, and two, so I didn't nick my lips on the delicate points of his fangs as I pressed my mouth against his.

Jean-Claude drew back with a sigh. "Ma petite, you quite undo a man pressing so much of yourself against him in this dress."

I grinned up at him as I went back to being as flat-footed as my heels would allow. "It's not often that I can get this reaction from you in public. I like it."

He leaned in and whispered against my hair, "As do I."

Nathaniel came up beside us, sliding an arm around both our waists, which made us look at him. Jean-Claude raised a speculative eyebrow. I saw the mischief in Nathaniel's eyes and knew that he was about to do something that I might regret, or it might be really fun. Either way, we were in public, and mischief didn't always translate well in the rumor mill. St. Louis was actually getting mentioned regularly on some of the celebrity gossip shows thanks to Jean-Claude. The rest of us usually got mentioned only in reference to him. I was good with that; the big engagement announcement had moved me up the professional gossip food chain a bit, and I wasn't good with that. Speculation seemed to be, "Would Anita Blake, infamous for playing the field, really commit to even the most beautiful vampire on the planet?" People were terribly invested in the princess (apparently that was me in this version) picking just one prince, or picking the prince (which was definitely Jean-Claude), because happily-ever-after couldn't include more than one prince, not even in the twenty-first century. Since I would have married all three of the men legally if I could have, the idea, even certainty, in the press that I'd marry Jean-Claude and we'd both become happily monogamous was the same kind of thinking that made people who were bisexual think that marrying one sex would make them magically not be attracted to the other half of the population. It had taken me years to own the fact that it just didn't work that neatly. The rest of the world was still looking for love to be simple, like a

fairy tale. Why did most people want love to fit inside a child's story? Why wouldn't they let true love grow up and be real?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

Nathaniel moved closer to Jean-Claude, drawing me in tighter with him, so that we were hugging him at the same time, and then he raised his face up to the other man. At five-nine he didn't have to go up on tiptoe for Jean-Claude to bend down and take the kiss he was offering. It was more delicate and chaste than ours had been, but it was the first public kiss between them . . . ever. I caught a flash of light and realized someone had used a phone to capture the moment. It would be on Facebook before we left the reception. Crap.

Jean-Claude pulled back with a pleasant expression on his face, but I'd been looking at his face for over six years now, and I knew he was as puzzled as I was, because he and Nathaniel didn't kiss. They weren't lovers.

Nathaniel smiled up at him, then turned and kissed me with the taste of Jean-Claude still on his lips. My own lipstick came back to me, smooth and slightly sweet. It's funny that I didn't really taste my lipstick when I wore it, but when I kissed the men and then they kissed me back, I could taste it more sometimes.

Nathaniel turned from us and reached for Micah. He hesitated a moment, but then went to him, and they kissed. Micah tried to keep it chaste, but that wasn't what Nathaniel wanted, and instead of drawing away from the other love of our lives, he let Nathaniel draw him into the kiss. Nathaniel's hands went underneath Micah's suit jacket the way mine had with Jean-Claude, but there was something about watching those strong arms wrap around each other that moved me more. They kissed each other in private and public, but this was probably one of the most passionate ones I'd seen from them where outsiders could see.

Normally, it would just have been exciting seeing my men together, but I had a flash

of emotion from Nathaniel that he couldn't keep to himself behind his metaphysical shields. He was happy, fiercely happy. It was the wedding and that we were planning our own commitment ceremony. He'd never thought he'd ever have anyone who loved him enough to put a ring on his finger, and now he had two people.

We'd told Tomas that we weren't just survivors, we were thrivers, and we were, we all were.

Love makes you closer, but when you have metaphysical ties to each other, it can be a level of emotional and mental closeness that is either heaven or hell. With Nathaniel it was usually heaven, and that was good, because Jean-Claude and I had had our share of being tied to people who were hellish. Think about being able to feel someone's emotions, get glimpses of exactly what they're thinking, and the love you had for one another had turned to hate years ago; now think of being bound like that forever, literally forever, with no way to break free. Hell about covers it.

We were thrivers; all four of us were that and so much more.

"This one needs a ring, and soon, ma petite," Jean-Claude whispered through my mind, as if a thought could talk back to you. Years ago "hearing" someone in my head like that had scared the crap out of me, and I'd fought hard to stay free of it, but it was a heck of a lot more private than whispering.

I had to concentrate hard to think back at him without speaking out loud. "Yeah, he's got wedding fever like a girl."

"You will never be so moved by a wedding, ma petite."

Out loud I said, "No, but I'm still going to marry you."

He drew me into his arms again, and this time the kiss was less careful, lipstick be

damned.

In her twenty-fifth adventure, vampire hunter and necromancer Anita Blake learns that evil is in the eye of the beholder . . . keep reading for an excerpt from

CRIMSON DEATH

Available now!

I'D FALLEN ASLEEP cuddled between two of the men I loved most, with one arm flung across their naked bodies so I could touch the third. All three of them were warm when I fell asleep, but when my phone woke me hours later, only two of the bodies in the bed were still warm. The only vampire in the bed had died when the sun came up a mile over our heads in our nice safe cave of a bedroom. It was great for vampires, but if you were afraid of the dark or didn't like the idea of tons of stone pressing down on your head, well, you couldn't sleep with us.

I scrambled over Nathaniel's almost fever-hot body for my phone, which was plugged in on the bedside table, but when the screen came on it was his phone, not mine, because his lock screen was a picture of the three of us and mine was a close-up of our hands entwined with the new engagement rings. I finally got my phone and hit the button, but it had already gone to voice mail.

Micah asked in a voice thick with sleep, "Who was it?"

I squinted at the bright screen in the very dark room and said, "I don't recognize the number, or hell, the area code. I think it's international. Who the hell would be calling me from out of the country?"

Nathaniel snuggled against the front of my body, burying his face between my breasts, as he tucked himself lower under the covers. He mumbled something, but

since he was both the heaviest sleeper and the most likely to talk in his sleep, I didn't pay much attention.

"What time is it?" Micah asked, his voice less sleep-filled and closer to awake.

"Five a.m.," I said. I clicked my phone to black and tried to put it back on the bedside table, but Nathaniel had pinned me and I couldn't quite reach.

"We've only been asleep for three hours," he said in a voice that was starting to sound aggrieved.

"I know," I said. I was still trying to push my phone back on the edge of the table with a now firmly asleep Nathaniel weighing me down.

