Mother of All Darkness

by dhapin

Summary

I find Anita Blake and Illyana interactions to be quite intriguing. Both are violent and very ruthless when need be and yet both have a softer side, although Illyana’s is so rarely seen. I got to wondering how Illyana’s interactions with Anita’s world would have affected the Mother of all Darkness storyline now that Katherine and Illyana are part of the storyline. And I did want to write another full Anita Blake story. I figure that this story takes place shortly after the Laurell K Hamilton's book Bullet.

This is a combined sequel to my first Anita Blake/Illyana story Scary things and the story Cat’s Cradle. To fully understand this story you need to have read the Scary Things and then Cat’s Cradle. There are also references to my Snowflake on Ice story and my current Pride, Prejudice, Illyana, and Zombies story (but you don’t have to have read them).

And Anita Blake stories tend to involve sexual topics as that is how the author Laurell K Hamilton currently writes her. As in my prior Anita Blake stories this is told from Anita's perspective.
Chapter 1

Part 1: What came way after what came before

Cuddling and snoozing in bed post sex. Ahhh, one of my favorite things. Something to take the edge off of the hurt, the pain, the loss... the grief.

Things so completely sucked right now.

Sucko issue number one. Haven was dead by my hand, it was either him or Nathaniel and it so wasn't him. I wished it could have worked out. He was a powerful werelion, but had so many issues about masculine dominance (i.e. him dominating me) and he'd gone nuts and tried to kill Nathaniel just to make me feel bad. Well... he'd succeeded but not in quite the way he'd planned as I ended up shooting him resulting in his death.

Sucko issue number two. The vampire council had been taken over by the Mother of All Darkness’s spirit, and said bitch was using the council to try to either take over me and mine or destroy us completely.

The Mother of All Darkness, otherwise known as Marmee Noir or Mommy Dearest, is the leader of all vampires and the head of the Vampire Council. She is both a vampire and a lycanthrope at once, and is apparently a were-cave lion. According to several of the vampires (and her), she is supposedly the first vampire. However, there were hints that she is the Mother vampire in a metaphorical, rather than literal sense, having created the rules and culture that governs the vampire race. Nobody is quite sure and Marmee Noir is certainly not telling.

Not quite sure what she was, she might be a unique type of vampire, distinctly different and more powerful, from all later descendents; perhaps not even a vampire, per se, but a unique type of monster with vampiric traits. Her powers included control over several species of vampire/lycanthrope mixes (i.e. cat based), the ability to project her attention and mental powers, and a deep control over darkness.

Marmee Noir and her vampire/lycanthrope followers had been "sleeping" for centuries, due to some members of the vampire community casting a spell on her, in an underground tower that looks out on a wide open space. Her body has been destroyed but the bitch's spirit survived and was actually possessing various vampires. Her goal was to posses me as her new host.
Yea, ultra sucko like I said.

But... damn I love the sheets on Jean-Claude’s bed, they must be one thousand thread count or better. I so didn’t want to know what they cost.

I was sprawled naked between three of my sweeties, Jean-Claude (vampire), Micah (wereleopard), and Asher (vampire). They were all sleeping and I guess I was dozing when I heard the slight cough of somebody announcing their presence.

SHIT!

I froze. I hadn’t sensed anything! And… none of my bedmates had stirred at the sound which must mean strong magic!

I groped for the concealed handgun (yea I have one hidden in the bed and no I’m not going to tell you where it is) as I peered over Asher’s shoulder and saw a person sitting on a chair on the far wall. It was... well shit it wasn't whom I'd feared but almost somebody as bad. It was...

Magik.

Which was odd. I didn’t hear any screaming like I usually do when I’m around her and she was also dressed strangely. She was wearing some full body grey garb with electronics boxes over her chest that had wires leading to her wrists, looked like some weird prison clothing or something.

She also looked... unkempt. And I wasn't feeling anything from her. No sense of power, demonic evil, or... heck anything at all. It was like she wasn't really here.

She had an expression of vague annoyance as she looked upon me. “Occupied with your usual hobby I see Ms. Blake. Have you become an exhibitionist or are you trying to find out if I’m a voyeur and into...” she waved her right hand to indicate the three sleeping males.

I sat up and found a bed sheet to hide my breasts. I’m a lot more casual about nudity now, but just didn’t feel right flashing her. I shook the boys but nobody woke up.
She watched me attempt to wake them and commented again in a dry sarcastic tone. “I think this is a private conversation Ms. Blake. Your dream, your rules I suppose”.

“Why are you here Magik”? I asked as I glared at her, I hate being surprised and aggression is kind of my default reaction.

I’d called her Magik but she also had other names. Darkchilde for one. You really didn’t want to meet her when Darkchilde described her as she looked like a classical female devil. I’ve seen her a few times like that and it was never good. I don’t think it was good for her and it really wasn’t good for those around her (although sexually the look tended to be very good with some of the boys which I think speaks volumes about the male species in general).

Childe with an E was the first name that I learned (she’d used that name when we'd first met). Childe was… well not safe but not… ummm… genocidal is too strong a word… let’s just say she tended to refrain from wanton homicide and leave it at that.

Magik. Interesting name, denotes I suppose what she really was as she was magical at so many levels in that she was able to do all kinds of things. Magik had fried the Great Pyramid of Khufu the first time I’d met her, and years later it was still smoking. Nobody knew what was burning underneath all that stone rubble and nobody wanted to find out. They’d spent weeks pouring water from the Nile on it but whatever was burning apparently didn’t care about water. And just to be extra specific Magik was not a self assumed title, she’d been named Magik by others; meaning she wasn't bragging.

Then there was Snowflake, Katherine sometimes called her that. It was a nickname from her human childhood before she became a demon sorceress, died, and came back as a full demon. Katherine also sometimes called her Kit as in Kitten.

Katherine and Illyana were lovers, but separated by fate due to something that Illyana (and yes I mean Illyana and not Magik) had done to save Katherine. Really separated as apparently Illyana had taken on some kind of fate that had been Katherine’s so Katherine would not have to die and was rather... damaged by it; but that’s another story. Katherine had tried explaining it once using quantum mathematics, something about quantum super positions and quantum particle entanglement in the non quantum world, but all I achieved was a quantifiably super headache. I mean how can something be in two places at once and be two different things?

Hell Lord, ruler of Limbo was one of her titles. Power with a capital P, see Magik for reference.

Some folks I knew had taken to calling her Dragon Lady when they didn't want to mention her
other names (for some reason they didn't want to speak her name, they thought it was bad luck or something). They never did it around Katherine as she got annoyed, but she did concede that the title was well earned.

Then there was Illyana. Nice safe human name. Right? Naa… Illyana was… way past dangerous. When she was Illyana, in our world, that either meant her human side was really showing (I’d only seen it once) or it meant that somebody was threatening Katherine and hell was about to pay a visit (I’d seen that too and I’d take Magik over Illyana any day of the week, with Magik you had a better chance of understanding and surviving. Illyana tended to lose it when Katherine was involved).

Well enough about her names for now.

“You called me”. Was her response. “Umm… do you have a Coke or something in here? They don’t usually let me have soft drinks and I’m rather craving a Coke”.

Ok, no idea what the hell she was talking about. I pointed to the wet bar and she went over and rummaged around in the small fridge and came back with a glass of ice and a can of Coke. She poured herself a drink.

“Thanks”. She said and she took a long sip.

Ok this is way weird. She said dream so… what the hell was going on? Well, I asked the question a bit more politely then that. Never hurt to be polite with Magik although you could cuss at her and she wouldn’t take offense, I guess demons tended to have a thick skin.

“You summoned me… well, I suppose you kind of summoned me. More of a please show up kind of plea. I think you’re contemplating cashing in the favor I owe you and you want to talk it over first. I was asleep as well and decide to respond to your plea. Because… well shards I’m so very very bored. At least Scott is finally letting me out on missions now and then, grateful for the break in the tedium”.

Ok, not making any sense, rather the norm with her. I tried a question that might elicit a more understandable response.

“What’s with the new look? You look like a character in a Sci-Fi film”.
Her response surprised me as she held up her arms to emphasize the getup.

“Prison garb, integrated with a nifty demon incinerating bomb jacket. Rather annoyed to find myself wearing it in a dream as well, but beats the hell out of most of my dreams lately”.

“Prison gear? Bomb jacket? What the hell did you do and who the hell is able to do this to... well you”?

Her answer both interesting and chilling.

“Got my soul back for one and arranged the death of the elder gods”.

She gave a sarcastic grin. “My methods... upset my teammates as I risked all of creation to do it. That and... well... some other things. So now I’m locked up with the bomb thingie set to go off if I misbehave, try to do magic, or get uppity I suppose”.

“Shit... so you’re powerless”.

“No. I’m locked up”.

“Isn’t that the same thing”? 

“No”.

“How”? 

“I let them lock me up”.

“Meaning...”? 

“How good were you at locking me up”? 
Ok… I thought about it a bit and then got it. Not sure if the folks who locked her up got it but then that was not my problem.

Wondered who Scott was, decided not to ask as I likely would just be more confused by the answers. Hmm, she said a team…

“*What kind of team? Don’t tell me you’re a member of the Justice League or something*”? If so they really needed to get their heads examined was my inner thought, that’s like letting Lex Luther join and putting him in charge of the kryptonite.

“*Naa, I don’t live in a comic book Ms. Blake. Although it is a super powered response team for the situations that are the baddest of the bad. Not to be used in most cases so not much play time as it were. At least they let me out the cell for training as well. The team name sums it up well, the Extinction team*”.

Ok, with a name like that her presence made a kind of makes sense. And I so wished she’d stop referring to massive mayhem as playing, the girl has a disturbing perspective on things. “*How do they… um restrain you when you’re not in your bomb jacket*”? 

“*With another more expensive bomb jacket that looks just like my spandex black and yellow costume. Rather sucks in that I haven’t had a bath or a shower in a long time. Shards moist towelettes so don’t cut it. I find that I keep fantasizing about a shower*”.

Ok, that explained the unkempt look.

Magik then asked a question as she looked around the room. “*So… why am I here Ms. Blake? Here being rather notional as this is a dream*”.

I explain what had been happening and my fears about Mommy Dearest. I then asked a question that had been on my mind for quite some time.

“*Are you stronger then her, Marmee Noir, the mother of darkness*”? 

“No… Well, not completely sure but probably a very strong no, especially if she’s taken over the
vampire council. I stayed well away from her the times I've been here”.

“Shit”.

“Hoping I’d take out the big bad for you”?

“Yea”.

“Sorry, but she’s beyond just me even with all that I am in this world”.

“Shit”. I said gain. Yea, I like to curse sometimes.

Magik asked a question. “Have you involved…” she gulped and suddenly her body language changed. She got a panicky look and started to hyperventilate. She ended up closing her eyes and stuttered “Kath… Kather… Kath… Kath…”. She stopped and gulped, then continued. “Her”?

Ut-oh, dangerous ground. Magik had just gone Illyana and I only knew one thing that could cause that. I had been tempted to involve Katherine, but I was rather convinced that doing that would fall under plotting Katherine harm and Illyana had made it very plain, and had demonstrated, just what happened to folks who plotted Katherine harm (remember that genocidal comment). Plus… Katherine was my friend and… well shit, you don’t do that to friends.

“No, she doesn’t know”.

Katherine was off at Yale getting her first Doctorate degree. In fact she was due to come back here for spring break in just three weeks, assuming there was something to come back to that is. Just knew she was going to be way beyond pissed when she learned that we had hidden this from her (assuming we were alive in three weeks). But alive and pissed beats dead any day of the week.

Illyana gave one of those full body shivers, but when she opened her eyes you could tell Magik was back.

“Good”.
We sat there staring at each other for a while as Magik drank the rest of her Coke.

I finally asked the question that I really wanted an answer to.

“If… well… does that oath you swore cover… um… this”?

Magik swallowed the last of her Coke, then got up and retrieve another can. She replied as she rummaged around in the mini fridge. “I swore my oath to you. Better you do… the bigger the favor”.

“And…”? I asked. Hoped and prayed to be honest (yes the irony of praying about help from a demon was not lost on me). Although… she wasn’t really feeling demony. Maybe because this was supposedly just a dream? Hmm… she did say she got back her soul.

She stood back up with her refilled glass of Coke. “You did what I… couldn’t do… for… Kather… Kath… Ka Ka Ka Ka...” She gave up trying to pronounce Katherine’s name and continued. “I owe you the biggest favor you can possible come up with. I can’t take out Mommy Dearest myself… but I’ll be there if you call”.

“Thanks that actually brings me a bit of comfort”.

The conversation again ground to a halt. Magik just looked around while she drank her Coke, then she spoke.

“Usually dreams like this end on some big moment where some critical piece of information is about to be reveled or after some cathartic revelation or you awaken just in time to fight some monster”.

I had to agree with that. “Yea…”.

We stared at each other for a while but nothing happened. Then Magik asked another question.
“Do you have any Oreo’s”? 

What was I supposed to do? I threw on a robe and we went and got milk and cookies for the big bad demon. Turned out she also really liked chocolate milk as well.

I just hoped she didn't get a craving for pizza or something as it was past 3am.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

This story takes place close to the end of Illyana's confinement in the X-Brig.

And is it just me or do the X-Men have an obsessive desire to put X in front of everything? X-Brig for crying out loud. Next it will be the X-Boys room and the X-Girls room. Hey how about the X-Closet for the brooms? My favorite is putting Xs on female costumes right over the nipple (I mean... come on... but it is nice I have to admit). Oh no, we must go the X-Cave! Hmm, I suppose Batman has the same compulsion (Bat Mobile, Bat Cave, Bat Plane, Bat Computer; one must wonder if there's a Bat Condom)?

There is a reference to my ongoing Top Gear X story. Top Gear X is another Illyana story written from other's interactions with Illyana (like how this story is written from Anita Blake's perspective). Illyana starts to play a major role in chapter 6 of Top Gear X (shameless plug) with lots of flashbacks and Illyana back-story to Top Gear X.

And references to Cat's Cradle (Katherine) and Tango with Doom (plug, plug, plug).

Part 2: Milk, cookies and revelations

Magik and I where sitting in the kitchen area part of the catacombs that there were beneath the Circus. Not that vampires had any need for food, but we had lots of were staff that needed real food, some human and were vampire servants, and me of course. Not to mention the need for banquet cooking.

This was one of these really vivid dreams. Complete in every detail except only Magik and I were awake in it. We had passed sleeping guards and staff. Like everybody had been hit with knockout gas or something. Part of me was suspicious that this was not a dream but Magik assured me (gee like that helped) that she was not doing this and that she knew it was a dream.

I also found it strange to be sitting at a table with her when several other tables were occupied by sleeping guards and staff, plus some friends of mine. Watching a demon dunking Oreo’s in a glass of milk and eating them. I mean… do demons do that?

She asked me if the makeup of the vampire counsel had changed. I told her that it hadn't, still had the same members as when she'd given them that unpleasant scare when she looted their archives.
Even weirder I was now engaged in prolonged small talk with Magik. At first she'd just munched some cookies and drank some milk while staring at me as I drank some coffee. Now I'm good with silence, but Magik always wins the stare down contests. If she doesn't have anything to say she apparently feels no need to fill the void of silence and it just gets creepy with her staring at you.

I'm also real good at stare downs as well but... heck I guess I got bored as well with nothing happening. I finally asked her why they didn't let her have soda.

"Another strange working theory by one of my jailors I believe. For a while they wouldn't let me cut my hair which finally passed, thank the nameless ones, as I like having bangs. Now they claim they have concerns over the impact of caffeine on my blood chemistry. In truth they don't know how one such as I functions and that puzzles them to no end. Rather annoying being a part time lab rat".

Yea, I could imagine. I carry several different forms of the lycanthropy virus, which is supposed to be impossible, so I also get to have lots of fun doctor visits. Of course I'm not locked up in a cell with a bomb jacket on. Really think that the bomb jacket is excessive and... well from my experience all it could do was hurt her but the rules (God I so wish I could get a copy of this supposed rule book) likely said no on the ability to actually snuff her. God knows we'd tried.

My question apparently broke the ice and we started to selectively talk about various things as I tried to keep the conversation away from things that might upset her. Things being Katherine.

No talking about Katherine. That was kind of a rule about being around Magik. Magik... well Illyana I guess, couldn't really deal with the topic. Katherine had tried to explain it to me one day.

It was like Magik could pretend to herself Katherine did not exist and that Magik had not once become the person she wished she could be. The whole fate thing that Illyana had done made that impossible somehow. Now even thinking about Katherine somehow caused massive physiological problems for her. We all found this very tragic for Katherine (she was a dear friend). Less so for Magik as we were all freaked out by her, but I think I felt the most for her of the ones who felt anything. She kind of reminded me of... what just might have happened to me if I'd chosen wrong.