Micah wrapped his arm around my waist and Nathaniel's back and pulled us both closer to him. "Sleep, must have more sleep," he said with his face buried between my shoulders. If I didn't slide down into the covers soon, they'd both be asleep and I'd be pinned with my arms and shoulders bared. The bedroom at night was about fifty degrees; I wanted my shoulders covered. I gave one last push to my phone, which fell to the floor, but it didn't light back up, which meant it was still plugged in, so I was good with it on the floor. Screw it, I was going back to sleep.

I had to force both men to give me enough room to slide down between them so we were all covered and warm again. I was just starting to drift back to sleep to the sounds of their even breathing when my phone rang again, but this time it played a different song, George Thorogood's "Bad to the Bone." It was the personalized ringtone for one of my best friends, Edward, assassin to the undead and fellow U.S. Marshal Ted Forrester. Interestingly, Edward and Ted were the same person; think Clark Kent and Superman.

I flung the covers off all of us and scrambled, falling to the floor and fumbling for the

phone that was glowing in the pile of clothes beside the bed. I hit the button and said, "Here, I'm here!"

"Anita, are you all right?" Edward's voice was too cheerful, which was all the clue I needed that he was with other police officers who would be overhearing everything.

"Yeah, I'm good. You sound awfully chipper for five a.m.," I said, trying not to sound like I was already getting cold outside the body heat of the bed. I started to fumble in the clothes pile for something that was mine but kept coming up with just the guys' clothes.

"It's eleven a.m. here," he said.

He wasn't home in New Mexico then, so I asked, "Where are you?"

"Dublin."

"Dublin what?"

"Ireland," he said.

I sat naked and shivering on the floor, scooping through the pile of clothes around me like a bird trying to make a nest, and tried to think. I failed, so I asked, "Why are you in Dublin, Ireland?"

"For the same reason I'm calling you, Anita."

"Which is?" I tried not to get irritated at him, because it usually amused him, and Ted usually took longer to tell anything. Edward was far more abrupt. Yes, they were the same person, but Edward was more of a method actor, and trying to get him to break character wasn't a good idea.

"Vampires."

"There aren't any vampires in Ireland. It's the only country in the world that doesn't have them."

"That's what we all thought until about six weeks ago."

"What happened six weeks ago?" I asked, trying to burrow myself into the clothes on the floor for warmth.

Someone from the bed above me threw my robe on top of me. I told whichever of my leopards had done it, "Thanks."

"They had their first vampire victim," Edward said.

I slipped into the robe, using my chin to hold the phone against my shoulder. The black silk robe was better than being naked, but silk isn't really very warm. I kept meaning to buy something with a little more heat retention, but it was hard to find sexy and warm at the same time. "Vampire victim, so dead?"

"No, just a little drained."

"Okay, if it was nonconsensual blood donation here in the States the vampire would be up on charges, but if it was consensual it's not even a crime."

"Vampire gaze wiped her memory of it," he said.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

"If the vampire and blood donor had agreed that the vamp could use their gaze so the donor could get the whole vampire experience, then it's treated like you let someone drink too much at a party and then let them walk home drunk, again it's not even a crime here, just bad judgment."

"Vic can't remember, so we'll never know if consent was given or not."

"If they took a swab of the bite for genetics and he, or she, is in the system, they can find the vampire in question."

"Nobody believed it was a vampire bite, so they didn't treat it like an attack. They thought she'd been slipped a date-rape drug."

"The fang marks weren't a clue?" I asked.

"You said it yourself, Anita: there are no vampires in Ireland. In thousands of years of history, there's never been a vampire here. They noted the fang marks as possible needle marks for the drug they thought had been used on the vic; if they hadn't been hunting for needle marks and other signs of drug use, they wouldn't have even found them. They are some of the tiniest, neatest marks I've ever seen."

I sat up a little straighter, both to tie my robe tighter and because that meant something. "You've seen almost as many vampire bites as I have."

"Yep," he said in his best Ted Forrester drawl. He was probably playing the full American cowboy, accent and all, for the Irish police. He could be the ultimate undercover person and blend in damn near anywhere, but when he was Ted, it was

like he enjoyed just how thick he could play the part. I wondered if he'd packed Ted's cowboy hat and brought it on the airplane. The thought of him wearing it in Ireland was either fun or cringeworthy. I wasn't sure which yet.

"How tiny? Do you think it's a child vampire?"

"I've seen female vamps that had a bite this small, but that one could be a child."

"What do you mean, that one?"

"We have at least three different bite radiuses."

"So three different vamps," I said.

"At the very least, maybe more."

"What do you mean, maybe more?"

"I've got permission to share photos with you if you can get to a computer."

"My phone is a computer. Can't you just text me?"

"I could, but you'll want a bigger screen to look at some of these."

"Okay, I . . . I can get to a computer. I just need someone to help me log on, or something."

"You have a secure email account, because I've sent you things to it before," he said.

"I know, I know. I just don't use the computers here much."

"Where are you?"

"Circus of the Damned."

"Tell Jean-Claude howdy for me?"

"Howdy? Even Ted doesn't say Howdy."

"I'm American, Anita. We're all cowboys; didn't you know that, darling?" he said in a drawl so thick it sounded like you should be able to do a Texas two-step on it.

"Yeah, like all the Irish are leprechauns and go around saying Top of the morning to you."

"If I had my way, you'd be here seeing all the leprechauns."

"What do you mean, if you had your way?"

"Go to the computer so you can see the pictures, Anita," and the out-West accent lost some of its thickness, fading into what was Edward's normal "middle of nowhere," maybe Midwestern accent. I'd known him for over six years before I'd learned that Theodore (Ted) Forrester was his actual birth name and the one that both the military and the Marshals Service knew him by. He'd just been Edward to me.

"Okay, but what did you mean, if you had your way?" I got to my feet and my lower body was instantly colder in just the silk robe without the nest of other clothes around me. I looked down at the bed, because both Micah and Nathaniel were better with the computers down the hallway than I was; hell, Nathaniel was still occasionally sneaking new ringtones for people into my phone. Some of them had been embarrassing when they sounded at work with the other marshals, but "Bad to the Bone" for Edward had worked so well, I kept it.

"When you're at the computer, call me back," he said, and hung up. That was more like Edward.