Everybody likes to think that they would sacrifice themselves for their beloved. Makes you... makes you wonder if you could ever really do that for somebody. I know I can as I have, but such devotion, such purposeful intent... knowing that the sacrifice means you can't have what you want and you get to live with the results. Well... I sometimes wonder if being a sociopath makes you more... extreme. Extreme in all things.
I can be a sociopath at times, especially when I kill, but Magik? I think she's mostly locked into being one and doesn't know any way out or... or didn't even know.

I find it somehow humbling that a demon can teach us so much about love and sacrifice.

I’d just gotten done detailing my hand gun preferences and the merits of 9mm vs. 40cal ammunition. It was my turn to ask a question. Prior to that Magik had spoken at great length on her dagger preferences and just how to twist the knife when it mattered.

"Why the heck have you let yourself be locked up"?

"Wants". Was her simple answer.

I gave her a slightly irritated expression. Like... more detail please. To my surprise she enhanced her response.

"Wants. I want... to have what I once had with them. I want to earn it, not manipulate it into existence. I want to not know the future any more. I want to be... surprised by what happens. I want... I want my friends to trust me again. I want... a lot of things that I can't have. So... I acquiesce to the incarceration. I don't know it if will work, but it appears to be the only option open to me if I wish to remain with the X-Men. Scott has to show that the big bad reality threatening demon is under control and is being punished; leadership and all that".

That's... good I thought. Wanting and acting on wants. Progress I suppose.

I asked another question. “Why don’t I hear screams? I always hear screams around you. Are you still a demon”?

Magik answered. I had to suppress a laugh at her milk mustache.

“Could be because this is a dream, but more likely it’s because I got my soul back. I’m... not so dead anymore as it were and your power has less to sense now. But... still a demon, but now a demon with a soul so I suppose somewhere one or more hells have frozen over as this is so not covered in the rules. Heck, I think I can even sometimes see blue as it were”.
“Congratulations on that and um... killing the elder gods. Umm... blue”? Blue? What the heck, oh shit she’d killed or arranged the killing of gods. Really needed to remember that and... hmmm needed to find out if maybe whatever she’d done could be done here to take out Mommy Dearest. Yea... follow that up before this dream ends.

“Obscure reference, meaning I can now... understand some things I really couldn’t before, due to regaining my soul. Think color blind but now I see glimpses of color”.

"How does it feel having your soul back”?

"I'm... not always sure. I'm... actually confused about some things that I was so certain about at one time. I find myself... questioning some the things I've done... and allowed to be done. I'm... Sometimes it feels real good, sometimes I find things now hurt that didn't used to hurt. Sometimes... sometimes it's like it doesn't matter. Time will tell I suppose".

"Are you... better now”?

She as silent for a bit as she apparently thought about it.

"More complete, yes. But better? No. I... better understand just how... damaged I think I am. How... insane I must be. I can see part of that now. It's not very pretty. My broth... some people keep insisting on having an image of me that does not exist. That me... if she ever existed for me, died. Died badly. This is what's left. That illusionary image of me... hurts because... that means that I know that they would just reject the me that is if they ever removed their self imposed blinders. Funny how even statements of love can hurt a person if the statements are felt to be about something that does not exist”.

I can recognize extreme trauma when I see it as I've both experienced it and seen way too much of it. Damn, I so understood aspects of what she was saying and was so powerless to help. Part of that sounded so similar to my own life story before I found love and how my family acted. Well, I offered the only advice I had to give.

"You need therapy". Yep, insightful, that's me. Sometimes I just have the gift to see the blindingly obvious and give voice to it.

She now had an irritated expression. "I'm getting therapy".
"Oh, well that's good".

"Who do you think locked me up and put the bomb jacket on me"?

"Oh, that's bad". I thought about it for a moment. "That must raise all kind of trust issues with your therapist".

"Therapists and yep, say the wrong thing and the bomb jacket might just go boom and turn me extra crispy yet again. Rather locks down the desire to share".

"Yea, I can relate. Share and get punished. Been there, done that. But..." I suddenly got a brief burst of actual insight. "Why the heck are you sharing this with me"?

She gave me a look I couldn't interpret. "Again trust issues. My brother is blind and deaf as it were, he only sees and hears what he wants to. Kitty can't stand me at all which I suppose must mean she's smarter then everybody else. You at least I can kind of partially trust. You listen to me instead of just talking at me. I... I suppose you have a partial understanding of my perspective. So many people are so quick to condemn what I've done without any understanding at all. How... how all of them would have done... bad things if... if... that... had happened to them".

Kitty being the young doppelganger for Katherine in the universe where Magik came from. Wow, alternate universes are so confusing.

Yea I could relate to that. Had a therapist when I was a kid that kept insisting that I was evil because I involuntarily raised the dead; he felt that I was trying to punish my Father and Stepmother Real downer. Hmm... let's try my hand at therapy.

"What would you want if you could only have one thing, not um... taking into account things that fate says you can't have". No need to trigger Katherine issues.

She had a ready answer. That meant she'd been thinking about this, likely in response one of her therapist questions (but I bet she hadn't shared it).
wishes I was. If that happened then... then maybe... maybe other thing could be as a well”.

Real heavy issues. Reminded me of my own family issues. Time to change the subject.

“So... anything interesting happen while you've been locked up”?

“Not really. Hmm, well... I tangoed with Doom, that was fun”.

“You mean tangled”? As I've said before, why is almost everything she says so confusing?

“No I mean the dance, the tango, was rather fun”.

“With Doom”?

“Victor von Doom”.

“Oh...”. Once again I didn’t have a clue what she was talking about.

“It was in a dream like this but it had really fantastic food. Very romantic in a school girl fantasy kind of way. Victor is very... impressive at all levels”.

"What's he like"?

"A romantic Darth Vader comes to mind, costume and all”.

I just had to ask, ok enough of that; yet another topic to not pursue. Then I remembered a question I've always wanted to ask.

“I’ve always been meaning to ask... do you really have a dragon form”? 
Magik gave a little sigh. “You always ask that question”.

I looked at her with some confusion. “I’ve never asked you that. Hell we don’t even talk much the few times you’ve been here or that time you summoned me to that weird other dimension zombie London to perform that service I owed you”.

Magik suddenly looked slightly... well not embarrassed, but like she had been caught out in a some type of fib. She answered and I didn't like what I heard.

“I’ve been here more then... you or yours remember”.

Shit. That meant that…

“You mind rolled us again and it sounds like more then once”.

Sigh… “Yep... I guess I’m supposed to apologize for that but... well... naaa. It was for the best”.

I tried to clamp down on my anger because one it wouldn't make any difference, not even sure she'd notice much, and I really did want her help. “Why”?

Oh my God she actually slightly blushed.

“Well... you and yours were a good source of... um... female... umm... advice. Kind of don’t have anybody to ask questions about some... um... things”.

“Like what”? Wow, and now I turn into chatty girl asking for details. Guess it's ingrained into us all. And with that I was now I’m sitting next to a slightly blushing Oreo eating demon.

Just great. Apparently the demons are coming to me for female issues and then erasing the conversation. Really not sure what that implied about me. Hmm she said others so not just me. She continued.

She stopped blushing and now had a slightly pleased expression as she responded.
“About … things… female… things. I was on a road trip with this old guy, one of my therapists thought that it would be a good idea to get away; this was before I got locked up. Well there was a bit of a giant mess up which resulted in a onetime issue that was, kind of like your ardeur problem. He was… nice in that older guy kind of way, real gentlemen, but he was really… um… big… and you have lots of… um… well… umm… experience with… big. The road trip was part of this TV show and I had a great time, lots of my kind of fun. Scott and Emma ended up rather upset, the actual episode was banned in seventeen countries last time I checked due to violence and religious… issues”.

Fun… Magik's definition of the word tends to involve lots of mayhem. TV show? So did not want to know. Great, it's an apparent yes on me being the sex advisor to demons. So do not want that reputation.

Then she changed the subject. "Plus erasing the recollection of my presence solved… some issues that your binding attempt caused”.

“What issues”?

Magik looked me in the eyes and explained, and as she spoke at length I… remembered.

Shit did I remember.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Chapter three and beyond takes place after the Laurell K. Hamilton's story Blood Noir. Yea, I'm doing a story within a story (after all it is a sequel to two other stories).

Part 3: What came before

The screaming woke me up with a start only to find that I was the only one awoken. The two naked male bodies (Micah and Nathaniel) that I was sleeping between stayed soundly asleep.

Crap, I knew those screams. The sobs of a girl being… raped, the cries of a child being hurt. The female screams of torture and abuse.

I’d heard such screams many times in my life, hell too many. But these specific screams I’ve only heard when I was around…

“Magik”! I cried out as I sat up and scanned my darkened bedroom.

Over there, she was leaning against the dresser and was partially lit by moonlight from the window. She was wearing that spandex full body costume of hers with the yellow X and had a brown leather satchel hanging from her left shoulder. She looked fully healed from the damage she’d received at our hands; meaning the blue eyes Arian babe motif was back in full.

Which was apparently her real form and not some attempt to get my goat. I have family issues with hot female blondness in that my step sister and step mother are and I’m not.

What is Magik like?

Think nails on a spiritual blackboard, although others don’t perceive her quite the same as I do. If they have the talent then the scent and the power they can sense, but not the demonic or the screams for some reason. For me it was like being next to a soulless screaming black hole of evil. She just radiates demonic vileness. She has a scent of smoke, pepper, and wolf; although I’m sure
a real werebeast would be getting the full nuance of her scent. Her power was hot and sharp, like you could get cut or burned if you touched her. And her presence felt… heavy, like she was make out of lead or something.

It’s like the soundtrack of a horror film that just makes you think the big climatic monster attack is about to happen. I’m always antsy and on edge around her.

The pale moonlight was also making her look unearthly and very mysterious, almost black and white and her hair was platinum'ish in that pale lighting.

“Hello Miss Blake” she said with a slight smile.

“Ms. Not Miss”. Instinctual correction, I was tired of being called Miss by folks.

“I stand corrected Ms. Blake”. Was her reply casual reply.

Ummmm, now what?

We’d tried to kill her, bind her, banish her and she’d taken our best shot and shoved it down our throats (or up our asses depending on who you spoke to). Yea, we’d hurt her badly, but then Magik has broken loose and… well the only reason we were still alive was because I’d offered to do a service for her which had apparently been a bit of a setup as she had wanted that service to provide her open ended access to our world, but we'd surprised her on just how effective we had been. Yea... rah rah us, so effective she’d almost stuffed everybody.

In short she’d played us. She was a demon, worse she was a demon lord which was kind of like a demon who was on the demon Wheaties box (breakfast cereal of the damned? Not sure but it tastes like cardboard). Maybe she’d won the gold at the demon Olympics or something. Supposedly the ruler of a dimension called Limbo.

And we strongly believed she was also a weredragon, although likely less emphasis on the were and more on the dragon.

My two bedmates snored on so I assumed that they were enchanted. Great, private talk with the demon. Not on my list of things I want to do. I tried to think at Jean-Claude but my link to him was closed. I assumed that she had caste some kind of spell like she did before when we first met in the
graveyard.

The demon spoke again, she had an odd expression on her face, like… was she slightly blushing?

“Ummm…. One of your… ummm…. boys is rather… Ummm… happy? Could you… Ummm… cover him up”?

Oh… I glanced down. It was Micah. He was fully erect and there was a whole bunch of Micah on display if you get my drift (if not then I’ll just say he had the biggest and longest… shit now I was embarrassed as well).

Wait a second, since when do demon get embarrassed about something like this? I mulled that question as I rearranged the scattered sheets to conceal both of my sweeties.

“Thanks, kind of off putting trying to talk to you with all of that just hanging out there pointing at me”.

I didn’t answer. So did not want to talk to her. So didn’t have much of a choice. She kept talking. I’d later swear that she turned into a teenager for a minute (which makes her extra evil I suppose).

“Umm… don’t answer if you don’t want to but… does it make a difference? You know… all that… um… size”?

Great, apparently she’s a demon lord by day, inquisitive teenager by night. Or is it the other way around? This can’t possible be a dream, just way too embarrassing. And now demons as asking me sex questions? So not feeling good about that. I actually responded for some reason that escapes me now.

“Yea, if the guy knows how to use it and the woman is… capable of… stretching and doesn’t mind if her cervix gets…. Um… can we not talk about my sex life”?

“Ok”.

“Let’s go talk in the kitchen”.
I could see her trying to get her demon cool look back. Hmmm need to think about this. Maybe we could weaponize male hotness against her. I got a mental image of an entirely inappropriate firing line with a number of naked men holding their weapons as it were (ready, aim, fire!). Oh boy, best not to mention that, doubt she’d find it funny.

Ok, I know that sounds silly but I was trying to do anything but think about what was standing next to me.

“Works for me”. She replied as I put on a robe and no she didn't turn her back to give me some privacy. Which was off-putting but I suppose I wouldn't turn my back me either after what I did to her. Still, rather creepy.

Odd the big… well dick had embarrassed her but she wasn’t looking at me sweeties with the kind of interest or lust that most women looked at them with. The only person she was staring at was me.

Great, also not a good feeling. She had said before that I interested her and having a demon interested in you sounds like the start of a horror film where you have a starring role. I had felt sorry for her when she had last departed. Now… Now I realized that my sympathy for her was in inverse proportion to her proximity.

I so wanted her gone, so knew that this was going to be another one of those events that I hoped me and mine survived.

We went down the hallway of my rental house, my original house was being rebuilt because we’d kind of completely firebombed it with thermite while trying to snuff Magik with a binding spell. She’d been hurt and had gotten cranky about it. Cranky in that swear to do me a service or I’m going to kill everybody kind of mood while what was left of my house explode in slow motion flames (they found my stove three blocks away, good thing I live out in the country side).

I put a cold cup of coffee in the microwave and rummage up some black Russian tea as I remembered she didn’t like coffee (why the hell am I making tea for her?). And that’s how we ended up sitting at my kitchen table staring at each other while sipping our drinks. Oh, and she was eating some Oreo’s we had (Nathaniel loves them).

“Your stronger now” she observed as she slurped some tea.
Which was true, I’d accidentally formed my own triad of power with Nathaniel (a wereleopard and now one of my boyfriends) and Damian (non master class vampire and also now one of my boyfriends). Which was partially caused by the ardeur and partially caused by my necromancy; still trying to figure that one out.

What was the ardeur? It’s… um… well… shit. I’m kind of… shit... am... a living sexual vampire, meaning that I feed off of sex. Need to feed off of sex. Really don’t like explaining this and me a good ex Catholic girl. Ex because of my zombie raising ability and not because I don’t believe, I’m Episcopalian now.

I also carry several forms of the lycanthrope virus, which is not supposed to be possible as one infection is meant to block others. I have leopard, lion, tiger, and wolf somehow. I don’t shift into an animal shape, we’re not sure why but we suspect the vampire marks that I have from Jean-Claude might be the reason (but nobody is absolutely sure).

Then she scented the air, meaning she drew back her upper lip and the air hissed slightly as she inhaled tasting the scents. Cats do this as they have additional scent sensing organ that gets exposed when a cat does this. I’ve seen my wereleopard and werelion friends do this many a time. But she was no cat, the only animal form we knew of, well suspected, was dragon.

“Is your dragon form real”? I asked.

“Yes… Crap, I was doing it again wasn’t I”?

“Doing what”?

“Tasting the air. Very annoying. I’ve always had really good hearing, but the ability to smell and taste scents only happens here and only after I… manifested as dragon. So very irritating to gleam so much information about somebody. Now I know why Logon always smoked those annoying cigars”.

Hmm, wonder who Logan was, so not going to ask.

She’d manifested as a dragon when she’d been captured and tortured by the now Ex vampire Master of Cairo. It had been a ritual called the rape by fang and claw and… well he and all of his court were dead. Eaten was the common belief, but nobody really knew.
Dragons were an extinct apex predator. They were omnivorous but it was widely believed to have preferred magical creatures as prey. Most weres were rather ineffective around Magik, especially when she went dominant as they would either turn submissive or frankly want to flee. It was their animal nature that caused it, submission before the alpha. Fight or flight and with dragons it was apparently all about the flight as fight was not a good idea.

“Do you have a half human half dragon form”? The stronger weres were able to do this (think wolfman). The weaker weres were only one thing or another.

“No. Just dragon and only here”. She sipped tea and then surprised me by providing more detail.

“Big. Not... like your weres. I don’t shift into a horse or pony sized dragon, I’m... I think I’m about fifty or sixty feet nose to tail, maybe longer as it’s not like I have a tape measure. Also have wings that work. Flying is fun. And it’s not virus based so you can’t catch it from me, not that I usually leave survivors that is”.

Ok. Concerned about the survivors statement. Ok, really really concerned.

“Can you breath fire”?

“Yep, but it’s like the mother of all heartburns to do it so I try to avoid it”.

Interesting, she’s sharing, that was something she really didn’t do last time and the one time we briefly shared she also make me answer a question as well before she’d answer.

Wait a second, suddenly she’s trying to be chummy with me? Damn, need to get my head in the game.

“Why are you here Magik? Please don’t tell me there’s another pyramid you want to blow up or something, the last one’s still burning and nobody knows how to put it out or whatever the heck is burning in under all that rock”.

“I do” she replied.
I looked at her with confusion and she answered with slightly more detail.

“I know what’s burning”. Ok, back to be enigmatic. I resisted the urge to ask, just knew I’d be horrified by the answer. Bet it was some gate to hell.

“So again, why are you here? Please tell me you’re not hiring me again”?

“No Ms. Blake, I don’t think this will be a paying job, pure Pro Bono, enlightened self interest and all that”.

I just gave her a look of annoyance. Yea me, staring down the big bad demon! I’d have been more impressed with myself if I’d been less concerned with why she suddenly was just talking. Meaning why did she suddenly act as if she wanted to be in my good graces?

Magik had a slightly resigned and frustrated expression as she continued.

“I have… issues. Some of which were in part caused by you and yours, and some issues that involve you and yours. Shards, I never should have fed the strays as it were”.

Why oh why does everything she say always sound so confusing?

She then gave me a glare. "Or you".

No sure what to make of that. Before I could ask why the glare I noticed something. She was drinking her tea with her left hand and I finally noticed that her left pinkie had a slightly torn nail. She saw the direction of my gaze and answered the unspoken question.

“Tore a claw as I dug out the sixth one. The ground was more stone then dirt”. Shit, she said claw. She must have been in dragon form.

“Sixth what”? I asked. And then everything turned to utter and complete shit.
She sighed, opened her satchel and dumped the contents on the kitchen table. It was… oh shit! It was masks, just like the kind the Harlequin wore!

The Harlequin were the Vampire Council’s enforcers. They were vampires, most with weres or human servants. Some were powerful enough to be on the council if they had wished it. The very use of their name was forbidden, meaning if you spoke it they would kill you for using it, unless they first gave permission. The secret baddies of the vampire world that in part kept most of the other vampires in line.

There were two red masks, two black masks, and one white mask. Red means harm, white means observation, black means death.

I slowly picked up one of the black masks, while frantically hoping that this did not mean what I was thought it did, meaning that the Harlequin were at war with Magik. If that was true then that meant the Council was at war with her as well.

I asked a very important question “More details please”. See! I can be polite and even say please. She answered.

“As you know I took control of the surviving vampires in Cairo when I promoted and elevated the surviving captain of the guard to be the new Master of the City after I killed and… consumed my attackers when I first manifested Dragon. I also took over the weres as Ōyutaka Masachika, the Japanese werelion who pledged himself to my service, is my proxy to control of all the weres of Cairo as he’s frankly the strongest of the lot”.

Yea… Ōyutaka, a Japanese sumo wrestler turned the biggest Fing werelion I’d ever seen (and that was just in his human form). And the new master of Cairo was now a day walking vampire due to a power boost from Magik after she had destroyed that GOD machine called the great pyramid of Khufu.

And it wasn’t just Cairo. All of upper Egypt had been declared off limits to the Vampire Council according to my main sweetie Jean-Claude (who is the vampire master of St. Louis, I’m his human servant by the way and yes it’s a long story).

That apparently was causing problems as the Vampire Council didn’t like being told what to do (think evil caffeinated homicidal kindergartners lacking any nap time and you have most council behaviors social interactions to a tee). Only the baldest of the bad vampires ignored the council.
“Well… apparently the Council decided that I’d left and they started sniffing around Cairo with the intent of reasserting control. One thing led to another and…”.

She gestured at the two red and black masks. “They then learned that I return from time to time. I got angry about my instructions being disregarded by them. I killed four of the Harlequin because I had said Upper Egypt was off limits and there had to be consequences for such violations. That’s when I learned of some additional issues”.

Shit, it must be war!

Double shit she said Harlequin!

Oh triple crap! There is no way, no way me and mine are going to get involved in that death sentence.

OH… crap to the Nth degree I think we now were! Be easier to just have her kill us. I sat there stunned as she continued.

“The sixth Harlequin survived my… um… eating his animal to call, werelion by the way, and screamed that I but bide a moment while I was busy digging him out from beneath this old Egyptian ruin of a temple he was hiding under. He was wearing the white mask by the way. I had already killed the other four on two prior encounters and the fifth on this encounter. First two has been wearing red masks, the second two black masks. Stupidly I paused to hear what he had to say. I think… dragons are extra inquisitive or something. And… they like playing with their food, rather like a cat or an orca”.

Had a quick mental image of us being seals. Not good. Yea some of us were sharks to push the analogy, but orcas eat sharks, even great whites.

Then it registered, the Harlequin has started with red masks (harm), switched to black (death), but has switched to white (observe) once they realized that Magik was still a factor. They must have first thought they were just dealing with the new Master of Cairo.

Thank GOD! That meant that it wasn’t a war! Yea!!!!

Then Magik explained a bit more and it was right out of left field, and I think it was worse then
war.

“He informed me that the council wants me to join them and take the empty seventh seat”.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

I got to thinking, there was no way that Illyana left Cat with Anita without knowing lots more about Anita. That implied additional interactions with Anita that convinced Illyana that leaving the most important thing in the world to Illyana (Cat) with Anita made the most sense. Then I did more thinking about possible Illyana impacts and the story within a story was born.

Plus I like to stir things up. Rather curious how many of the readers are Illyana/X-men fans and how many are Anita Blake fans? If one side or the other wants more detail/history then write a comment (hint hint). Part of this chapter is a variation of stuff I got from Wikipedia on the vampire council (one should give credit when it is due).

Part 4a: Council

Shit! The council!

What is the council you ask? Well I suppose a brief summary is warranted.

They are a group of seven vampires, six currently as one slot is empty, who collectively governed the vampires of the world. Well, most of the vampires. Not all vampires obey and some of those vampires were way beyond scary strong, or just crazy, or both; and the council left them alone so long as they didn't make too much of a public mess.

The council had been formed by Marmee Noir, an ancient female vampire who was currently in an enchanted asleep and so wanted me as her pet; more on that later. The council set the rules of vampire society and even had an enforcement arm called the Harlequin. Each council member also had their own court (followers). The council is based in France.

They are cruel, vicious, self centered, and love playing with others. And to quote Magik, playing in this context is like how orca's play with their food. Think mean girls and then dial it up a few thousand notches and add in some extra nasty habits. The members, in no particular order were.
**The Dragon - Female vampire** (And no this is not Magik)

A enigmatic vampire who's true name is unknown. She's an old vampire (hell all the council are old). She created a vampire back in Roman times that currently resides here; goes by the name of Primo. She had sent Primo to St. Louis in an attempt to dethrone or destabilize Jean-Claude but that ended up fizzling (but it had been close).

She apparently has the power to draw all of the energy from another vampire, killing it permanently. She can project her power from a distance. I'd been told that she had formerly sired many vampires, but has remained largely secluded during recent centuries.

Apparently rather anti social and very scary. Never actually met her, don't ever want to. I think Jean-Claude and her have conversed several times since Primo got put in his place.

**Padma - Male Vampire**

Also known as the Master of Beasts, is originally Indian and wears a turban (which he still thinks is the height of fashion). He is one of the weaker members of the Vampire Council as he can only gain strength from his human servant through direct feeding (heck may be the weakest but weak in this context is relative). His unique power is the ability to "call" all animals, not just a single species. Using this power, Padma can bend animals and almost all shapeshifters to his will, and can also use the power as if it were a shapeshifter's.

Magik supposedly kicked his ass when she assaulted their archives so don't think dragon, or her dragon form, is susceptible. But... who knows? Maybe she has to be in dragon form?

He is a member of the only other surviving triumvirate with Gideon (male were) and Captain Thomas Carswell (male human). I made Padma surrender his utter bastard of a son, by the name of Fernando, in return for sparing Padma life when he and some council members came to town to see if Jean-Claude would accept a council seat (yea I would have died as well but I got the drop on him. Really lucky). I then gave Fernando to Sylvie, a woman he had repeatedly raped in an attempt to capture the werewolves. Sylvie and I had not been on good terms up until then; afterwards we were buds. Sylvie killed Fernando and now keeps his bones in a box in her room.

Padma absolutely hates our guts and would cheerfully kill us all (plus I don't think he thinks of women as people, just... receptacles). And yea, I don't like him either.
Hmm... need to let Magik know about his hobbies as I don't think she'd approve and she seems to get very... upset about certain things. Ahhh, payback can be such a bich.

**The Traveler - Male Vampire**

It is unknown what the Traveler's true name is. He has the ability to possess other vampire's bodies, though that vampire's consciousness is still awake (which can be real icky as he then likes to do sexual things with the body that the owner may not be into).

This seems to be limited only to vampires considerably weaker than himself; Jean-Claude was once the victim of this ability back when he was a member of Belle Morte's court.

He also has the ability to lend power to lesser vampires temporarily, bolstering their inherent strengths, and he can shield others from sensing him. Nobody has ever seen the Traveler's real body (oh forgot to mention the council is paranoid as well). Magik said she was apparently able to block his ability to take over vampires in her vicinity when she raided the archives.

He likes to claim that council members do not fight other council members; but he also does not like Padma at all (and I suspect loves to piss in his soup as it were so I suppose he's actually somewhat, kind of, don't take it to the band, on our side in a slight way).

He's strictly homosexual, and his human servant, Balthasar, is also his lover. A large part of their relationship appears to revolve around the enjoyment they each derive from The Traveler possessing new bodies for use in their sexual antics (as I said, icky).

Old, powerful, and jaded. Hmm... council members do not fight council members... might that be why they want her to join? Might it be more the just a rule or a tradition?

**Morte D'Amour - Male Vampire**

His name accurately translates to "death of love" or "death from love". Morte D'Amour is a rotting vampire, meaning he can appear to decompose even to the point of becoming skeletal (utterly gross in a massive freak-out kind of way, but no stench), as well as the ability to cause corruption with his bite.
All vampires with either ability appear to be of his bloodline. Damian, my vampire to call and my vampire servant, has told me that Morte D'Amour had formerly sired many vampires and was responsible for the ancient tales of vampires being largely corpse-like in appearance. Nasty nasty person.

**Mr Oliver - Male Vampire, dead (empty council slot)**

Was known as "the Earthmover". I spoke with him at length and to his claimed knowledge, he was the oldest living vampire. Oliver was roughly 4 feet tall, with a sloping brow, absent chin, and really great hair. He looked like he was a member of the Homo erectus species, which would make him a pre-human vampire; which means he'd have to be a million freaking years old! Was he? I don't know. Part of me thinks he just looked like Homo erectus, the other part of me... well I'm not sure and I think I don't want to be sure.

Mr. Oliver's abilities included the ability to cause earthquakes, the power to "draw blood from a distance," levitation of himself or others, the ability to remain awake during the day and mask his vampire nature almost totally. He also had voice powers similar to Jean-Claude's, and the ability to call snakes and snake-like supernatural creatures.

He had been an opponent of the liberalization of vampire laws. He'd come up with the plan to kill Jean-Claude, become master of St. Louis, then force all vampires in the city to engage in a killing spree to create a political climate hostile to vampire legalization.

He defeated Jean-Claude, but I killed him before he could sacrifice Jean-Claude and begin his plan (just luck dumb on my part as he had agreed to not use his abilities). I defeated Mr. Oliver and his servant by ripping out his heart and throat (a real red letter day that was). I almost died but... well I'm still here.

I don't think... I don't think... I... I was a bit different after that.

**Belle Morte - Female Vampire**

Beautiful, pale skinned, dark haired, with eyes the color of dark honey and a body that was... yea
she... well everybody is attracted to her. Everybody. To have known her is to love her and... well she's known me. I'm not gay... but I guess I'm gay for her. It was not actually physical but mental... but... yea. Ummm....

Belle Morte (or "Beautiful Death") is apparently personally responsible for the rise of "sexy vampires". She is at least 2,000 years old. Her abilities include the power to induce lust from a distance (extending to at least hundreds of people at a distance of miles), the ability to draw power from lust, and the ability to call all of the "great cats" (presumably lions, tigers, leopards, jaguars, etc.).

All members of Belle-Morte's bloodline tend to be selected for their beauty, and some of the vampires in her line are visited by the ardeur, becoming incubi or succubi that need to feed off of lust as well as blood, but able to also project the ardeur to control others (which includes me, the first human servant so blessed... so not happy about that but I do have to admit the orgasms are really fantastic).

Belle-Morte can make mental contact with all new vampires of her bloodline, and can serve as a mental "bridge" between willing members of her bloodline. In some cases, Belle Morte has shown the power to actually "resculpt" the features of vampires in her bloodline, making them still more beautiful than when they were chosen. Jean-Claude and Asher are both part of Belle Morte's bloodline (more on them later).

It has been speculated (speculation my ass, it's a fact) that Belle Morte can use her control over the vampires in her lineage to cause "problem" that always seem to work out to her benefit, as in the case with the Master Vampire of London who seemingly went crazy out of the blue and killed his Kiss of Vampires.

Oh, and she'd tried to bind Magik to her only to apparently find the bindings being reversed because, to quote Magik. The weaker cannot involuntary perform such bindings on the stronger.

**Marmee Noir - Female vampire (last and oh so not least)**

Also called The Sweet Dark or as the Mother Of All Darkness or my favorite term Mommie Dearest. Marmee Noir is the notional leader of all vampires and the head of the Vampire Council. She's apparently both a vampire and a lycanthrope at once, were-cave lion. According to several of the vampires, she was the first vampire, which means that she had to predate Mr. Oliver (which frankly part of me is just not buying).
However, it has also been hinted that she is the Mother vampire in a metaphorical, rather than literal sense, having created the rules and culture that governs the vampire race. Peace, justice and the vampire way, which means you can strike out peace and justice.

I think... I think she's a unique type of vampire, distinctly different and more powerful, from all later descendents; perhaps not even a vampire at all but a unique type of monster with vampiric traits that can create vampires. Her powers include control over several species of vampire/lycanthrope mixes, the ability to project her attention and mental powers, and a deep deep control over darkness.

Marmee Noir and her vampire/lycanthrope followers have been "sleeping" for centuries due to some spell cast on her by rebellious followers. Sleeping, but now partially awake, and so very interested in me, just like... shit. I so hope Magik is not interested in me in that way.

Belle Morte is gathering her power to challenge Noir for leadership of the Vampire Council, but I think Belle is naively underestimating Marmee Noir's true nature and powers. If I had to bet then I wouldn't bet on Belle Morte no matter what the odds.

**Part 4b: Prep**

I was stunned. And confused. “*I thought only vampires could be on the council*”?

And the rabbit hole just kept going as she replied with a scowl.

“*That’s... kind of one of the issues. I’m very... upset about that little problem*”.

Not good. No, not good at all. Really hoped that she was not a sexual vampire like me. If so then we were so screwed, and not in a good way.

She continued. “*I find that I now have a compulsion to return to this world from time to time. Like, I not only belong but I have a responsibility to be here. After the second time I returned I realized it was the vampires that I took over in Cairo. By making the head of the guard the new Master, and by shoving power into him, I apparently somewhat bound him to me like a Master of a City does to all vampires in their city. Rather like that blood oath thing that they do*”.
Crap. That meant that she was the true Master of Cairo regardless of whoever had the title. Which likely explained the compulsion to return. They needed her as she was the power that kept them alive and functional.

I asked a question as she was being so chatty. “Um… how did that happen and… um what are the details of you problem”?

Please don't let it be sex. Please don't let it be sex. Please please please don't let it be sex. Just for once let it not be sexual. Pleassssssseeee don't let it be about sex!

She looked at me and sipped more tea and them muttered "Not time like the present I suppose".

She then waved her right hand in some complex pattern and I felt my link to Jean-Claude snap into existence, like she’s stopped doing something. At the same time I heard the gentle snores in the bedroom stop.

(Ma petite you are suddenly awake? Ahhh… Childe I see).

I felt Jean-Claude grow cold and locked down. That stillness that only a vampire can do. That stillness that says great danger.

A few seconds later Micah and Nathaniel emerged from the hallway walking very silently (they are both wereleopards). Magik's back was to the hallway but she appeared to sense them (or just guessed that they were there). She spoke.

"Don't do anything... rash".

They didn't. They came around the table and stood by me (naked, were was so casual about nudity). Apparently she had regained her demon cool so all that... equipment in view didn't faze her, plus… Micah wasn't exactly pointing anymore.

Magik smiled and spoke.

"Time I suppose for the meet and greet. Informed consent and all that. Please tell your vampire
that I wish to converse with him, you...". She gestured at both Mica and Nathaniel. "Them, Richard Zeeman, Damian (vampire part of the triumvirate I formed with Nathaniel), and Asher. And that conversation will take place now".

Jean-Claude spoke to my mind. (I have awoken our Richard. He is... annoyed and does not wish to participate). I relayed that information to her. Gee what a surprise that Richard was being difficult. Her answer was brief and booked no discussion.

"Tell him that he has five minutes and then I'm teleporting him wolf ass to the blue room. Oh, and no guards. Just... us. Guards will be eaten". Ha ha, so not funny... um... shit that might not be a joke.