Once the phone screen stopped glowing, the room was pitch-black, cave dark, so that you could touch your own eyeball because you couldn't see your finger coming to flinch away. We usually left the bathroom door open, so the night light inside could give some illumination, but whoever had gone in last had forgotten. The only thing that let me walk to the bathroom door without bumping anything was familiarity with the layout. I opened the door and it was so damn bright that for a second I thought the overhead lights had been left on; but as I blinked and adjusted to the glow, I realized it was just the night light. It looked ungodly bright because my eyes had adjusted to the thick darkness of the other room, but as my eyes readjusted to the light it was just the night light like normal.

I'd have liked to let the men in my life sleep, but I needed help with the computers. I was really going to have to take notes the next time someone showed me how to do all this because I never seemed to remember it the way that they did. I stared down at the bed. Nathaniel had curled down into the covers so that only the top of his head and the thick braid of his nearly ankle-length hair showed. The light was just bright enough to gleam red in the brown of his auburn hair. He was curled up on his side so that his broad shoulders rose like a hunky mountain above the rest of the bed. It was impossible to tell with him curled up like that, but he was five-nine. Micah lay just out of arm's reach from him; they were leaving my space in the middle of them empty, waiting for me to crawl back in and sleep, which I so wanted to do, but duty called. Micah's curls had spilled across his face so the most skin I saw was the darker skin of his slender shoulders and one arm that showed muscles, but he would never bulk up the way Nathaniel did. Genetics had made our very dominant and commanding Nimir-Raj, leopard king, my size, five-three. You couldn't see it under the covers, but he was built like a swimmer with that upside-down triangle of shoulders to slender waist and hips. Nathaniel was built not only more muscular but more lush, the man's version of curves. Jean-Claude lay on his back. He could sleep

on his side but he preferred to sleep on his back, and since he died at dawn so he couldn't keep cuddling as we moved during our sleep, it wasn't as big a deal that he didn't spoon as well as the three of us, who were all side sleepers.

Jean-Claude was the tallest of us at six feet even. Lying on his back, he looked every inch of it. His long black curls fell almost to his waist now, as did mine. We both had truly black hair, me because my mother's family had been Mexican, and his because it just was; his skin was paler than mine, but not by much thanks to my German father. I was pretty sure that if Jean-Claude hadn't been a vampire I'd have been paler than he was, but no one is paler than a vampire. Even literally dead to the world he was still one of the most beautiful men I'd ever seen, and that was with Nathaniel and Micah to compare to, though admittedly both their faces were currently covered, but I knew what everyone looked like. I was told that I was beautiful and some days I believed it, but looking down at the three of them I was still amazed that everyone and everything in the bed was mine, and I was theirs. I caught a gleam in Micah's hair and realized it was his eyes open and watching me through the tangle of his rich brown curls.

I whispered, "Were you just pretending to sleep?"

He star

ted to sit up and nodded.

I tsk-tsked at him. "It's police business."

"Then get a policeman to help you with the computer," he said, but he was already climbing out of the covers, carefully trying not to uncover the other two men.

"Get my gun," I whispered.

He reached into the specially made holster attached to the headboard and grabbed my Springfield EMP, and crawled to the foot of the bed to hand it to me so that he didn't cross Nathaniel's body with it. He was nowhere near the trigger, and he was being careful, but he knew the rules for gun safety. Treat every gun as if it's loaded and lethal, and never, ever cross someone's body with it unless you mean to shoot them. I took the gun and put it in my pocket, wondering if it would hold the weapon. The gun fit, but my robe was seriously hanging crooked from the weight. I tied the sash at my waist even tighter and tried to see if my hand would fit into the pocket well enough for me to draw the gun if I had to; it wasn't perfect, but it worked.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

Micah crawled out of the bed with his own handgun. He was one of the few lycanthropes I knew who carried a gun and weren't professional bodyguards or mercenaries. He was not only the Nimir-Raj of our local wereleopard pard but also head of the Coalition for Better Understanding Between Human and Lycanthrope Communities. The Coalition was a national organization that was slowly but surely forging the country's different types of shapeshifters into a cohesive group with one voice, shared goals, and they looked to him to lead them toward those goals. Not everyone was happy that the infighting that had always divided the shapeshifter communities was being turned into something more cooperative. Some hate groups saw it as a danger to humanity. Some lycanthropes saw it as us forcing our rule onto them, even though the Coalition never entered another group's territory unless invited in to solve a problem they couldn't solve on their own. It was like people who called the police when they needed them and then got angry that the police found evidence of a crime while they were saving the phone caller and his or her family.

There'd been more than one death threat against Micah, so he had bodyguards when he traveled and carried his own gun when he could. Not all buildings and businesses would allow concealed carry on the premises, so sometimes he had to leave the gun behind and rely on the bodyguards, but he liked to be able to take care of himself, too. Just one more thing we agreed on.

Micah's robe was one that Jean-Claude had bought for him, or maybe had had made, because it looked like something from the Victorian era, deep forest green velvet covered in gold-and-green embroidery. The thick cuffs and the collar and lapels that swept from his neck to his waist were shiny gold with more of the brocade embroidery. The robe also fell exactly to his feet but was a fraction short enough that he never tripped on it or had to lift it up when he was walking on anything but stairs.

Stairs were tricky with anything that went to your ankles. I knew that at least the robe had been tailored to fit him. He added dark green house slippers and he was ready to go.

I finally had house shoes, too, so that my feet were warm, and they stayed on rather than making me shuffle like the house slippers had done, but the silk robe . . . I needed something warmer. Especially now that we were here at least five nights a week. The two days in the Jefferson County house were mainly so we could get some sunlight. Except for Micah, we all worked almost exclusively nights, and after a while it was just depressing without some sunshine. I'd finally asked Jean-Claude if he missed it, and he'd said, "Very much, ma petite, much more than I thought I would when I agreed to become what I am."

Micah gathered his own phone and his eyeglasses from the bedside table on his and Jean-Claude's side of the bed. The glasses had green frames with gold accents to complement his green-gold leopard eyes. He'd been wearing prescription sunglasses for a long time without most of us being aware they were prescription. A very bad man had forced him to stay in leopard form until he hadn't been able to shift completely back to human form. He had his summer tan from running outside, so that the eyes looked incredibly exotic against the darker skin, but the serious downside to his having kitty-cat eyes was that cats are nearsighted. He'd also lost some of his color vision, though not as much as a real cat, as if something were more human about his leopard eyes. His optician had asked permission to write a paper on the difference in his vision and was cowriting the paper with a zoo veterinarian. Micah had worn the sunglasses to hide his eyes when he didn't want to stand out and because he'd worried that having less-than-perfect eyesight might be used against him in fights for dominance in the lycanthrope community, but finally he'd gotten glasses that helped him read more easily as well as see farther away. Cat eyes focused differently and had made him work harder to read than we'd realized. He had contact lenses, too, but here with us he didn't bother. I liked the way the dark frames bordered his eyes like they were works of art that finally had a frame worthy of them rather

than being hidden away behind dark sunglasses.