Micah and Nathaniel looked at me and I nodded. They went to get dressed. She apparently knew of the blue room (a rather nice living room in the catacombs, done up with blue silk hanging curtains to conceal the stone cave walls, great big screen TV). Which was not good, meant she'd done her homework on our layout and likely our security as well.

I got up to get dressed. Like... what could we do? At least she wasn't threatening to kill us... yet.

Jean-Claude replied to me. (I have contacted Damian and Asher. They will take some time to join us unless Childe wishes to expedite the travel).

She didn't so that's how a half hour later we were all in the blue room with an angry demon.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Time for a meet and greet. I've decided to include intros for each new character in support of those readers who have not read Anita Blake stories. Again content taken from Wikipedia. Hmm maybe there should be a wickedpedia entry for Illyana?

This chapter sets the tone for the rest of the story and I kind of went all out. I actually don't know the complete story details yet as I only have a partial outline (but it looks like one hell of a party).

A metaphor might be cutting the break lines of a dynamite truck and letting it roll down hill into a refinery just to watch what happens.

Part 5a: Blue Room

The blue room. One of the living rooms that Jean-Claude had in the catacombs beneath the circus. Blue drapes hid the stone walls hence its name. There were various throw rugs and some nice leather sofas and chairs, and soft lighting. Plus a great 4k big screen TV that was only rarely used, seemed kind of a waste to me but I guess one had to keep up the Jones.

Above us was the Circus of the Damned. A nightly carnival in a converted warehouse that now housed a big top tent, lots of side shows, food booths and souvenir shopping. Thrill to the acts under the tent, gasp as real zombies are raised (not by me), gaze upon the half lizard half female creature, thrill at the rides, and eat county fair food until you bloat.

The top of the warehouse had these giant clowns with red eyes and fangs that were lit by search lights.

People totally loved it. It was a major tourist attraction in St. Lewis and a steady money maker. I was more blasé as I knew the monsters really did want to eat you.

But below the circus were the catacombs. An extensive series of caves and artificial passages. Back in probation there had been a massive speakeasy down here. Run by the vampires I might add, who siphoned off more then just money.

This was where Jean-Claude slept by day (which is a total secret by the way); him and a whole
bunch of vampires. We had lots of security composed of wererats, werewolves, werehyenas, and some other creatures as not everybody was a vampire and day does come which so put the vampires to sleep.

Dining hall, massive kitchen, banquette facilities, bedrooms, prison, arsenal. Hell, we even had a gym and a gun range down here.

Magik was sitting in a chair listening to her iPod and reading some ancient looking leather clad book while we waited for Asher and Richard to show up (Asher could fly and was bring Richard in, for some unknown reason Magik had relented on her threat to teleport him here). She had teleported Micah, Nathaniel, and I right to the room; thereby showing that she did know way more about our setup then we were happy about.

Magik has allowed security to bring some refreshments. I was having some coffee while Magik had grabbed a Mountain Dew and a blueberry muffin.

Currently Jean-Claude and Damian were here as well. Both looked like they has just fed, which was wise as who knew what might happen as this was likely going to be one heck of an interesting meeting.

I was currently sitting in a sofa next to Jean-Claude, half in his lap, with his arms around me. Micah and Damian were sitting opposite on two other couches. Nathaniel was sitting next to Micah.

The conversation had died out as we waited for the others. For some reason I ended up staring at Magik. She just sat there, occasionally turning a page, sometimes frowning at the book, or maybe at something she read. There was something about her... The more I looked the more I saw.

She was almost rage incarnate. Angry. Filled with hate. it felt like she could barely contain it, like she was bursting with it. As she was made from it. Rage in all it's permutations, flavors, varieties.

Yummy yummy tasty rage.

I had recently gained the ability to eat rage and anger. As some others could feed remotely off of lust or fear or pain I could now feed off of rage and anger if I choose. I had taken back the rage that Richard had gotten from me, which was a blessing for him as rage is so not something he was good at dealing with.
She smelled... like fresh bread for the starving.

I imagined how it would taste. The flavor, the sensation. Like swirling a fine wine in your mouth or a great cheese. She burned so bright and there was just so much of it. It looked endless. All I'd have to do is reach out and...

"I wouldn't if I were you Ms. Blake".

Her sudden statement broke my concentration and I realized that I'd been fixated upon her. She continued without even looking up from her book.

"Just make the problem worse... well not worse I suppose, just reduce the time span; and you really won't like the consequences of that".

I stiffened up and got hostile. "What the hell did you just do"?! Everybody else went tense at my outburst.

She shut her book and looked up with a slightly exasperated expression. "I did nothing. I felt you reaching out, you were about to try and... do something that would not be wise".

"You were staring at her very intently ma petite. What just occurred"? Jean-Claude softly asked.

I explained. "Rage... she's almost composed of it. So much rage. I... felt drawn in like I wanted to take a bite".

"Eden's apple Ms. Blake. Don't recommend it". She stated as she opened her book once again and went back to reading.

Jean-Claude and the rest of us exchanged glances. Something had just happened but we, or more importantly I, didn't understand. At least not yet. Jean-Claude looked very concerned.

We continued to wait and I thought and looked at things other then her.
Interesting choice of people by her, the core of our... hmmm, well my magical powers. I suppose a brief summary of the attendees and the interdependencies would make sense.

First there is Jean-Claude, our vampire master, the center of the triumvirate that contains me and Richard. Jean-Claude had gained the biggest power boost as he was the center, but we had all benefited in power and other abilities. For one, vampires now couldn't roll me with their powers (the really strong ones that were stronger then Jean-Claude could, but that number was quite small). Jean-Claude had also grown more... ruthless which was totally from me and I was completely ok with as it was a big bad world.

The center also can draw power from the others if the center is in need of food or power; which can result in the death of the others if they don't eat or feed. That had happened a few times and now I regularly feed the ardeur to avoid having that happen to Damian and Nathaniel.

Then there is me, necromancer and center of the triumvirate that contains Damian and Nathaniel. I was the center so I benefited the most, but I also had gotten some of Nathaniel passivity and submissiveness which allowed for better relationships as I no longer felt I had to always be top dog about everything.

Micah is Leopard king to my Leopard queen. A bonding of a different kind. We complemented each other and rule the Pard, but I have veto power over everything.

Finally there is Asher, lover to both Jean-Claude and I, and Jean-Claude's second in command. No bindings but... we were close. Odd that Magik had included him.

Our group additional powerful vampires and werebes, but only the center of my circle were here or were on their way.

And all were my lovers (ick I hate saying that, sounds so... slutty). Some very full time, others part time (i.e. Richard). And I have additional part time lovers as well, part of the feeding rotation for the ardeur (Ick! Ick! Ick! I hate having to explain that! Makes me feel like the queen of sluts or something).

Finally Richard and Asher walked in. Richard glared at Magik and then at Jean-Claude. Great, likely annoyed to see me in the arms of another man. Asher looked a bit smug so I suspected that he'd done something to annoy Richard as well.
So... who are we?

**Part 5b: Introductions**

**Jean-Claude - Male vampire**

Master of the City of St Louis. Jean-Claude is my lover. He is supposedly between 400 and 600 years old as he likes to be coy about his specific age. He is the head of the triumvirate consisting of me and Richard. He is what in earlier times would be called an incubus as he carries the ardeur, which is like a sexual vampirism. Which he involuntarily passed onto me and is very sorry about.

Jean-Claude is a French-born. He was a favorite of Belle Morte for his eyes (Belle actually had a collection of different vampires all selected for different shades of blue eyes like she was collecting gem stones), and, like many vampires of Belle Morte's line, Jean-Claude was selected for his almost perfect mortal beauty. He came to St. Louis and, indeed, the United States itself to escape Belle Morte's court (something that Belle never really forgave me for doing as she feels that nobody gets to leave her or would want to leave her).

Jean-Claude's daytime lair is the sub-basement of the Circus of the Damned which is his as the owner of the JC Corporation. He also owns and runs the clubs Guilty Pleasures (strip club for woman where male were and vampires strip), The Laughing Corpse (comedy club), and Danse Macabre (dance club).

Perhaps because the patrons of Guilty Pleasures expect it, Jean-Claude tends to dress the way vampires are stereotypically expected to, wearing skin-tight leather pants, thigh high boots, and antique shirts with large amounts of lace and long cuffs, left open just enough to give glimpses of his bare chest (and yea he makes lace look very masculine... yum yum me like).

He's 5'11", with black shoulder-length softly curling hair, and midnight-blue eyes. He has long-fingered hands, and his voice is rich, melodious, textured and seductive. He has a cross-shaped scar on his left breast from where he was burned by a cross. He also has whip scars on his back (he had been a wiping boy for an aristocratic youth back when he was mortal), although he hides them from most folks with his vampire mind-powers.
Micah Callahan - Male were leopard

Micah Callahan arrived in St. Louis as the Nimir-Raj of the Maneater Clan. He merged his Pard with my Pard, the Blooddrinkers Pard. Together we rule as Nimir-Raj (King) and Nimir-Ra (Queen). Micah is founder and coordinator of the Lycanthrope Coalition, and is one of my live-in lovers.

Micah has many unique powers as a shape-shifter. He can heal others by (calling flesh), meaning forcing them to transform. He has the ability to shape-shift quickly, and is not tired or ill from the effort.

He has these amazing chartreuse yellow/green eyes that won't shift back to human eyes, a result of too much time in animal form, which was caused by a really bad and now dead man called Chimera. He is about the same height and same size as me, with rich brown hair, very large...um...genitalia, and is extremely easy-going.

He does, however, have an antagonistic relationship with Richard, who feels that Micah has usurped his place. Which I suppose he kind of has but... well... tough. Micah is always there for me, Richard frankly isn't. Micah never judges me, Richard excels at it. Micah accepts me for who I am and follows my lead. Micah helps me feed the ardeur and Richard won't. Micah... Micah never emotionally hurts me or makes me cry or feel bad about myself. Richard... does. And that's why broke up for the last time (I think).

Nathaniel Graison- Male were leopard

Nathaniel is in his early twenties, approximately 5'6" with long mahogany auburn hair, lilac eyes, "pretty" rather than handsome features, and a muscular swimmer's body. In his animal form, Nathaniel is a black were-leopard. He's a stripper at Guilty Pleasures, (stage name: Brandon). Nathaniel is member of my second triumvirate and before that he was my pomme de sang (a favored person to feed upon). I sometimes get obsessed about Nathaniel's eyes and his vanilla scent.

He is another of my live in lovers (yea I have a massive sex life, not my fault so deal with it).

Nathaniel has been reluctant to share details of his past. I've learn that Nathaniel's parents died when he was young, and that Nathaniel and his older brother Nicky were in the custody of an abusive man. Nicky protected Nathaniel at first, but also died when Nathaniel was quite young, at
which point Nathaniel ran away.

At some point in his late teens, Nathaniel was found by a were-leopard named Gabriel (former leader of the Blooddrinkers Pard, I killed him when he tried to kill me in a snuff film he was making. Yea, not a nice guy). By that point, Nathaniel was a drug addicted prostitute, and was so submissive and masochistic that he was literally incapable of saying no to any torture proposed to him. Gabriel helped Nathaniel stop taking drugs but was unable or unwilling to address Nathaniel’s other problems and simply pimped Nathaniel out after making him a wereleopard. He did restraining customers from taking too much advantage of him.

After I took control of the St. Louis Pard, Nathaniel attached himself to me for protection. Nathaniel has been becoming more assertive and self-reliant, if only to please me. He is still highly submissive and is very happy to take the "wife" position in my increasingly large... um... damn the word harem works I suppose. He does most of the cleaning, cooking, and generally providing lots of emotional support.

Richard has a lot of problems that I associate with Nathaniel. He looks down upon submissives and male gay sex as well. This helps cause some of the problems between Richard and I, but we both do just dandy on our own when it comes to causing issues between us.

**Damian - Male vampire**

Damian is a green eyed, red haired Viking vampire. Through a series of accidents and emergencies, he became my vampire servant (similar to the role of a vampire's human servant) and eventual part time lover, and also ended up becoming member of my second triumvirate with Nathaniel when the magic went wild and we bonded as a triumvirate. Which incidentally made him a day walker as well.

Damian was made by "She who must not be named", later revealed to be a female vampire by the name of Morvoren (God, vampires just love melodrama, and considering how old some of them are, they may have invented it. I mean... she who must not be named? Guess she should start dating Vordormort from Harry Potter).

He tends to have a calming effect on me if he is touching me, supposedly because he was taught by she-who-made-him that her will was all important. His appearance changed slightly a while ago, just enough to make him breathtakingly beautiful. The ardeur does that sometimes.
He's approximately 1000 years old, Damian will never be a master vampire, but because of the additional power of our triumvirate, he can physically walk in daylight. Although doing so tends to drive him into a fear-induced insanity episode (vampires do so tend to get worked up about sunlight). This likely comes from witnessing Perrin, one of his Viking comrades, who was also turned into a vampire, bursting into flames from walking in the sunlight while he and the aforementioned Viking were in the "care" of Morvoren. Yea, supper bitch with a capital B, and a capital I, and a capital T and a... you get the picture. I have a few 9mm rounds just waiting for her if I ever get the chance.

Damian had been living in my basement until my house went poof, currently he's staying at the Circus while my house is rebuilt. He works at Danse Macabre.

**Asher - Male vampire**

Asher is a Master Vampire of Belle Morte's line, and is both my lover and Jean-Claude's. Asher was formerly part of a menage-a-trois with Jean-Claude and Asher's human servant Julianna, until the Church burned Julianna at the stake as a witch. The Church also tried to "burn the devil" out of Asher with holy water in a form of Chinese water torture. The holy water left Asher badly scarred on one side, and for many years he blamed Jean-Claude for rescuing him too late, and for failing to save Julianna.

Bisexual with a heavy emphasis on the male.

Jean-Claude's love for Asher allowed me to see beyond the terrible scarring and I've come to love him. Which allowed Asher to finally overcoming his hatred for Jean-Claude (though Asher still carries massive emotional baggage). He's obsessive at times, moody, insecure, tends to delight in being a drama queen, really into S&M, and enjoys being a massive pain in the ass (and annoyingly those time appear to be growing in frequency).

Asher is Jean-Claude's second-in-command.

His main vampiric power is fascination: people who are caught by his gaze are fascinated by him and can't look away; Belle Morte said people he rolls completely become "love-besotted fools" and follow him around. Oh, and his bite is orgasmic, and his victim can have flashbacks of the orgasm hours or days later (yep... really, I... um... yea... like wow. Ummmm... I think I need to... stop... Oh! Yea... just had a small one, need to stop thinking about that before... before... Oh! Damn it! Time to switch topics).
He has recently acquired Hyena as animal to call, and yea, he also can make lace look masculine as well. I swear it's a ancient vampire power being able to do that as modern men just look sissy.

Richard Zeeman - Male werewolf

Richard is Ulric (wolf-king) of the local werewolf pack (Thronos Rokke), and is a sometimes lover and now very ex fiancé. He's a junior high school science teacher who has to hide his lycanthropy as he wants to keep his job (Can't have the big bad wolf teaching the kids now). He's been getting emotional therapy and has rejoined Jean Claude and I with a somewhat more accepting attitude than he has had in the past.

Still wants the white picket fence and all that with me and... and I do as well. But... not going to happen for so many many reasons.

He's compassionate, educated, and naive. We live in a bad world with bad people and I do bad things to the bad people. He hates that he's a werewolf, a monster, and he hates the monsters. Doesn't help that he thinks I'm a monster as well, sometimes the biggest. Well, he did until Magik showed up that first time she was here.

Richard stands at six feet and one inches, with brown hair, brown eyes, and has what I'll say is almost perfect good looks. Seeing him naked or shirtless just does things to me that usually reduces my IQ.

Richard is an extremely powerful alpha werewolf. His general werewolf abilities include superhuman strength, speed, endurance, healing, agility, and senses (able to smell the emotional state of humans and night vision), but to levels far superior to those of most werewolves. Even prior to forming a triumvirate with Jean-Claude and I, Richard was one of the most powerful shapeshifters in the area. However, his inner turmoil frequently prevents him from making effective use of his powers.

He lifts weights and studies martial arts in an effort to be able to engage in pack fights without using deadly force. His "beast" is extraordinarily strong, and Richard can often control other shapeshifters' changing by his raw power. He is one of the few shapeshifters able to partially shape shift. Richard also has the extremely rare ability to "feed the pack" - sharing some of his magical power by feeding his own blood to pack members.
Me (Anita Blake) - Female necromancer, Marshal, and general bad ass

I am a petite woman of mixed German and Mexican heritage with curly long hair and pale skin with scars scattered over my body. I tend to be direct and flippant in my speech and have a tendency to write checks with my mouth that so far I've been able to cash. Yea, I like to poke at the monsters, bugs them to no end. I am an animator, which is a person who raises zombies, and a vampire executioner (currently a Federal Marshal).

I'm trained in several forms of hand-to-hand combat as well as in the use of various firearms. I'm a Christen and a member of the Episcopal faith, as I left Catholicism since the Catholic Church excommunicated all animators. I also have a bachelor's degree in preternatural biology.