We left Nathaniel deeply asleep nested in the covers and already wiggling a little closer to Jean-Claude. This bed was big enough that he might just wrap himself in covers before he reached the other man for cuddling, but Nathaniel was a cuddle-seeking sleeper more than any of the rest of us, and the rest of us were pretty cuddly.

Micah and I moved as quietly as we could toward the door, leaving our shared boy asleep and our shared master sleeping the sleep of the dead. We probably didn't have to move all that quietly, but it was just polite. Micah stopped me at the door and made motions for me to fluff my curls into place. I raised an eyebrow at him, and he mouthed, Jean-Claude. Which meant my vampy fiancé had requested that Micah remind me not to go out without tidying my hair a little. Since I was technically going to be queen of all the vampires once I married Jean-Claude, I guess a little decorum was called for, but it still irked me.

Micah actually finger-tamed his own curls, too, so at least it was evenhanded silliness. Jean-Claude had said that our appearance reflected on him, and vampires, especially the very old ones, could be exceedingly vain. It had been everything I could do not to say, Vampires vain, you're joking, but I didn't, since he rarely went anywhere when he wasn't perfect top to bottom. I didn't think of it as vanity, more just him, just Jean-Claude, and I loved him, so I did what men had done for centuries when they waited for their beauties to get ready for the night--waited patiently for the perfection that was worth waiting for. It had never occurred to me that he might start wanting me to do more perfection on myself as the wedding got closer. It was a trend I wasn't really enjoying, but I was letting it ride. One thing I'd learned was to pick my battles. I'd already lost on the size of the wedding; I was still hoping to win on the wedding dresses for the women, mine included.

Micah opened the outer door and the two guards went to attention, backs ramrod straight, shoulders back, arms at their sides as if they were still wearing a uniform

that had a crease or stripe to follow.

I said, "At ease, guys. You're not in the Army anymore."

"I wasn't in the Army, Marshal Blake," the taller one said. His hair was still so short that I could see scalp through his nearly white-blond hair.

"It was a line of an old song, Milligan; I remember that it's 'Anchors Aweigh' for you."

The slightly shorter man, who was letting his brown hair grow out from the high and tight, gave a crooked smile and said, "Millie doesn't like the classics much."

I smiled back. "You need to broaden his horizons, Custer."

"Every time Pud tries to broaden my horizons, my wife gets mad," Milligan said, smiling. I knew that Pud was the first syllable of Pudding, because they'd started calling Custer Custard as a nickname, but in that mysterious way of nicknames it had changed into Pudding and then Pud. How did I know? I asked.

Micah chuckled and shook his head. "Your wife made me promise that I wouldn't let Custer lead you astray when we traveled out of town."

"I know she talked to you, sir."

"It's just Micah, or Mr. Callahan--no sir needed."

"Are you serious? Your wife talked to Micah about me?" Custer asked.

Milligan nodded. "That last weekend trip, you almost cost me my marriage."

"I thought you were joking about that," Custer said.

His friend shook his head.

"Well, fuck, man, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that." Custer actually looked serious, which wasn't typical for him.

Milligan and Custer were part of a SEAL unit that had been attacked by a group of insurgents that thought being werewolves made them a match for the SEALs. They'd been wrong, but the six-man unit had lost one of their own and the surviving five had all tested positive for lycanthropy, which meant an automatic medical discharge. We had other former military for similar reasons. One of them had brought the unit to our attention, and we'd offered them jobs.

Some of the private contractor firms would take shapeshifters, but they were all new enough shifters that full moons meant they were either in secure areas or with older, more experienced lycanthropes who bab

ysat them as they learned to control their inner beasts. Until they got complete control of themselves they couldn't work for any of the private contractor firms, because their rule was that you had to be a lycanthrope for at least two years before you could apply. Some companies insisted on four years, and not all countries would allow lycanthropes across their borders. The former SEALs had less than a year of turning furry. When the time was over they might decide to go to the other firms, because the money was better, for some assignments a lot better, but the money here wasn't bad and the level of life-threatening danger was much lower. Either way, they had good jobs with benefits for them and their families while they were deciding what to do next with a set of skills that was impressive as hell but of limited use in the civilian sector. So far their biggest complaint, and only from Custer and one other, was that there hadn't been enough excitement on the job.

Micah and I started down the hallway hand in hand. It meant one of us had to compromise a gun hand, but since we didn't expect to be attacked in our own inner sanctum, I figured we were safe. I even let him have my gun hand, even though I had better scores on the range. Custer said, "I'm not sure how this works, but we're on duty here to protect everyone in the room behind us, including the two of you."

"I'll go with them. You stay on the door," Milligan said.

Custer eased back to his post beside the door without an argument. You could always tell who outranked whom in the newly ex-military, because of moments like that. We'd only had one person at a time from a unit before this, never most of a group that had worked together for years and then lost their careers in the same fight. They were still very much together as a unit. In fact, Claudia, who was in charge of our guards overall but especially here at the Circus, had talked to me about whether we wanted to separate them for work. They needed to learn to work with the rest of our people and not just with each other, but so far it hadn't been an issue that anyone had complained about.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

I honestly didn't think we needed a bodyguard here in the underground of the Circus, but I'd learned not to try to argue with some of the guards about where their duty lay. It just made me tired and didn't gain me much. I could have played the "I'm your boss" card, but I was also one of their protectees, so it was a gray area. If I was their boss, then I could tell them to take a flying leap and they had to listen, but if something happened and I got hurt on their watch . . . Like I said, it was a gray area, so Milligan trailed us toward the computer room. Though Jean-Claude had totally embraced the new technology, he didn't like everyone living on their phones and electronic devices instead of actually looking at and talking with the people around them, so he'd limited everything but smartphones to the one room. I happened to know that the other reason he'd done it was that some of the older vampires were a little intimidated by all the new tech. Besides, having to bring the wires and cables down this far through the rock hadn't been easy, and keeping the computers in one place helped make it just a little bit easier.

Milligan hurried forward and opened the door to the computer room for us. Micah and I both let him. The room was dim, lit only by the banks of computer screens that were still cycling through the images on their screens. Some had finally gone black and still for the night. We moved into the room and Milligan started to come in with us, but I said, "Sorry, Milligan, but I'm going to have to look at police evidence."

"I have to make sure the room is clear," he said.

Again, I could have argued with him, but I let him do his job, though again, I was pretty sure the two of us could take care of anything that might be lurking in the computer room down here. It wasn't that big a room and there was only one area that was actually out of sight of the door.

Milligan came back around the room after completing his circuit. "The room is clear, ma'am, sir."

"Then you can leave us," Micah said.

"You don't have to stay right by our sides," I said.

He hesitated, and you could almost watch the wheels turning as he weighed whom he was supposed to listen to and whom he could safely override. A lot of our new ex-military had issues with the new, less rigid chain of command.

"We're going to be talking police business, Milligan. You cannot be in here for it," I said.

Milligan nodded. "Okay, that makes sense." He went for the door.

"And don't stand just outside the door," Micah said.

Milligan turned. "Sir, I . . ."

"I know I could hear the conversation through the door, Milligan, which means so could you."

"Claudia will have my head if I don't wait for you."

"We're both armed, and we're standing in our own underground fortress," I said. "If we're not safe here, then we're in deeper shit than just one guard can handle."

Milligan got that arrogant look on his face, one I'd seen before from men with certain backgrounds.

"Even a former SEAL wouldn't be enough, Milligan. Now go back to Custer and guard Jean-Claude's door."

He tried to argue some more, but Micah said, "That's an order, Milligan. Anita and I both outrank Claudia."

He frowned, sighed, and said, "Yes, sir." He didn't question it again, just turned on his heel and went for the door.

I made sure Milligan walked down the hallway and then came back to Micah.

He sat down in the chair in front of the computer so he could type faster, and within a few minutes I was up and running. He didn't even have to ask for my password or username anymore, because he'd helped me too many times and had finally memorized it all. That probably wouldn't please the other officers if they knew, since he was a civilian, but I wouldn't tell if he didn't.

I called Edward back. He answered on the first ring. "Anita, are you online?" His voice was less Ted and more Edward, so I thought to ask, "Can you talk freely yet?"

"No." Edward's one-word answer rather than the longer way around the mountain that he sometimes took as Ted.

"While we wait for the email to come through, you said something about how if you had your way I'd be seeing more than pictures, or something."

"They don't like the fact that you're a necromancer." His voice held some of Ted's happy undertones, but there was also Edward's cold emptiness. He was not happy that they wouldn't let me come play.

I heard voices in the background. Edward said, "Sorry, Anita. I've just been

corrected"--with more of Ted's accent this time--"because it would be against their own laws to deny someone entry to their country on the basis of the type of magic they could perform."

"I think of it as a psychic gift more than something mystical," I said.

"Their laws actually don't acknowledge a difference between psychic gifts and magic, only between magic and Church-sanctioned miracles."

"If they actually mention miracles in their laws, then that's a first outside of Rome that I'm aware of."

"Then be aware, Anita, because this is the second," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice, but it didn't match the words, as if he were having trouble staying Ted in front of the other cops. What had they done, or what had happened, between one phone call and the next to make him struggle with it?

"Are you okay, Ted?"

"I'm just dandy."

I let it go, because he either wouldn't talk about it or couldn't with all the other officers in the room. My email pinged. Micah helped me open the attachment on it, and we were suddenly looking at a throat with two delicate fang marks on it. It was a really small bite radius. It could be a child or a woman with a smaller-than-average mouth. The second neck wound had considerably bigger holes; no one was going to mistake them for hypodermic needle marks. These were definitely a different vampire.

"I'm going to put you on speakerphone, Anita. Tell us what you see." He didn't mean tell us; he meant tell them. I was pretty sure this was some kind of test. If I dazzled

them, would they let me come play with Edward in Ireland? Did I want to go play in Ireland? I didn't want to do an international flight with my phobia of flying--that was for sure--but . . . I di

dn't like that they were all prejudiced against a psychic gift that I couldn't do anything about. Also, I was a wee bit competitive.

"Well, from the first two bite images you've got at least two different vampires. The first could be a child, or a grown woman with a small mouth, or a crowded one."

"This is Superintendent Pearson, Marshal Blake. What do you mean, crowded?" His voice sounded like I'd expected. Irish in that way that movies convince you must be real. It made me smile that he actually sounded like movie Irish; so many accents didn't match what you expected.

"Fang marks are just like human bite marks in one way, Superintendent Pearson. It's not always the size of the mouth that dictates how a bite mark looks; sometimes it's how the teeth are placed. Someone who has too many teeth for the size of their mouth can sometimes have teeth that are sort of crowded together, which will make the space between their canines much smaller than you'd expect for an adult."

Another man's voice said, "We don't care about canine teeth. We care about the fangs." His accent didn't match as well, as if he were from a different part of Ireland. It was the same idea as a Southern accent here, as compared to Northern, or Midwestern, though television and the Internet were erasing regional accents in a lot of places.

"The canine teeth are what become fangs after the person changes into a vampire," I said.

"That's Inspector Logan. Please ignore him, Marshal Blake."

I heard Logan make an unhappy noise, but he didn't make a second remark. Pearson outranked him, or someone else in the room did and had taken Pearson's side.

Edward said, in a much more cheerful version of Ted's voice, "Go to the next picture, Anita."

I did what he asked. The fang marks seemed bigger still, but the holes weren't as neat and tidy, so . . . "The marks look even bigger than the last set, but they're also less neat, as if the vampire used more force to bite down, or jerked out more when it stopped feeding, so it could be the same vamp as bite number two."

Pearson asked, "Do you think we can assume that vampire number two is an adult male?"

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

"With the spacing between fangs you'd probably be safe assuming that, but I've known a few women with exceptionally wide teeth spacing, so it's not a guarantee. The necks all look like women; is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Inspector Logan here . . ."

"Address her by her title," another voice said, and I thought it was a woman.

"Fine, Marshal Blake, this is Inspector Logan. The pictures don't show the Adam's apple; how did you know they were women?"