Being 5'3 inches tall which means almost everybody is taller then me. I tend to use this to get the better of men who always underestimate small females. Not sure if that trick works against Magik.

Which brings us to her.

Magik - Demon

Tallish, blond, very attractive, weredragon, demon and supposedly a hell lord.

We don't actually know much about her other then what she told me when we were sitting together watching my house burn. Still rather surprised she didn't kill all of us after what we did to her.

Claims that she was human at one time and was stolen to hell as a child where she was slowly transformed into what she is. She apparently died at one point, but was brought back years later missing her soul; which she is supposedly on a quest to regain.

She smells of smoke, pepper, and wolf; apparently this is what dragons smell like. And on the raw power scale she's the strongest I've ever personally encountered, not sure how she ranks against Mommy Dearest, and the whole dragon thing really freaks out the weres as weres are just prey animals to a dragon.

Main bit of advice I have is don't get in her way. A lesson she taught us all as she's very powerful.
And run if you see her with a burning sword. Run as fast as you can.

**Part 5c: Discussions**

Security had been banished beyond hearing range, after bringing the refreshments, with instructions to not intrude on pain of death (unless one of us went and summoned them).

Richard stomped over to refreshment table and grabbed a sticky bun and some orange juice. Asher looked like he’d also recently feed. They both sat down, Richard by himself and Asher by Damian.

Magik had shut her book when they had come in. She stood up after everybody was seated and spoke. He power was restrained, barely felt and her scent of pepper, smoke, and wolf but lightly in the air.

“I believe some of you may have insights of worth as to some... issues that are happening. Be known that if any of you divulge the personal information I’m going to share without my permission then I will get very upset”.

I’ve always admired Magik’s threats. She was either very specific as to the details, or would just issue a general warning that make you really motivated to not want to find out the specifics.

“Can we not... um... learn the details”? I asked. Let’s see if we can opt out.

“Sure” she replied. She actually looked relieved, like I’d just solved her problems. Then she spoke again as we felt her power start to bloom and fill the room.

“That makes it easy. I’ll just slay all of you and that coven you used as I think that might fix most of the problems I’m having. At least I would cease getting any moral spillover from you due to your now dead condition. If that doesn’t work then the lack of this itch of morality should then allow me to finish coming up with a more appropriate set of solutions to my remaining issues”.

“Let’s go with hearing your details” I quickly said before she could do anything. Moral spillover from me? What the heck?
She gave me a look of mild annoyance and her growing power folded away.

Jean-Claude then spoke some very wise words. "Please let us not be hasty Ma petite. When elephants dance the mice get crushed. Let us hear her words and consult with each other before responding with any... conclusions".

Yea... that was good advice. I think she was just yanking our chains but... yea... good advice.

Part 5d: Badness

"I can't believe I'm actually talking about such things to you" was her opening statement.

I could kind of understand why we were not on her hit parade (that whole burning her alive and binding her thingie that we had done).

"I have bad news, really bad news, potentially apocalyptic news, more bad news, and... well additional badness. I suppose I'll first briefly summarize, in no particular order as the level of badness is likely different for each of you. Then... shards... I think I need to share just who I actually am".

She gave the first set of bad news.

"Somebody is casting major enchantments that involve me in some way. The first of the enchantments apparently hides them from me which has so far resulted in my inability to locate them. I first thought it was you folks again and almost killed you reflectively but for that sudden whiny itch of morality from Anita. My second guess was the Council but I have determined that it is not them. I don't know what the enchantments pertain to but I suspect they may have some connection to my other issues".

What? Itch from me? And enchantments?

"Second bit of bad news is that I am apparently the Master of Cairo due to my inadvertently blood oathing the current master. Without my recurring presence they will all go insane or not awaken again. Very annoying as I avoided having pets just for that issue. And apparently the compulsion
to be here is growing, I suspect the enchantments have something to do with that but I don't know."

As I suspected from her prior statements.

'Third, I apparently have some vampiric... tendencies now. Related I think to my Dragon form and how that came to be. I can feed off of crowds, taking some of their energy. I first noticed this at the dance clubs. But... that does not suffice long term. I get more... hungry. Protein helps, when I'm in Dragon form, as I like to hunt and a few deer are tasty. But... other prey... beckons. To date such prey has been rather self selecting. Hmmm, I've been told it is polite to ask you, Mr. Zeeman, for hunting rights to deer and wild hogs while I'm here as the werewolves are the biggest group here and have most of the informal hunting grounds".

Great. Just great. I could see all the weres tense up as they were all prey animals to a dragon. She'd killed and eaten Harlequin for crying out loud! That... that was scary.

"Fourth, the Vampire Council, a hereto great source of the self selecting prey, has decided that all of their issues with me can be resolved if I join the Council as I now meet the membership rules as it were. The... oaths would bind me from harming them, or them me, which nicely solves their issues and fills the empty seat".

Shit.

"Fifth, St. Lewis is the agreed upon common ground for the negotiations. They didn't want to come to Cairo and I didn't want to go to Paris. Belle suggested St. Lewis as a compromise location and I agreed. Padma thought it was an excellent idea and made sure to remind me of certain habits of certain people here. Rather in-depth reminders. They, or their representatives, are coming here in seven days. It was decided that I'd break the news to all of you. They are rather nasty people but I do like their idea of a joke. Accommodations will be required of you Jean-Claude, I believe they will contact you tomorrow as to the details. As for myself I will need housing for three... well for a vampire, a were and another demon apart from myself; hope you like cigar smoke. I will make my own independent sleeping arrangements".

Shit! Shit! Shit! Felt her grow darker as well while she looking at Asher, Jean-Claude, and me as she spoke. And here I was going to verbally knife Padma and he beat me to it. Need to remember that he's no dummy. Damn it, the entire Council will be here! Could so feel and see everybody tensing up and panicking.

And there was even more. Now she glared at me and I could feel the rage and... and something else that I couldn't name hiding behind that inferno.
"Sixth, the bindings that you, Anita, caste upon me, while broken, mutated in the breaking. I suspect your coven didn't tell you what the core component of the binging spell they created is normally used for. The weaker simply cannot do such a binding upon the stronger without it being voluntary. Shards, I begged you not to, to let me go but no; just had to try and put me in my place. And it's really is your fault as you just had to use the sliver of leftover power from me when you tried bound me with my names. Well... that apparently rebounded back upon you but the link was so incredibly weak it was not noticed by me at first, but it was likely the reason I didn't kill you for what you did. And why you were just now fixated upon me and why I keep getting...".

I felt Jean-Claude clutch me tightly as she looked away from me.

"Anita you are in the process of becoming my familiar and I am so pissed about that as I find myself unable to stop it other then by killing you and I keep getting... having... issues with that every time I decide to kill you and yours. But the council does not know of that little issue so the choice of this locality for the negotiations is... not as fortuitous for them as they thought".

Oh utterly massive... shit.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Well folks have I set the stage well? One problem with writing such stories is trying to keep the characters in character. This is not the original chapter six I wrote but I was troubled by the direction the story was taking.

Then Lord Grise helped clarify the problems. Lord Grise noted that he thought Anita was being too passive, and so was everybody else. A very legit complaint that I address in this chapter. Which resulted in a very difficult chapter to write as I think this chapter sets the stage for the test of the story, so if I get his chapter wrong then the story will likely bomb and I'll abandon it.

Then as I wrote this chapter (and rewrote it several times I had to write the next few chapters as a whole as well due to… story complications). That is in part why feedback is critical in keeping the writer honest. So keep them coming!

Oh, and sometime even Illyana gets it wrong.

This story takes place after Blood Noir (Anita Blake time line). Which I tend to think of as the last of the really good Anita Blake stories.

Part 6a: Time-out

And that's when I shot her... well… I was going to shoot her but instead shot at her (meaning I shot to miss).

Right after the comment about me becoming her familiar and her thinking of killing me and mine. So tired of this bullshit attempt to intimidate us. Frankly she'd done a far better job the last time when she didn't talk so much. And she'd meant it back then, were as now she was bluffing. Shit I knew she was bluffing and I could sense most of my men knew it as well.

Jean-Claude sent me a thought. I suppose he could feel me tensing up to act.

(Careful Ma Petite. Yes she is bluffing but... don't turn the bluff into actual deeds. She is being rude but not actually dangerous... might you... reciprocate without blood?)

I had gone cold and still as she had talked, gone to that quite still place that I go to when I kill but... he was right. Since she was acting out... let’s put her in a time-out.
Usually when I shoot somebody it's for a kill. Forget the TV shows and movies where folks shoot the gun out of somebody's hands or shoot them in the leg. So not realistic. I mean... if you have a gun and I'm within ten feet of you with a knife who wins? If you're not actually pointing the gun directly at me with your finger on the trigger then I'll be the winner every single time, and incidentally the survivor. Once I'm within your reach then it's all over except for the bleeding. Your bleeding.

Contrary to most understanding, knife beats gun most times if the range is ten feet or less.

But this time I fired one round right over her right shoulder, only a few inches from either her head or shoulder. Oh the look on her face as she started which caused her to stumble backwards, she ended up upending over her chair which was priceless.

So worth it. Here's a hint... I can be a vindictive bitch at times. Ok… most of the time.

This was one of those times.

Richard flung himself backwards when I shot. Jean-Claude had just braced himself as he had felt me tensing up. Damian and Nathaniel froze. Asher just looked sarcastic, and Micah had transformed his hands into claws and looked ready to spring.

Behind the chair we could hear her curse once in what sounded like Russian "Дерьмо"!

I still had my Browning extended, pointing to where she had to be behind that chair. We all waited with baited breath, well some of us did.

None of the guards made an appearance, they had to have heard the shot even if they were beyond hearing range for conversations. Good, they were obeying the instructions to not interfere; they were not pleased but understood that there was nothing they could prevent if her intent was to kill. They understood that things were likely to get… interesting and that their involvement would likely cause problems instead of solutions.

I spoke my mind, politely this time.
"Enough! Sit down and talk like the adult you claim to be".

Yea, I was being a bit bitchy, felt good. Felt real good.

"What gave her away to you"? Asher asked as he casually stood up. As he did this the top of her head appeared over the overturned chair and silently looked at us.

"Too many threats, and my cross didn't glow". Plus that still injured nail of hers but no need to mention it with her present. I lowered my gun.

Yea... big bad demon threatening to kill us and my cross doesn't glow. Not even a teeny-tiny bit. Really big tell. And the fact that that the vampires and weres had been too casual, apart from Richard. They could scent moods better then me, but I could see it as well. There was more then just rage, there was...

Panic.

She was scared and was trying to establish control. Establish dominance. Hmm... I think she really needed to work on her people skills, they looked rusty. The (I'm a big badass who can kill you all) only works if folks think you'll do it. Once they don't...

Asher casually walked over to the overturned chair and looked down upon the still silent Magik. He spoke with a slight grin that showed a hint of fang. "Would you like a hand up Ma jolie"?

Wow, I've never actually heard a glare before but I would swear I could feel the glare she gave Asher. Asher just smiled a full on fang smile at her and waited. Then... her left arm came up from behind the chair and took his hand.

Asher helped her to her feet and as he did this I swear she looked... embarrassed for a moment.

She proceeded to right the chair and sat back down with a neutral expression and then spoke. "I see you're... not buying it".

"So she's constrained? Powerless"? Asked Richard.
A burst of hot power from within her. Vast but restrained. Like a bird in a cage that can't fully stretch out its wings. And an answer from her with that tone of voice you get from somebody who's pissed at being caught.

"No, I'm.... I'm just... ethically and emotionally constrained regarding things Anita truly cares about. Don't... don't do that again. I might... well using too much power does tend to make me hungry".

I aimed my gun again. She gave me an exasperated look as she replied. "Not a threat, just an observation. A rather unpleasant self observation".

Needed to remember that. After all we were are talking to somebody who is vampire council strong even if... she was... Crap just what truly was she?

Hmmm we needed more details. I holstered my pistol and got a refill on my cup of coffee and a muffin as well; I had a bit of the munchies myself all of a sudden. Must be all the excitement.

Part 6b: Questions

"What exactly has happened to you"? Was my question as I poured another cup.

She answered while looking... frustrated. I suppose the lack of control was disconcerting to her.

"Like I said, enchantments, several in fact. The minuscule link that was between the two of us has been amplified by parties unknown. Although apparently amplified more on my side then on yours. Resulting in... well... I find myself in an annoying maze of moral decisions. And being rather... blind to such things I’m... actually concerned about making wrong choices. And rather surprised to find myself worried about that. Very... odd".

Ok... an interesting answer. Micah asked a question in response as I came back over and sat down again by Jean-Claude. “Why is being worried odd and what kind of moral decisions”? 
She looked at us with a contemplative look. Like she was trying to come up with an example. Then she spoke.

“It’s like the color blue if I were colorblind, which I’m not. I remember what blue looked like, but if you pointed to something and said that it was blue I’d have to take your word for it, as I can’t see it anymore, all just black, white, or shades of grey to stretch the analogy. What makes it hard is then you then point to something else and say it’s red. Looks the same to me as the thing you said was blue. Same for green, yellow… so on and so forth. I... remember such things, but I really can’t feel or understand them anymore except for... some specific instances and those instances... hurt”.

Jean-Claude followed up. “So love and hate are the same for you”?

“No. I can feel hate. Hate, anger, rage, guilt, self loathing, disgust, those feelings are all too alive and well. Guess I can see red as it were”.

Yea, I could still feel the rage burning within her. All that tasty rage. My stomach gave the slightest of rumbles so I took a bite of my blueberry muffin.

She continued, heck in hindsight she over shared a bit. “I can’t feel much else. My brother does inspire feelings but... they are not... well... they are mostly not good feelings. Shards, I so hate myself. Kitty might have allowed me a path out of this darkness but that is denied me. Rules, always more damn rules”.

“Rules”? I asked. So wanted to know the rules that governed her. And who was Kitty?

“Demons are not allowed to go back in time. Suffice it to say a friend of mine is gone and I am not allowed to determine what happened to her or if she is even alive as the freaking universe says NO to that! I didn’t take no for an answer and... and I... well... there were consequences for... suffice it to say I ended up even worse then I was before”.

Confusing tidbit of a story there. Ok, time for some answers. “Just who are you”? Was my question.

Surprise surprise, she answered it.
Part 6c: Magik (In her own words).

She looked resigned, like she had to clean up her room or something.

“As I said I keep having to return here…. And it’s growing ever stronger which is interfering with my… attempts to find my soul. To find where that bitch Witchfire is. I was… am… a demon sorceress. I… She… It’s very… difficult to fully explain. I came here in pursuit of information about… some deals that Khufu had made with her. I am many things, one of which is a mutant. My… mutation is the ability to travel the multiverse via the ability to summon teleportation disks from a place called Limbo. This allows to me access most but not all dimensions. Yours for example is very locked down”.

Nathaniel asked a question. “Have you been to Wonderland”? Richard rolled his eyes in annoyance, Richard has mostly distain and great dislike for Nathaniel for a variety of reasons. Yet another example of why we were no longer together.

A somewhat silly question but Nathaniel had never read any of the childhood classics in childhood due to having to run away at age six from a murderous child abusing guardian who had just killed his brother and living on the streets. We don’t really know anything about that time in Nathaniel’s life and he so far has not shared. Micah and I were reading him such classics in bed, ok that sounds odder then it actually is. Rather a sweet time.

Then she replied and I realized that the rabbit hole might actually exist.

“Once. Cheshire was an… enjoyable traveling companion. But the red queen was most irritating. Magic was very odd in that dimension”.

“How was Alice”? Was Nathaniel’s eager reply.

“Who’s Alice”? Was her response. Hmm, last time she was here she didn’t get the white rabbit comment I had made.


“Never read it. My… childhood was… not… pleasant or normal”. Hmm, guess Nathaniel and her
had something in common then.

“Ok, we’re off on a tangent here”. Was my contribution to the discussion. “Let’s stay on topic”.

“Ummm…” Nathaniel said. You could just see he was dying to ask a follow up question.

“Let our kitty cat ask his question”. Suggested Jean-Claude. “Assuming the answer is brief”.

Nobody protested, I guess the concept of Wonderland possibly being a real place had caught everybody’s interest. Nathaniel asked his question.

“How did it end? I mean did you ended up in a trial over who stole the tarts”?

Magik looked… slightly confused. I guess she really never did read the story.

“No”.

Nathaniel had crestfallen expression as to her short answer. She slightly frowned and then gave a slightly more detail answer.

“The red queen loved the phrase off with their heads so I relieved her of hers after a rather violent… disagreement”. Nathaniel looked pleased with the answer, but I could just tell that he so wanted to just talk about Wonderland.

“Do you work for the devil”? Asked Richard out of the blue.

“No. There are many and I work for none of them, heck I’m a hell lord in my own right”. Was her clearly irritated reply. Guess she got that a lot.