"I've spent a lot of years looking at fang marks on skin, Inspector Logan. After a while, you just know what you're looking at."

Edward said, "Is there anything else that makes you think male or female, Anita?"

"A lot of vamps prefer to take blood according to their sexual preferences, so most males prefer to feed on women, and a lot of females feed on men, but some new vamps take any victim that they can, just like any other young predator on a learning curve."

"Detective Logan here, Marshal Blake." And there was something in the way he said my title and name that let me know he wasn't happy about it. Or maybe I was being overly sensitive.

Micah looked at me, and the look was enough; he thought the same thing about Logan. Maybe I wasn't being overly sensitive.

"Yes, Detective Logan?"

"Are you saying that gay vampires would feed on same-sex victims?"

"Possibly, but if you've never had vampires in Ireland before, then these may all be very new. So again, they're probably going after whatever victim is easiest. Some women feel safer feeding on other women, even though as a vampire they could beat the shit out of most human men. They never quite get rid of the idea that men are stronger and more dangerous than they are, so they feed almost exclusively on other women regardless of their sexual preference."

"So basically, you don't know anything about these vampires just from the pictures?" Logan said, and he made sure that I heard the disdain.

"I told you that Anita would be more useful in person, Logan," Edward said, holding on to the cheerful Ted voice with effort. Logan had already been a pain in the ass for his voice to struggle like that.

"I don't think we need to fly your girlfriend in, Forrester."

"Logan!" And now I was sure it was a woman.

"That's enough, Luke, and I mean it this time," Pearson said.

"Everyone knows . . ."

"No," Pearson said, and the Irish accent held anger just fine, "everyone does not know, and before you start spreading rumors about a fellow officer, you might want

to make certain you know what you're talking about."

"That's how a lot of the rumors get started," I said.

"What, Marshal Blake?"

"One person says something that isn't true, but it's too scandalous not to repeat, and then the rumors feed on each other, and before you know it, everyone knows the truth, even when it's a lie."

"Well said. I'm Inspector Sheridan, Rachel Sheridan." The woman's voice again.

"Glad to almost meet you, Inspector Sheridan," I said.

"You would take her side," Logan said in his sour voice.

"Who got your panties in a twist about me? We've never even met," I said.

"It's me he's mad at," Edward said in a voice that was far more cheerful than the words warranted.

"Why in blazes would I be mad at you?" Logan asked.

"Because you're jealous," Edward said.

"Why would I be jealous of you, Forrester?"

"For the same reason you're going to be jealous of Marshal Anita Blake."

"And why is that?"

"Anita, look at the next picture."

I hesitated for a second, then thought, Why the hell do I care if some cop in Ireland doesn't like me? I moved to the next image and it was another set of fang marks like the last ones, bigger fangs, and this time rough enough that the wounds were jagged around the edges. It made me have to swallow hard and fight off an urge to rub at the scars over my collarbone at the bend of my left arm where the same vampire had worried at me like a dog with a bone. It had almost cost me the use of my arm, but serious physical therapy and devotion to the weight room in the gym had left me better than I had been even before the injury.

"A vampire tried to rip a little and wiggled its fangs in the flesh, deciding if it was going to try to take a bigger bite out of the neck. It looks like a man's neck this time, or a larger woman's."

"It's a different vampire," Logan said, his voice demanding that I believe him.

"Maybe, but I doubt it."

"It's a different style of attack," he said.

"A different style of biting doesn't mean a different vamp, Inspector. The vampire is experimenting, deciding what he prefers. This one was either hungrier with this kill, or he's beginning to like the potential violence of it."

"Potential violence, my arse. He's sinking teeth into their necks. How much more violent can it get?"

"A lot more," I said.

"Go to the next picture," Edward said. His voice was very still with that edge of

coldness that was usually close to the surface for him.

I did what he asked, and this time the holes in the side of the neck were huge. I didn't even think fang marks, just holes, as if someone had taken an ice pick, or something like it, and just driven it into the neck as far as it would go.

Micah made a small exhale of breath and reached for my arm. I realized that he might never have seen a vampire attack this violent. He was always so strong, so certain, and dealt with the violence in his life and mine so calmly that sometimes I forgot he hadn't seen everything I had, or vice versa. I was pretty sure there were things happening on his out-of-town trips for the Coalition that would have scared the shit out of me, even if it was just me being scared because of the danger to him and other people I cared about.

I took Micah's hand in mine while I asked the next question. "Who figured out this was a vampire attack and not just a murder with something sharp and pointy?"

"We didn't think vampire, because Ireland doesn't have them," Pearson said.

"Exactly, but someone figured it out."

Edward said, "I did."

"This kind of damage isn't typical for vampires. A lot of police--even here where we know it's a possibility--might have missed this," I said.

"You don't have to be nice to us, Blake."

"I'm being nice to everyone else, Logan. You're just collateral kindness."

"What?"

"Let me just apologize for Logan for the rest of the conversation. It will save time," Sheridan said.

"I don't need you to apologize for me, Rachel."

"Oh, you're going to apologize for yourself. Good man, go ahead," she said, and I could hear the almost-laughter in her voice. Some people rubbed everyone the wrong way, and apparently Logan was one of those, because no one in the room seemed to like him. It made me feel better that he wasn't picking on Edward and me special; he just picked at everybody.

"Keep going through the pictures," Edward said, as if the others weren't really there. Ted played well with others; Edward didn't.

The next picture was worse, as if someone had torn the throat out but didn't quite know what they were doing, so there was a fang mark left to one side of the meat that had been someone's throat.

"The vamp is figuring out how strong they are, and what that strength can do to a human body," I said.

"He's getting a taste for it," Edward said.

"Was that supposed to be a pun?" Logan asked, his voice accusatory.

"No," Edward said, "just accurate. You should try it sometime."

"Try what?"

"Accuracy." That one word was low and cold with anger. What the hell had Logan done to earn that level of anger from Edward?

"Who the hell are you to come into our city and tell us that we aren't accurate enough for you?"

"I didn't say that everyone was inaccurate, Logan, just you."

"You bastard!"

"Please, pretty please," Edward said in a serious voice

. He wanted Logan to take a swing at him. What the hell had happened in Ireland to make Edward as Ted fish that hard for a fight? It wasn't like him to mess around on the job like that. I was the one who usually mouthed off.

I did the only thing I could think of to help; I swiped to the next picture he'd sent me. There was another dainty bite on a neck, but on the opposite side of the same neck was the bigger set of bite marks, not the one that was messy, but the first one that I'd thought had degraded in the tearing-out of throats.

"Does this next victim have two bite marks on it from both of our first vampires?" I asked. No one answered me, so I raised my voice. "Ted, talk to me!"

"Yes, the first two vamps seem to be working together."

"Did that victim die?"

"No," Sheridan answered. "He wandered into a hospital because his neck was bleeding, but he couldn't remember how he got injured."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

"They're starting to figure out how to work together," I said.

Logan's voice was strident. "Some expert you are, Blake. You were wrong about the second vampire. It's not the one tearing out throats."

"You've got at least three vampires on your hands," I said.

"Did you hear me, Blake? You were wrong!"

"I heard you, Logan. I'm okay with being wrong if it gets us better information to catch the vampires that are doing this."

"Two of them haven't hurt anyone too badly," Sheridan said.

"Have any of the victims been attacked a second time?"

"No," Pearson said.

"I told them to put protection details on the earlier victims," Edward said.

"Did they do it?"

"They're having a little trouble convincing their bosses to approve the overtime."

"Jesus, don't they realize that the vampires can call their one-bite victims out again?"

"I explained it to them."

"What we have a hard time understanding is, if this is true, then why isn't America overrun with vampires? If one bite enslaves a person, then you should all be slaves by now. You yourself are engaged to a vampire, Marshal Blake. If it were that easy to be enslaved, I don't think you would still be trusted as a police officer," Pearson said.

"If you donate blood willingly without being completely bespelled by the vampire's gaze, then he can't enslave your mind and call you at his whim. Done willingly with the minimum of mind tricks, it's not much more than a hickey or a love bite."

"Do you donate blood to your fiance?"

"I'll answer your question if you'll answer one of mine about your sex life," I said.

"I'm not asking about your sex life, Marshal."

"Yeah, you are."

Micah squeezed my hand and looked at me with a caution. He was right; if I wasn't careful I'd be telling them more about my love life with Jean-Claude than I'd shared with my friends on the force here. Sometimes avoiding a question reveals more than just answering. I was sort of screwed on this one, very damned if you do and damned if you don't.

"They call it coffin bait in the States," Logan said.

"Coffin bait is the equivalent to a badge bunny, someone who will fuck any cop just because they're a cop. I'm actually only dating one vampire currently, so I don't qualify as coffin bait."

"How insulting a term is that considered to be in your country?" Pearson asked.

"He's basically called me a whore who will let any vampire both fuck me and bleed me, so pretty damned insulting."

Micah had let go of my hand so he could stand up and start massaging my shoulders through the robe, because I'd suddenly become very tense. Imagine that.

"I'll apologize on Logan's behalf and on behalf of all the Dublin Gardai."

"Gardai?" I made it a question with an uplift of the word.

"That's what the Irish police call themselves," Edward said. "Gardai is plural. Garda Siochana, literally Guardians of the Peace. Only between twenty and thirty percent of them are even trained with weapons."

"You're joking."

"No, I'm not."

"Wow, that's different from here."

"It only went over twenty percent because they had some foreign lycanthropes get out of hand about two years ago."

"It made the international news," I said. "Wasn't there a sorcerer involved, too? It was like a gang of preternatural criminals, right?"

"Not like, Marshal. It was," Pearson said.

"The sorcerer was homegrown, but the shapeshifters were immigrants, if I remember correctly."

"You remember correctly."

"And now you've got your first vampires. What's changed about your country in the last few years?"

"Nothing that I'm aware of," he said.

"Then why does Ireland suddenly have supernatural crime?"

"I don't know, but it's a good question."

"Do you have a good answer?" I asked.

"Not yet, but I may know who to ask for one now."

"We've all been trying to figure out why we have our first vampires," Logan said.

"She hasn't told us anything that we didn't already know."

"She asked the question differently from anyone else; didn't you hear it?" Pearson asked.

"It's hard to hear anything when you have your head shoved that far up your own ass," Edward said.

"You won't always have other cops around you, Forrester."

"Is that a threat?"

"That would be illegal and I could jeopardize my career, so of course it's not a threat."

"Let's pretend it is a threat, because you need to understand that the other officers

aren't keeping me safe from you; they're keeping you safe from me." His voice had started in Ted mode but had sunk all the way down to that cooler, slightly deeper Edward mode. What was it about Logan that made it so hard for him to stay in character? I'd been insulted worse than this before, and we'd both worked with bigger pains in the ass, so what had Logan done to get on Edward's serious shit list? Usually you had to be a bad guy to piss Edward off this badly.

"Enough out of both of you," Pearson said.

"I'll play nice if he does," Edward said.

"We're not playing here, Forrester. We're trying to catch these vampires before they kill more people. That's not a game."

"What good is playing if the stakes aren't high, Logan?"

"What does that even mean, Forrester?"

"It means that life and death are the ultimate stakes to play for."

"Ted, you might want to tone down the big-and-bad routine a little." It was the best I could do to warn him that he was being all too much Edward and not enough Ted. It was like Superman putting on Clark Kent's glasses but showing up to the Daily Planet in his super suit. If you're dressed up like Superman, the glasses aren't going to hide who you are.

"Yeah, Ted, tone it down for your girlfriend," Logan said.

"What are your rules on sexual harassment, Superintendent Pearson?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Logan just seems like he's going to keep pushing on this until it falls down around his ears."

"Nothing's going to be falling on me, Blake. This little problem goes one way, and that's your way."

"I'm glad we agree on something, Logan."

"What are you talking about?"

"You just said the problem is going to go my way; that means I win."

"That is not what I meant."

"Your language is imprecise, Logan. It has been the entire time I've been here," Edward said.

"Fuck you, Forrester."

"No, thanks."

"That is not what I meant, damn it, and you know that."

"I don't know anything about you, Logan, except you are an incredible pain in the ass," Edward said.

"If you can't work civilly with Marshal Forrester, then you may need off this case," Pearson said.

"I've been on this case from the beginning."

"We want the Americans to help us find and contain our vampires."

"We don't need some cowboy cop from the States to help us do our jobs," Logan said.

r /> "I'll take all the help we can get. These vampires are killing innocent people, Logan, and all you can do is pick at Ted," Sheridan said.

"So it's Ted now, is it?"