Richard followed up. “More then one devil? There’s more then one Lucifer”? 
She started ticking off names on her hand. "There’s Hela of Hel, one L not two, Norse hell as it were. She can be a real bitch at times but she’s a smart one. There’s Mephisto, also known as Mephistopheles, he rules your more traditional hell. Then there’s Dormmanu, a real bastard of a hell lord. Then… well no real need to keep going on. Oh, Lucifer gave up on the whole gig and currently plays piano in a bar that he owns in LA; guess he had a mid life crisis or something”.

Blank looks from all of us.

Magik then, thankfully, got back on topic. "The enchantments that are being cast… they have altered me in this reality. As I said the first one cast apparently hides who or whom are doing it from me. I have found three enchantment sites to date; but there may be more”.

"The first was in Moscow in a deserted warehouse. I only found it after the second enchantment alerted me due to the… changes in me. I think the second enchantment… amplified the vampiric behaviors, the desire and the actual need to feed. This is in part tied to what happened in Cairo when I first came here. I believe that the second enchantment actually took place in Cairo while I was not present in this dimension. The third enchantment opened up the link between Ms. Blake and I causing me emotional… difficulties. That ritual took place in Paris which was why I first thought the Council was involved at first”.

Interesting, I could so feel her rage and frustration over this.

She continued.

"Think of it as somebody having access to the rule book. My entries are being… modified for reasons unknown. You know me as Magik, Childe, or Darkchilde…. My actual name, which no longer has power here due to that… oath Ms. Blake swore, is Illyana Nikolievna Rasputina, otherwise known as Illyana Rasputin. I...".

And she got interrupted again. I always hate it when people start asking questions on slide one of a power point presentation where the answers to said questions are on the next few slides. I'm a Federal agent so I been to a bunch of presentations.

Asher interrupted this time. "The Rasputin? As in Grigori Rasputin? The Russian monk"?

She replied. "Yes... although my timeline is different then yours. I am Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin's great great grand daughter".
Well that was just dandy. Grigori Fing Rasputin.

I don't know what he was in her world but in ours. Well... Grigoria was born in the later part of the 19'th century. He was a born a peasant, a nobody and a nobody he remained; right up to the point when he started having visions. He then progressed into a kind of faith healer, general mystic, and... something else.

A really really powerful something else. At his height he wielded significant influence over the Russian Tsar and his wife due to his ability to heal their sickly son. He was not so much a monk as a kind of religious wanderer. And according to hearsay, a very debauched one when it came to alcohol and women.

He survived the communist revolution and became the holy man of the white Russians. It was rumored that he had the ability to sway a crowd with his powers. Not by anger or passion but by... by something. He said few words compared to say a Hitler's endless ranting and diatribes, but... but those words... Well…

This is only one film recording known of him. He was in a small room sitting and speaking so the camera could record him so the film could be shown to solders in the field and to cinema goers where the white Russian's still held sway.

I don't speak Russian but I'd seen the film once in my college years in the class on Mystics. It was creepy. His eyes... something looked out of his eyes and... and you didn't want those eyes staring at you. There is no soundtrack on that surviving film as this was before speakies existed, as they were called back then.

It's a good thing. Even with just words being flashed on the screen you feel like... you need to obey because you... you want to. He’s considered one of the top mystics of the twentieth century.

He died in some massive Red vs. White Amy battle where... things happened. The Communists purged all written writings of what happened but... they said he raised demons on the final battle where he died. Apparently very few people survived that battle, and Russian folklore has it that some of the demons he raised are still in our world.

Even today the location of that battle is unknown as it is a Russian state secret. Afterwards the Communists killed all of his descendents and his relatives.
Asher then provided a new tidbit of information. "The vampire council tried to have him killed. It was thought that he might... become or even be a Necromancer. They failed... all vampires... they couldn't stand to be near him. The Council was very happy that the Communists did it for them”.

"As useful as that sidetrack was... please let her speak before dawn arrives”. Was Damian’s comment. Yea, the clock was ticking.

She paused but there were no more questions so she continued.

"Grigori, in my world, was not quite what he was in yours. He died before the revolution, killed by nobles. I was born on a State Farm in Siberia. Just a little peasant girl with two big brothers. One who went on to become a cosmonaut and one who became... well... you call them super heroes. My brother Peter, he could turn into living steel. Very strong. He ended up in a group in America called the X-Men who were a group of mutants who tried to do good”.

"Like the Justice League”? Asked Nathaniel. And again we were off topic, sometimes it’s like herding cats.

"Yes... like the comic". Replied Magik... umm Illyana I guess now, with a slight frown.

"They battled super villains, evil mutants, and aspects of the U.S. government who sent giant robots called Sentinels to contain and destroy mutants both good and bad”.

This was beginning to sound like a terminator film plot, but then I lived in a world of vampires, weres, magic, fairies, and other creatures so I kept my comments to myself.

"I was kidnapped from my home and brought to America at the age of six as a hostage to... influence my brother. I was freed in the end and spent some time with him and his group. In that group was a young thirteen year old girl by the name of Kitty Pryde who I kind of thought of as a big sister. The school where they resided was destroyed and they ended up at this deserted floating lost Atlantan city that had been raised from the ocean. That was were I was... kidnapped again. But this time by Belasco. He was a demon sorcerer and ruler a hell dimension called Limbo”.

"The X-men also ended up in Limbo and briefly freed me, but before we could return I was briefly torn from Kitty’s grasp as they were on one side of a magic portal and I was on the other. A few seconds passed in their time and then Kitty grasped me again and pulled me from the portal. I was
now thirteen. I had spent seven years in hell”.

“Seven years where I... I... I do not wish to speak of it other than to say at the end of it Limbo was mine, I had lost three fifth of my soul, and was now a demon sorceress”.

“I returned from hell and... things were different. Difficult. Everybody was both concerned for me and scared of me as I would not speak of what happened. My brother was besides himself with guilt. Eventually some of what happened to me was learned. Only... Kitty truly accepted me. I... treasure that... there is nothing I would not...”.

“To make a long and very private story very short. I died at the age of seventeen. I... had... my brother was dead, or so I thought, and Kitty was badly hurt. I... didn’t take it well. Made bad choices... kind of went insane. And... to fix what was happening, an invasion of earth by the demons of Limbo, I... killed myself by erasing myself from reality which sealed the breach between Limbo and Earth”.

She paused. Interesting summation.

“And yet you live”. Injected Jean-Claude.

“That... is... somewhat open to debate”. Was her reply. She continued.

“Years later I was brought back by Belasco. Well... he was trying to bring her back, the me that died. He ended up with the me that is. The Darkchilde part of who remembers all that she was, but lacking a soul. Her soul. I was not the blond bed warmer that he desired the return of. I was trapped in the demon form she had been trapped in when she died. He was... displeased. Very displeased. He... expressed that displeasure by doing... doing... It was bad and I will say no more about that”.

She paused and gulped. Damn the rage was just pouring off her. Rage and fear. I could take a guess at what the bad things were and that likely explained part of her panic. Losing control for her is likely always associated with bad things happening to her, so what is happening now is likely causing all kinds of unpleasant memories and flashbacks. Rather the control freak myself over certain things.

She collected herself and continued.
"I was broken, driven insane, and cast out into the wilds of Limbo. I somehow healed myself physically but I was not... well. I hid for a long time in a part of limbo where time ran very very fast. I... eventually recovered part of what I was. I then sought revenge. Meanwhile but a day and passed for Belasco. He was convinced that she yet lived and had pulled the school that the X-Men, and their students lived at, into Limbo. In the end Belasco was dead, Limbo was mine again, and... and I met my supposedly dead brother whom I had forgotten yet lived”.

Now her rage was scented with anguish.

"I banished everybody from Limbo and... decided to... attempt to regain my soul. Many more... things happened before I made my way to your world in pursuit of knowledge about a certain person called Witchfire. The rest you... kind of know”.

"I am Illyana Rasputin, the Darkchilde, Magik, Demon, Hell Lord, Mutant, and now a Dragon as well. And apparently ever more trapped in your world... That is why I'm..."

**Part 6d: Invocation**

God the smell of her rage was intoxicating. The longer she spoke the more angry she had became and the allure of it was filling the room, so tempting me. It was like...

The tastiest cake ever baked just starting at me.

The smell of fresh blood to my beasts.

The sight of a trashing dove with a broken wing.

The limping of a fawn with a crippled leg.

A dish of the finest fresh cream, whisker licking good.

The scent of sweet sweet living flesh.

The smell of coffee... yummy yummy coffee. It was like the aroma of freshly roasted and ground beans combined with the taste as well.

I just had to... take a sip... just a little sip. What would be the harm?
Just... one... little… taste.

Heaven! It was delicious.

Oh so delicious. Even though it was but the smallest of sips. Fiery hot and spicy. It went down smooth but had a kick like a mule that set things aflame within me.

This now named Illyana had been looking at Jean-Claude when I'd stolen the sip, but her eyes had jerked to look at me with a suddenly alarmed expression.

And so did everybody else in the room as the Ardeur erupted forth from myself and apparently Jean-Claude as I was touching him at the time. The Ardeur covered the room with desire. It was as if it had liked the taste of her and wanted more... much more.

The last thing I saw was the her look of alarm suddenly morph into horror, then everything went white and I knew no more.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Yikes, the Ardeur makes an appearance. Why you may ask? Well... I always try to write true to the characters and (sigh...) sex is a critical component of Anita Blake fiction.

One thing I dislike about the Anita Blake universe is the author has fallen into a very predictable writing pattern in her last ten plus books or so.

1) New baddie come to town
2) Anita ends up feeding the Ardeur on somebody new and gains yet another lover
3) Baddie always underestimates Anita and pays the price
4) Baddie tends to toy with Anita rather then just taking her out
5) The author has Anita spends ever more time thinking about her relationships
6) Anita has sex over many chapters and she’s always the best sex ever
7) Other women are always jealous of Anita and can’t understand why her men prefer her
8) Some high ranking female were or vampire had some kind of hissy fit with Anita
9) Anita has some blonde insecurity angst moments involving some blonde female
10) Somebody calls her a slut or a monster
11) Anita gains more/new powers
12) Richard behaves like a dick
13) Anita saves the day (yet again, not like there are any other people involved)

Warning... This is not a fun chapter for Illyana based on her history. No real adult content ahead but... very much adult consequences.

Part 7a: Dreams of Cairo

Anita dreams

...

...

I port to the roof of the building that is above the concealed temple of the former Master of Cairo, and take a deep breath of the clean night air... which causes me to cough after breathing in the city's dirty air.
Ok, I breathe the very smoggy night air, damn Cairo is way beyond just smoggy. The smell of old blood in the temple is really getting old, but leaving the sign of my slaughter when I first turned dragon serves as a warning to all who see it.

And as a remainder to me as well. This world... The rules that govern me are apparently mutable, subject to change, are being changed.

Damn it! I should have given up on getting my answers from Khufu after I slaughtered that vampire bastard and his entire Fing court over what they did and would have keep doing to me.

Well... no sense complaining about spilled blood now.

I cast the location enchantment and focus upon it... there... that direction... Alexandria... That's where they're hiding this time. Likely observing us with the concealed electronic devices they think I don't know about... Observing me.

I justify what I'm about to do... rationalize it. And briefly wonder about the sudden need to justify and rationalize it. So... odd to feel that way, even if it's only a faint stirring.

But that stirring scares me. I’m being changed, altered. And I have no control. Just like the times when… No. Not going think about those times. About… THAT.

I calm myself as I had started to hyperventilate in my sudden panic. Then I crouch down and leap up as dragon erupts from my form. I take to the air as I beat my wings.

There are intruders in my territory. Intruders that are also.... food. They were warned to stay away.

Things are more... clear now. Simpler. My beast I guess, that's what all the weres call it, is in the foreground of my thoughts. I wonder how much of that is dragon and how much is demon. It is a sign of my alteration that I no longer know.

I beat my wings and rapidly rise into the dark sky, and then bank North West as I fly in the direction of Alexandria.
Shards I'm so hungry. It gnaws upon me like a rat upon a bone. Always there... always... in my thoughts. I smile as I fly higher as I think upon what I will do to those who have done this to me once I find them. Not a twitch of moral confusion about that, just... anticipation. Well, Ani... Blake… Ms. Blake (must keep things in perspective!) is not a very nice person about such things as well.

I… like that in her. So… comprehending of how the world really works.

I again find flying to be fun. A grumble of a laugh as I wonder what Lockheed would think it all. Likely snort fire and try to eat everything in sight, that little glutton.

The memory of that little dragon throws me into mental darkness as I remember... remember a life that once was. What has been taken from me. What I so want back. I flex my talons as I snarl in grief and rage.

Dragons can fly fast... but I can travel even faster as I am so much more.

I pirouette in mid air as I draw in my wings and then snap into a dive. And as I dive I summon a teleportation disk.

With that I am diving down upon outskirts of Alexandria over some remote ruin of a temple. And I can see those whom I hunt. And smell them as well. Gods, dragons can scent so very well, this is what Logan must always be having to deal with; being able to smell everything.

Vampire, male. Werelion, female. They are next to a pickup truck with a shell on it. There are tables next to the truck with some laptops, likely examining the outputs of their listening devices. I idly wonder if they saw me take wing.

They look up as I roar out my rage and my hunger, and then run in different directions. Smart, two targets instead of one.

I dive down upon the werelion, the lesser of the two. She dives for a small hole in the ground, likely some opening to a cave system. No... no... can't have that. Can't have the mouse hiding in the wall. I breath a bit of fire and cover the area she's running towards with flames.
She stops and turns to confront me as I land behind her. I notice she's wearing a white mask, like that means anything to me. The whole color of the masks has been explained to me by Hans, the new Master of Cairo. I had explained back what the words (don't come here) mean. Apparently this world has many slow learners… well… about to be a few less.

I notice she's drawn a sword... good. I've found a fight makes the living meat taste better.

I snarl in rage. I'm not sure if it's the dragon or the demon that has such emotions over this. The dragon emotions are like a screaming voice inside my head, somehow I don’t think dragons were big on the whole sharing concept. Well… demons aren’t known for sharing as well.

The emotions are like screams in my mind.

**MINE! THIS IS MINE! MY TERRITORY! NOBODY HARMS WHAT IS MINE! NOBODY TAKES WHAT IS MINE! TO COME HERE IS CHALLENGE! FIGHT! FIGHT FOR WHAT IS MINE!**

She's shouting something that I pay no attention to. I snap my head forward and she swings her sword. She dodges out of the way of my strike and the blade bounces off of my armored neck. As she dives down in a somersaulting run I use my left rear leg and claws. I partially miss her, which means she's still living as I only ripped her left arm off.

She stumbles to the ground as I turn about, then gets back up to run.

I suppose the dragon in my wants to play with the food some more... but I'm so hungry. My head darts forth again and I have her in my jaws. With a few crunches she's dead and I feed upon both her flesh and her power.

And part of my screams at what I'm doing... but I'm so hungry and I told them the consequences of coming to Egypt, if not that actual act itself.

My tongue flickers out and the missing limb is swallowed as well. I both feel and hear the vampire scream at the death of his animal to call. And yet he still lives. Ahh, I knew he was a strong one.

Good. The strong ones taste the best.
Shots ring off of my head as I look up. Ohhh, cheating, good for him. He's got a hand gun and he empties the magazine at me. Futile but entertaining.

He tries for the eyes, good choice. The heat of my vision softens the bullets and my eyes are harder then normal dragon eyes.

The bullets splash upon me and I blink away the fragments.

I suddenly tire of the game and I give forth a massive surge of flame. The truck is in the path of my burst and it goes up with a dramatic explosion; but the vampire is gone.

I gaze about the ruin. The red and orange lighting giving it a rather dramatic affect. Then I sniff.

There... he's over there. He dove down another hole. I assume they choose this area due to the solid rock and the tunnels.

I grumble in irritation and amble over to the hole with heavy footsteps. I step upon the burning truck as I go, caving in the roof a bit. I take a deep sniff. He's deep down. I contemplate breathing fire into the hole but decide to dig him out like a mole. My claws start to crush through the solid rock, like a bear digging out a muskrat or something.

In my eagerness I wrench one of my talons, hot blood falls and sizzles on the rock.

He's screaming something and I at last listen to the words...

Parlay.

He wishes to talk.

Screams that he wants to but talk.

Begs that he is here to only talk as I refuse to read any of the messages from the council.

I pause in my digging. Then I back away and lay down, not exactly sure why. I use my dragon chameleon abilities to shift my body coloration to match the background as I grumble forth my
"GRANTED. I WILL LISTEN TO YOUR WORDS BLOOD DRINKER. BUT ONLY IF YOU COME FORTH FROM YOUR BURROW. I MAY... MAY LET YOU LIVE AFTERWARDS".

He hesitantly comes forth.

He speaks.

I listen.

Shards...

It's even worse then I had feared. This world has altered me so much.

The council wants me as one of their own.

...

...

Part 7b: Awakenings

And with that I wake up from the dream.

Somebody heavy was on top of me squishing me and I was... achy. Achy in that achy way from really prolonged... Oh Shit!

My eyes snapped open. A very naked Richard, smeared with dried blood from what little I could see, was passed out on top of me. A quick glance down showed that I was equally naked and likewise smeared. A glance to my left gives me a very big eye full of Micah's groin.

My "Get off of me Richard" grunt was greeted with a snore instead of any compliance.
I gave a shove and our bodies partially separated with a sticky sting as we were somewhat glued together with... well... dried male bodily fluids makes great skin on skin glue to put it politely. I like to say good sex is messy and apparently there was quite the mess. As I pushed the slumbering Richard off of me I saw Magik off to the right. She was sitting with her back up against a smashed couch while clutching a pillow to her...

Shit... naked body. She was looking right at me.

I froze but my eyes quickly took in the scene. It looked like a bomb had gone off in the room. All the furniture that I could see was smashed. The TV looked like it had been somehow chopped in two, and all the blue drapes had been pulled down. I could see a passed out naked Nathaniel clutching an equally passed out naked Asher off to my right; both also smeared with dried blood. Neither Jean-Claude or Damian were in my field of view.

I had frozen for two reasons. One because next to... well Illyana I guess... was my gun, all of my knives and what looked like two freshly whittled stakes, just right for a good vampire staking, and a third only half done. I could see fresh wood chips at her feet. Her expression was... was... was of one deeply in shock I think.

But the real reason was what she looked like. The blood on Richard was dried whereas she still looked wet in places and... and... there was a lot of it on her body and her hair. From this angle I could see what looked like two vampires bites on her neck, one really bad bite on the other side of her neck that looked like somebody had tried to take a chunk or had bit really hard; all three wounds were still bleeding. I could see at least one vampire bit on her lower arm and I suspected there were bites on her wrists as well. She looked… looked kind of lost I think.

Crap... it was plain what had likely happened, but I couldn't recollect a thing.

She then spoke with a quiet tone of voice that just screamed shock and detachment. "It's well past dawn... eleven am or so. I... I think... I think… I'll be calling in sick today".

Well, we're still all alive so she's not in a blind rage. Wonder if she's... God I hope she's not... bounded to me like I did to Nicky. When I made him my bride.

"Are you... ummmmm..." I started to say.

A slight glare from her. Ok, not a bride then. Brides can't even think of a hostile thought at their
"No... I am... I'm not ok". Was her reply. "The others are still out and your guards apparently had the intelligence to not intrude upon...".

And then a sigh from her as the glare faded away, like it was too much effort. "And I'm not... hungry anymore so... guess you all get to live for... the moment I think. I... I'm not sure about... about... things...".

"Hungry"? Was my reply. I mean it was obvious that the Ardeur had feasted, but her statement meant that...

"You all fed... and so did I".

Shit! Where was Jean-Claude and Damian was my panicky thought. She replied to my unspoken question as I guess she understood my expression.

"No need to panic Ms... ummm... Anita. I did not eat anybody, at least not in the sense you're thinking of". That caused a giggle from her and not the good kind, it was the crazy kind of giggle people tend to make just before they start having a breakdown. “Just as you all fed upon me I... fed upon everybody”.

I finished rolling Richard off of me and froze again as my Browning was now in her right hand, already cocked, pointed at my chest, and her finger on the trigger. Damn, I never even saw her move.

Most novice gun users tend to point the gun either at your head or only in the direction of the actual target. Center of mass, that's where you should aim as it is the biggest target, harder to miss, and frankly heads can jerk out of the way much better then the torso.

She was aiming right at my center of mass.

I spoke carefully "What happened"?
“You do not remember”? So did not like her empty tone of voice.

"No... I... It's as if I've been mind rolled".

"Well goody for you". She replied with a slight laugh that again was not a funny ha ha laugh. I've laughed that way a few times myself before, usually just before I start screaming about something and having a complete meltdown. I could tell she was right on the edge.

I slowly glanced around the room now that I had a more elevated position. I noticed Jean-Claude was behind a smashed chair and Damian was on the other side of the smashed couch that Illyana was sitting against as I could see his feet. Both were also smeared with dried blood, well the parts that I could see. And they were naked as well.

Odd, I couldn't sense any rage from her anymore. In fact I couldn't sense anything at all, not even the screams that were always around her, which either meant she was shielding like mad or... she was in very deep shock or... or something else. I'd bet it was shock.

I asked a question. "Did we... you... um... the guys..."?

"If you don't remember then I'm not... not...". Her finger tightened on the trigger. "In the mood to share right now".

I was busy trying to figure out how to get out of the way of the round, which is kind of hard as Richard's body was still lying upon one of my legs. God, I really wished she put down the gun.

Then she looked down at the gun in her hand like she was surprised to find it there. She pointed the gun up and clicked the safety on thereby releasing the hammer with a very loud click in the quiet room. Again very proper gun safety. Never point a gun at something you don't plan on killing. Rather happy but confused at her behavior. Then she surprised me.

She put the gun on the floor and kind of kicked the gun with her foot resulting in it sliding over towards me while speaking. "Here, likely will make you feel safer. I don't think... I'm not... not thinking well right now. Not... a good idea for me to... Ummm. Just not... I should go... go...".

She tried to stand up, still clutching the pillow to her breasts and belly with her left hand. That's when I saw at least three more bites vampire on her thighs, one was still dripping. But instead of
rising she gave a gasp of pain and her left hand went to her lower belly as she sat back down which resulted in the pillow falling to the floor as she sat back down.

I knew that sound as I've made it myself. Some of my men are very... large, and many women don't like their cervix getting poked or punched as it were during sex. I on the other hand... um... enjoy it most of the time. But this can leave you very sore afterwards.

I observed what looked like more vampire bites, none of which were bleeding. At least two on her breasts and several on her arms. But I also saw three more chewed bite marks, one on each breast and one on her belly and they were still bleeding. Again looked like somebody had tried to take a bite of flesh.

I slowly reached out and pushed the gun down by my lower right leg to get it out of the way but leaving it within reach. I maintained eye contact as I asked a very important question about me and mine. "Are we safe"?

She looked down upon herself as she replied in a quiet voice. "No... I don't think... I... I'm... not... I don't know anymore".

"Did... I bind you"? There... I said it. Major fear as I so did not want a demon to take care of.

She looked back up at me with an empty gaze as she replied. "No... just the... reverse I think... But... not ... really... sure. Might be... a bit of both. I... I'm not very motivated at the moment to explore the linkages".

"Linkages"? So did not like the sound of that.

"Yea... plural". Was her obscure answer as Richard suddenly gave forth a groan. My eyes had only flickered to Richard when he groaned but as I glanced back I saw that one of my knives was now in her right hand and she had a look of panic.

Shards she's fast. At least with a knife there was a better chance of… Before I could finish the thought the blade of knife went from cold to a dull red hot glow. The blade was also now flaming as well, and the flames engulfed the hilt and her hand; which did not appear to bother her at all.

Crap. Vampires do very badly with flames and weres heal very slowly from burns.
I made some soothing words in a calm voice. "It's ok... Illyana... He's just waking up. Nobody's going to hurt you".

I heard Micah now give a groan as well and make some small sounds as he sifted his body.

I spoke. "Micah"?

"Yea." he whispered groggily.

"Don't make any sudden moves. Please sit up slowly".

Richard was apparently awake enough to also speak. "Why are we naked"?

"The Ardeur ... it rose" was my answer.

Micah slowly sat up behind me. I felt him go still once he saw Illyana. She still had the knife but her hand was now shaking. I made very sure to keep my hands where she could see them.

"It's ok Illyana... you can put the knife down". Great... Now I'm trying to calm down a possible hysterical and in shock demon. That's one for the record book. Damn I wish she'd put the knife down as well as I don't mean her any harm right now.

She had wild eyes but she then... complied. The flames went out and the blade started to cool and make that tinkling sound metal makes as it cools. Then she again kicked the knives away from her and over close by me. Umm.... nice that she did that but... ummmm... why?

More groans about the room. In fact too many groans. It was past dawn and both Jean-Claude and Asher should have been down for the count as only Damian was a day walker.

Damian was the next to speak "Is it safe to move"?
I could see her suddenly beginning to lose it as he was behind her and out of eye sight. She had either not known that or forgotten. Her hands started to clench and it felt like a cold furnace suddenly ignited within her as her power flamed into existence. But before she did anything I yelled. "Freeze Damian. Do Not Move"!

Thank god he complied. I spoke to Illyana again. "Damian is behind the couch that you're leaning against. He'd going to slowly, very slowly crawl away from you and come towards where my voice is while staying as far away from you as he can".

No need to spook her as she was apparently very jumpy.

Micah spoke softly. "Does anybody remember what happened"?

Richard grunted a no and slowly sat up facing me. He then looked around and froze when he saw Illyana.

Jean-Claude replied from where he lay. "No Ma Petite. The passion came and all went white".

"Nothing at all" was Damian answer as he started to slowly crawl while making as much noise as possible.

Both Asher and Nathaniel also said no as they slowly sat up. I likewise answered no.

Illyana spoke one word in response. She spoke it very quietly.

"Yes".

And then she started to quietly cry.

The big bad demon, the one who had kicked all of our collective asses at one time, started to cry which made no sense at all.

I mean... yea I hate it when somebody has used the Ardeur against either me or us to force us to
have sex but this was Magik. Hell she'd killed off the Master of Cairo and his entire court back when they'd...

Shit. Back when they'd raped her with Fang and Claw. She'd freed herself and slaughtered all of them. We'd seen the memories of that from the new Master of Cairo. She had not been crying then and she'd been hurt much worse.

I surveyed the ruin of the room and the state of Illyana and I had a possible glimmer of understanding based upon my one prior conversation with her while my house burned.

I had a gut feeling that there was a good chance that she’d never had consensual sex before... and the Ardeur is not... ummm... When it has been used against me by my enemies it was so not...

Consensual.

Shit... I think… we... I think we kind of... gang raped her.

How... How the hell was that even possible?

**Part 7c: Picking up the pieces**

For some reason I then slowly crawled over to her. She watched me all the while as she continued to cry. I didn't think having any of the men get close to her would be a good idea right now.

I didn't say it would be ok. I didn't say it would be all right. I've been where she is and I think I knew just how she felt.

The Ardeur can be quite the curse. But I’ve only seen it like this when it was used against us. The Mother Of All Darkness had done it me once when I was on a trip. She had used it to force my friend Jason, and two complete strangers who happened to be weretigers, to screw our brains out for a day and a half as she was trying to have me get pregnant. I was mind rolled as well and barely remembered any of the details afterwards.
I had some issues after that sexual marathon, both physically and mentally. And the only comfort I had then was some over testosteroned males having pissing contests over me like I was some kind of door prize to be fought over. So yea… big zip on the comfort.

The genders tend to differ on *Ardeur*. Men tend to shake the actions off better. Woman tend to be less… blasé about it.

Yea, I suppose it had been fun, not that I remember much of it. *Ardeur* always makes it fun, like hours of foreplay compressed into seconds; and the orgasms are amazing. But… involuntary sex is rape regardless of any pleasure. Others had done it to me and mine by forcing the *Ardeur* to rise.

The brutal honest truth is what had happened here was a type of rape, regardless of the *Ardeur*.

I reached her and gave her a hesitant hug and she suddenly clutched at me like I was a life preserver. She started to cry harder and began to chant as she trembled. "*Kitty... I want Kitty. I want Kitty! I WANT KITTY!*"

She totally lost it in crying hysterics for her missing friend Kitty. Which was again odd… I mean… demon right?

Why did I hug her? I… I don’t know. I suppose I… I wished when that had happened to me that there had been somebody female that I could have a breakdown with. Glad I could at least do something.

And then it hit me.

Glad?

I’d shot at her but a few hours ago and would have cheerfully put her down if I thought I could actually do it. Now I’m comforting her? She’d mentioned linkages...

Damn… I think I know of at least one of them now. Normally that brings out my anger, heck to be honest almost anything can bring out anger in me but… a naked sobbing crying young woman having hysterics apparently doesn’t.
Wait... young woman? Ok... really needed to think this out. Then I got a mental thought from Jean-Claude.

(Ma Petite, I shall take the men away so we may clean ourselves. I would ask why we yet live but... We must talk once you are done).

I heard voices behind us as the guys got to their feet and shuffled out of the room leaving us alone.

"Did a demon just rape us?" whispered Nathaniel. "I can't remember a thing".

Richard was the only one to reply, but then he was always the most moral one. Funny, he's usually slower on the uptake.

"No... I think we just... kind of raped a demon".

Again, how the hell was that even possible?
A guest reviewer (thanks as I LOVE feedback!) was a little shocked that I went down this direction instead of skirting it. Well, I was rather shocked as well, but… sexual magic in Anita Blake stories is a key component of the books and… I do try to write in character. Plus I was left wondering just what the heck this story would actually be about (yes even I don’t know as I tend to write free flow on large stories and I write out of order as well as I get ideas).

I try to explore Illyana’s character in most of my writings and a repeat of my first Illyana/Anita crossover (Scary things) would be a waste of time.

Lord Grise has significantly helped me on these few chapters (first time I ever have used a beta reader) and has contributed some really good ideas as well so major shout out to him and credit as a contributor for this story.

Anita tries to be a good person who does bad things and has more then a few issues. Illyana at this point in her existence is fundamentally mostly a bad person who is trying to recover what she once was; but it’s not easy. She is a demon who wishes to not be one, but her nature means she has blind spots that are huge and she can’t see them. The lack of a soul makes moral decisions very very difficult for her and very confusing (as I’ve explored in some of my other works).

But now… she has been partially transformed into… something. Now she can see some of the blind spots but… the nature of such transformations means she might not fully realize she can see things that she was blind to before. And… just what will she do?

Illyana really has issues with dealing with most people as they tend to interpret whatever she does incorrectly, in part because Illyana hides her lack of social skills, in part because that whole part demon thing she had as Illyana 1.0 and now being a complete demon in Illyana 2.0. FYI, I use 1.0 to be pre-death and 2.0 to mean her re-embodiment. Also Illyana tends to never explain herself or justify herself in part due to deep insecurities and shame, hmmm just like Anita in some regards.

Illyana, just as Anita, tends to be a person of extremes, which is why it is fun to write such a crossover. Plus Illyana is a natural blond so that just makes her a physical embodiment of some of Anita’s personal demons (ha ha).

So… now I have a story that explores more of Illyana’s character in a way that is new (yea!). And I really do want feedback is this is a very difficult story to write as I need to stay true to the characters involved.
But… yea… sex. Wonder how Illyana’s going to handle that…

**Part 8a: Cleanup**

She cried for about fifteen minutes while screaming for her friend Kitty.

Finally she calmed down, stopped crying out for her friend and just sobbed for a while. Eventually she stopped clutching me so hard and stopped sobbing, then she spoke.

"I... I need a shower and... space to heal myself. I... I hurt".

Rather identical response to my own desires when I have been in similar situations. But… as she’d cried I was beginning to wonder even more about this sudden empathy I had for her. Yea rape victim and all that but... she's the big bad... so why... why did things feel... different?

"Can you walk"?

"I... think so".

I helped her to her feet which reminded me that we were still both naked and very besmeared, her even more so then me. As we got to the doorway I found Claudia, one of the female wererat guards standing with her back to the door holding two black silk robes.

**Claudia - Female wererat**

One of my bodyguards. She stands at around 6’6. More muscular than most men, and has a take-no-guff attitude. Very beautiful kind of woman who needs no makeup. Rather dislikes some of the men in my life. Very skilled in both hand to hand combat and the use of firearms. Good with a knife, not with a sword. You so don’t want to piss off this woman.
"It was thought that you would need these" was her comment. "The showers are empty."

Claudia then walked before us as I helped Illyana walk by providing a shoulder for her to lean on. Shards, she left drops of blood on every step she took, it was like she couldn't stop bleeding.

Illyana's robe was wet with blood by the time we walked all the way to the showers. Claudia and I kept offering to carry her but she kept refusing and I noticed her voice was gaining in strength and was now steady. Not sure if that was a good thing or bad.

She also kept refusing the offer of medical aid... that it wouldn't matter in a few minutes was her response. We met nobody as we walked which I suppose was a good thing.

"You cannot shower so injured". Was Claudia's comment as we entered the locker room.

"Yes I can" was her firm reply. "Please... leave me alone for now".

With that she hobbled into one of the extra large private shower stalls and closed the glass door. There are the main gym group showers, mixed gender as weres don't have much of an issue with nudity, but there are some large stalls for situations were privacy is desired or needed.

She didn’t bother to take off the robe as she turned on the water and steam quickly filled the stall obscuring her. She gave a muffled hiss of pain as the water hit her wounds and we could see the water now had red streaks in it before the steam and water droplets hid everything. I left Claudia standing guard in case Illyana collapsed and quickly took my own shower using the group facilities.

I turned on the water and it cascaded down upon the top of my head as I got some body wash from the dispenser and started to lather up. I really wanted a bath but there wasn’t time. As I cleaned off the blood and other dried liquids I felt Jean-Claude make mental contact with me.

(Ma Petite).