I suddenly had a clue: Logan liked Sheridan, God help us and her. She had reacted to Edward in such a way that Logan thought Sheridan liked Ted. We never really leave junior high and that he-likes-the-girl-who-likes-someone-else game, or reverse the sexes and get the same story. I wasn't a hundred percent sure I was right, but it was worth a try.

"How long have you been in Ireland?" I asked.

"A week."

"Donna and the kids must be missing you."

"I'm missing them, too."

"She must be frantic having you gone in the middle of all the wedding planning."

"Our wedding is just about finalized. It's your wedding that's taking forever to plan."

"The wedding has gotten huge," I said, and felt that familiar tightening of my stomach whenever I let myself think too hard about the size of the guest list.

"Looks like you'll be my best man before I get to be yours, at this rate."

"Wait. Did you say that Blake is going to be your best man?"

"Yep," Edward said, trying to get back into Ted-space, and failing worse than I'd ever seen him before. He was usually the master of disguise, but something about Logan just threw the hell out of his usual suave self.

"And your fiancée isn't bothered by Blake being in your wedding?"

"Donna encouraged it."

"Well, you know what they say: all the good ones are taken," Sheridan said, which meant she hadn't been subtle about being attracted to Edward. He was five-eight, blond, blue-eyed, naturally slender but in great shape, and if you went by the reaction from other women, very attractive. I didn't see it, but then he'd threatened to torture or kill me, which put a real damper on me seeing him as cute. Now we were so close as friends that it was almost an incest taboo.

I tried to swipe for more pictures on the computer, but we were done. "This can't be all the pictures, Ted."

"It's not, but it's the ones they'll let me share with you."

"Gentlemen and lady, are you really that prejudiced against my psychic gift?"

"It's nothing personal, Blake," Pearson said.

"The hell it's not."

"The hell it is," he said, and then he seemed to think about what he'd just said. "I'm having one of those flashbacks to that American cartoon where it's always duck season and never rabbit season."

"You're hunting vampires; my necromancy could help you do that."

"The dead do not walk in Ireland, except as ghosts, Marshal Blake."

"Bullshit, and you know it. You have a vampire problem."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:08 am

"We concede that," he said.

"Then let Anita come in and help me help you," Edward said.

"Sorry, Forrester, and no insult meant to Blake here, but necromancy doesn't work here."

"Is it outlawed?" I asked.

"No, not exactly."

"Ireland is supposed to be one of the most magically tolerant countries in the world. I'm feeling seriously picked on," I said.

"It's nothing personal, Blake."

"I do not think that means what you think it means," I said.

He gave a small laugh. "Thanks, we needed that."

"Anita can help us," Edward said.

"Are you admitting that the high-and-mighty Ted Forrester, the one that the vampires have nicknamed Death, can't handle things here without his sidekick, the Executioner?"

"Death and the Executioner--has a nice ring to it," I said.

"So does Death and War," he said.

"That's catchy, too."

"War is Anita's newest nickname from the vampires and wereanimals," Edward explained.

"Why didn't you get a new nickname?" Sheridan asked.

"Death suits me," he said, and I could almost see him give her that terribly direct eye contact from his pale blue eyes. It was like having a winter sky stare at you.

I could hear the shiver in Sheridan's voice over the speakerphone when she said, "Yes. Yes, it does." Her tone told me that our bid to get her to back off the crush by talking about Donna and the wedding hadn't worked. Edward was handsome, but this level of persistence made me wonder what he'd done to impress her this much.

"Go back to sleep if you can, Anita."

"I don't feel like I've been that big a help."

"You've helped as much as you can when they won't let me share information with you freely."

"Yeah, because they wouldn't want the big bad necromancer to fuck up their case."

"There's no need for that, Marshal."

"What?"

"Cursing like that."

"Logan cursed."

"But he didn't say that."

I realized he was upset that I'd said fuck. "If you don't let me cuss when I talk, I may have to just smile and nod."

He laughed as if he thought it was a good joke. I hadn't been kidding, but since they didn't want me to help them any further I wouldn't have to shock them with my language anymore.

"Don't mind Pearson," Sheridan said. "The rest of us curse. He just doesn't like the F-word and we are having the meeting in his office."

"I'll try to be better if we talk again. Best of luck with your vampire problem."

"Thank you, Marshal. That's most kind," Pearson said.

"Don't mention it."

Edward picked up the phone and went off speaker so at least they couldn't hear my side of the conversation. "What did you do to cause Sheridan to have such a crush on you?"

"I don't know." I didn't press, because it was probably the truth. Since Edward could flirt and seduce to get information out of people without any emotional qualms, I knew he meant it.

"You just don't know how charming you are."

"I will try to use this superpower for good, or personal gain, or to hunt down my enemies and slaughter them so I can dance in their blood."

"You have the most cheerful analogies, Edward."

"We all have our strengths, Anita. Sleep well. I'll call you again if everyone will agree to it."

"Okay, be safe and watch your back like a motherfucker."

"I always do." He hung up. I hung up. We were done. We could go back to bed for a couple of hours.

I opened the door for Micah. He was one of the men in my life who didn't argue over which of us got the door. I valued that, because sometimes you just want to open the damn door. We were in the corridor and it was just as empty as it had been an hour and a half ago. We all mostly worked nights here, so six or seven a.m. wasn't a time that any of us expected to be awake to enjoy.

"Do you think the smallest bite is a child vampire?"

"I really hope not."

"Why?"

"I've told you this before. All the child vampires go crazy eventually. Jean-Claude says that some of them go nuts immediately after rising from the dead. They just never adjust to it."

We had a couple of child vamps that we'd inherited from Europe. They were both constant reminders of why it was a bad idea.

"At least Bartolome is old enough for everything to function like a grown-up," Micah said.

"Yeah, but he still looks eleven to twelve, a young twelve."

"Valentina is worse," he said.

I nodded. "Five to seven years old forever."

"Her mind isn't the mind of a child," he said.

"Just her body. I know."

"I know the other vampires killed the one who made Valentina, but it didn't really save her," he said.

I took his hand in mine and said, "I really hope that she's the youngest vamp I ever meet."

"She's older than Jean-Claude."

"Her body isn't," I said.

I prayed that the vampires in Ireland were just female with small bite radiuses. I prayed that no one was creating more child vampires, because if any vampires were damned, it was them. Please, God, no more.

Laurell K. Hamilton is a full-time writer and the author of the Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter, and Merry Gentry series.

What's next on

your reading list?

Discover your next

great read!

* * *