(Yes)? Was my mental reply.
(The others are most distressed. They... Well Asher, Damian, Micah, and I have done foul deeds but Richard and Nathaniel have never thought of themselves as capable of... what has been done).

I replied. (We had no choice. The Ardeur rose. Why did it do that Jean-Claude)?

(You tasted her rage. Which I must say was... unwise. That... triggered something. Why I do not know).

(Yea... no shit. Why... why did I do that? It was like... a compulsion. Like I just had to take a taste).

(Ma Petite, how do you feel)?

I thought upon the question as I rinsed.

(Full I think... Really full. Like... like the time when I fed upon all the wereswans, when I fed upon their king so as to help heal you and Richard, but instead of the energy going to help raise the vampires for the day and to heal you two its just kind of... there.

(An appropriate comparison I think. The others are... satiated, were and vampire alike. Asher and I walk while the sun shines. And... she said she fed upon everybody).

(Yea?)

(She did. Richard is king of the local werewolves and Micah is likewise the ruler of the wereleopards and I am the Master of the City. Ma Petite, all who are ours, were and vampire alike, have been fed upon. She fed upon all that we rule. Only the wererats and the werehyena guards are currently functional as we have no mythical bounds to them. And... all the vampires that are mine are awake and yet the sun shines).

(Shit).

(Yes, shit indeed Ma Petite. Your American vulgarity is somehow so very appropriate).
I lathered up again.

(Ma Petite. Did you... dream)?

(Yes. It... I think it was a memory of hers. Of her turning dragon and attacking the Harlequin in her territory. Dragons are apparently very territorial. I take it the others dreamed this)?

(We all dreamed, but different dreams. Asher was involved in... a pillow fight involving some other young woman and a small purple dragon of all things, then they went and got ice cream. This Kitty it is supposed. Asher thought she looked maybe fifteen. He found it to be appallingly sweet and innocent. Kitty won by the way after apparently cheating with a tickle fest).

(And the others)?

Jean-Claude gave a brief rundown.

(Micah hunted in the woods with some native America girl by the name of Dani. They used arrow, spear, and rocks of all things. Beware if she throws rocks as she apparently has very good aim).

(I was leading some kind of attack that involved a rather large number of demons at my beck and call; and waving a disturbingly large battle axe about. She apparently thought that a rebelling demon was keeping the location of her soul from her. She was very... forceful).

(Richard was being read a bedtime story from a very large Russian sounding young man, the story involving a Ms. Piggy of all things; oh and again the young woman known as Kitty was there but maybe thirteen or fourteen? Our... guest appeared to be six years of age).

(Damian huddled in terror, naked I must add, in some cave somewhere and just stared at a cave wall covered in scratches. Terrified of everything. Her mind was... gone he thinks. Just a beast remained, a very filthy and skinny malnourished beast. She was clutching some doll made of twigs and straw and just rocking back and forth like... a child hurt beyond the ability to recover).

(Nathaniel endured a great deal of verbal abuse from some red headed young woman by the name of Rahne. Apparently Rahne thought this Illyana was evil, a demon, not be trusted by good people,
and should just go away. Which was apparently greatly frustrating to this Illyana as she had just saved the life of Rahne. She felt very annoyed that yet again regardless of her actions she was judged harshly).

Hmm, interesting. Even more interesting if true.

(Ma Petite, what do you think… of her? What are your feelings)?

(Some anger, some concern for her which really bothers me, a great deal of concern for us, and confusion as to what the heck just happened).

(Nothing else)?

(No… are the others expressing something else)?

(We… are apparently all mostly still as we were, but Ma Petite I do not understand how we yet live and… all also have some… concern for her).

(Just concern)?

(Just concern… as of now but… we must be careful Ma Petite. Not all changes may be discernable at first. For her and us. Richard is also very angry over both him being fed upon and the wolves as well).

Yea, Richard being angry; what a surprise.

Jean-Claude continued. (Ahhh, forgive me, your senses are less, I forget at times. The woman who entered that room is not quite same women we woke up with. She apparently now smells of Pack to Richard, Micah and Nathaniel. Not pack ruler, just Pack member, both Leopard and Wolf. Asher, Damian, and I sense her to be… well she feels… humanish now).

(I’sh)?
(I'sh. She feels of other things as well. Have you noticed any changes)?

(The screams are gone. The female screams that only I apparently could hear are gone. The screams that are apparently hers but she can't hear. Plus... well I guess she feels... rather human to me as well).

(An interesting night Ma Petite, I pray we never have another like it).

I rinsed again, then exited the shower and started toweling off. Illyana's shower was still going. Then Illyana's shower was suddenly filled with blazing fire instead of steam. The flames bellowed out the top of the shower stall. The heat drove Claudia back while we both madly rambled to find a fire extinguisher, but the flames vanished before I reached the nearest one (we have a bunch of extinguishers and first aid kits everywhere).

The now blacked shower door opened and a healed naked Illyana, at least physically, stepped forth. She looked calm, but her eyes were still... I could tell she was somewhat in shock, as she spoke.

"I think it best we all discuss what happened while... while I'm still... somewhat... detached about... it" was her dead tone comment.

Yea... might be a good idea... or not. Wasn't really sure there were any good choices before us at this point.

**Part 8b: Discussions**

We were in a different room, called the green room if you want to know, and yea it had green silk drapes on the walls. There was a round table and we were all sitting at it. On one side was Illyana, by herself, and the rest of us were on the other side in a tight group.

For reasons I completely understood Illyana was seating where she could see everybody, and nobody was behind her, and she was facing the only door into the room. She was dressed in her spandex costume again, she'd magic'd a new one into existence; very handy trick, know more then a few women who would kill for that ability.
The room was silent as we all just sat there. Illyana was looking everybody in the eye instead of being downcast so... good for her mentally I guess. But, nobody knew where we all stood anymore. What had happened? What… what had been done to us?

She finally opened her mouth to speak but Nathaniel of all people interrupted her.

"Who... bit you"? He asked. Not sure why... I think it was because he came from such an abused past. Nathaniel was so not a rapist.

"You all did". Was her toneless response as her eyes narrowed in what I assume was remembrances.

"All of us"? Replied Richard with what looked like insincerely very little surprise. I think he had started remembering some details.

"All of you".

And then Richard really said the wrong thing. But I understood what he was trying to ask. None of my men were into true rape as it were, if they were then they would not be sharing a bed with me. Group sex… yea... Rough sex… yea... S&M… yea... Dominance and submission… yea. But not rape.

"Was it...voluntary"?

"NO"! She shouted as she clenched her eyes shut, grimaced, and made fists with her hands. And that’s when the table caught fire like somebody had spread lighter fluid upon it and tossed a lit match.

We all hurriedly pushed ourselves away from the now burning table while she proceeded to pound her fists on it a few times.

She opened her eyes and appeared surprised to be sitting next to a burning table. It was not lost on us that the flames did not appear to cause her any harm. Her next statement did surprise us, she… apologized.
"Sorry... not... not happy right now".

She waved her left hand in some complicated gesture and the flames vanished leaving a very scorched table top.

Jean-Claude, ever the diplomat, replied as he sat back down. "Please excuse Richard's question... But... it is one that is upon us all. We... do not recall what happened and did not act of our own will. I would offer apologies for our actions but... one does not say trite words after such deeds".

She bowed her head and stared at the table and surprised us again. "Please stop thinking you... raped me. Your... self guilt is driving me nuts, very strong on the links. You did not... rape me. I did not rape... you. We... we had sex... lots and lots and lots of really... great sex and I... did it with all of you... repeatedly".

She sighed like that was some massive burden that she had just shed. “What did result was a binding. A binding upon us all”.

I then confessed my guilt because... well... it was kind of my fault. "If I had not taken a sip of your power then...".

She interrupted me while still not raising her head. "It's not your fault Anita because you had no choice in that".

Blank looks between all of us while she stared at the table.

"What do you mean by that" demanded Richard.

She answered and everybody went still. "I've been setup... you've been setup. I see that now. I puzzled out enough of what had happened while I sat there after... after we were finally done and you had all passed out. Sat and... failed in my attempts to remove the linkages. My enemies, those who are casting the enchantments upon me... are now your enemies as well".

She looked up and she had an angry snarling expression. "You were meant to die Anita. Whatever is being done to me, you were meant to die back there. Whoever they are, they tried to kill you. And with her death the rest of your would have likely died as well, thought I suspect Jean-Clau... the vampi... shards Jean-Claude would have survived, and Asher of course as he is not part of your
There... must be a new enchantment site that has not yet tracked down, one that was directed at the link between us. I think... the last enchantment was aimed mostly at you Anita. You were primed to do what you did without your knowing. I'd bet that something about me had become irresistible”.

Damn it! That so made sense.

I replied. "Your rage... it was... I couldn't resist. I just had to take a bite".

She continued. "And that was apparently the trigger for the Ardeur to rise uncontrollably. I should not... it should not have been able to affect me. The lesser cannot do such to the greater. If you had been by yourself then... you would have been consumed and I assume your power used to... bind or... transform me in some way that furthers the plots of those who are doing this. And most or all of those bound to you would either be dead, severely harmed, or greatly reduced in power as all those magical links would have come undone”.

"But we were all there". Stated Asher with a tone of cold fury. A tone that matched the vibe from everybody.

"Yes... the core of Anita’s power. Her... relationships. Instead of dying, the feeding was distributed amongst you all. A feeding that went in both directions. I upon you... you upon me and... I upon all that you have”.

"So we didn't rape you”? I slowly stated. Really wanted that out there.

"No... those who... cast the enchantments did. They raped me. You were just the incidental participants. They raped all of... us. However, whatever the enchantment was endeavoring to do has likely gone off the rails. Way off the rails. I have likely not been altered into whatever was their intent, all of you yet live, and... there have been changes”.

Hmm, still the screams that only I could hear were silent. I began to get a glimmer of understanding as to what had happened to her.

Jean-Claude had obviously already figured part of it out. "Nobody else had any vampire bites, just you. Are we... yours? Have we been blood oathed? Or are you enslaved to us”? 
She had a scowl and a feeling of constrained rage. "I don't know... don't really want to find out but... I think it's more... two way. I've been... overlaid is the magical term for it. I... I suspect my aura now has a mix from all of you. The intent was apparently that I consume Anita, instead I now have a connection to each of you. Very strong connections. I... I'm not sure as to the details as I need to... explore what has been done to me... I'm... I think I'm partially human again but not as I once was. Which is the true rape for me. That which I desired to become is no longer possible. And now I find myself...". She fell silent, bowed her head again, and did not continue.

"Does that mean we're now part demon"? asked Nathaniel. Which I suppose was a good question.

Asher injected "I don't believe so. If so then Anita's cross would be rather hotly right now. Likely... we will find out over... time what this entails. But... why are Jean-Claude, I and all of the vampires awake"?

"Demon blood". Was Damian comment. "Which we all apparently partook of".

"Greatly partook of". Was Illyana's dry comment.

Micah pointed out. “But that does not explain the other vampires”.

“The linkages do”. Stated Jean-Claude with a tired sigh. “Power. A new network has been crafted, something that is supposedly not possible as I have never heard of a binding of power that had more then three participants. But one supposes that a demon in the center of the mix alters what is possible. That... feeding by her, upon all that is mine, and likely the wolves as there are many wolves here, also brought power to all that is mine”.

“So... you're not going to kill us”? Asked Richard.

She raised her head and gave us an odd look. Started to say something but paused. Then she grimaced and closed her eyes. She spoke with her eyes closed like she didn’t want to see us.

“You... you would not be the... I've... I've killed those I’ve... loved before”.

Richard looked somewhat shocked, Jean-Claude and Asher looked resigned. Micah and Damian looked neutral while Nathaniel looked uneasy. Don’t know how I looked but I wasn’t really surprised. I wanted to go for my gun but my cross (yea I was wearing another cross, I have a bunch
She continued in a tone of rage and despair. “I love you. I hate you. I hate that I love you… so no… no killing for now. I… already tried that. It… hurt too much”. Then a half heard mumble. “Great… in love with people who burnt me alive… just great”.

She opened her eyes. “And it’s all fake… but oh so real for me despite its manifest falsehood. I’m… swamped by your emotional views of the world. Of each other. Some of you love all of you, some of you hate most of you. Some of you both love and hate a person at the same time. And… I get to feel it, be… influenced by it. And it’s all a lie for me. These are not my feeling”!

She bowed her head again. “And it makes no difference. I can’t really tell which are my feelings and which are yours… I suspect the hate and rage and dislike and distain that some of you feel for each other causes that. Great, just… great. Enslaved to a lie that I know to be false and still… I so… want to… believe it. Wish you’d just try to kill me again… that…”.

She finished in a whisper. “Would help I suppose. Think it probably could…”. She left he rest unsaid but it was obvious. Then she could likely find the strength to kill us.

Ok. That was a lot to digest, apparently figuratively and literally.

Then her phone rang.

Part 8c: Day Job

Apparently she was one of those folks who has musical ring tones. It was Bad Boys by Inner Circle, which is the theme song for the TV show Cops.

…

Bad boys, bad boys

Whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do

When they come for you
Bad boys, bad boys

Whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do

When they come for you

...

I have no idea how the heck she has pockets on the spandex thing she was wearing, but from somewhere she pulled out a phone and looked upon it with a totally exasperated expression as she stated. “Of course they call now... like the timing can’t get any worse”.

She looked up at us. “I kind of have to take this call but... please don’t say anything”.

Please?

Then she hit the accept button and she mumbled in a thick Russian accent, she now sounded completely hung over, as if she had just woken up.

“Groan... Da”? 

I heard some indistinct words. Almost sounded like...

She replied. “Apologies Sergeant, I am... ill. Da... calling sick... I believe phrase is”? 

Some more indistinct words.

“Da... I am... hung over. Your fiendish America clubs have been undoing. Tequila I believe. Lots and lots of devil drink Tequila. And I think a hippo has shit in my mouth from the taste of it”.

A few more indistinct words and a laugh. Crap, I so knew that laugh.

“Da, I shall take it easy as you Sergeant say. I will be in tomorrow or upon call if wanted. Please apologize to Lieutenant Storr for me. I... I must again throw up now”.
She made some gagging sounds and terminated the call. She looked me in the eye and I swear she looked embarrassed.

“Why were you talking to Sergeant Zerbrowski”? Was my calm and controlled question.

She answered after a bit of hesitration. “I am on loan from the Russian Federal Security Service, or so they think. A guest observer to see how Americans handle preternatural crimes. The St. Louis department is quite well regarded as one of the innovators in such investigations”.

“You mean you’re a member of RPIT”? Was my more then slightly outraged question as I found myself suddenly glaring at her.

She actually fidgeted before defensively replying.

“I was going to tell you... eventually”.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Illyana has killed those she loved before; Cat in a fight to the death and a dying Ororo to prevent an even worse death for Ororo. Why sex? Well it is an Anita Blake story but… for those Illyana fans, what is Illyana’s back story? Things were done to her and she was unable to prevent it. Illyana always associates lack of control with being abused.

Sound familiar? My fanfic canon is that Belasco was in part a child molester and Illyana was his victim at so many levels. Illyana is now trapped again by forces unknown who are doing things to her, you can just imagine the depths of her rage at this. Oh, and every time this has happened to her other people are harmed, some by others, some by her. One of the reasons I believe she was shown as so standoffish in the relaunched New Mutants was this realization.

Again great thanks to Lord Grise as his ideas and inputs have greatly shaped not only this chapter, but the story itself.

Part 9: RPIT (Pronounced Rip-it)

RPIT (Regional Preternatural Investigative Team), nicknamed the spook squad. Used to be general punishment duty before Sergeant, now Lieutenant, Storr elevated the reputation of the squad. They’re the ones called in on any non human crimes, murder or otherwise. FYI, RPIT Vice is the punishment detail for folks on the RPIT squad (I’m fornicating with the monsters and just so… icky on some of the things that the RPIT Vice folks get to deal with).

I used to be called in quite a bit back when I was their paranormal consultant due to that little raising the dead ability that I have and being a vampire executioner. Back when I wasn’t one of the monsters as it were. I learned quite a bit about detective work from them.

Now that I’m a Federal Marshal I don’t see nearly as much of the old group because… well mostly because Lieutenant Storr doesn’t like who I sleep with. He tries to game the system to work with other Marshals and he does now have his own magical support staff in officer Tammy Reynolds.

There are three people I generally deal with in RPIT.

Lt. Rudolph "Dolph" Storr (da main man)
Six feet eight inches tall and built like a wrestler. He’s normally extremely "by the book" clean cut with close cropped black hair and a neatly knotted tie and jacket, even at 4 a.m. crime scenes. Dolph is such an excellent police officer that I’ve always kind of wondered what he had done to be assigned to RPIT as it was a low-status position within the police force.

Dolph was one of my main mentors and used to a dear friend. But lately our relationship has become very strained, in part because I no longer believes that all vampires and shape shifters are monsters, but Dolph still does. So lots of mistrust and distrust over my increasingly close relationships with the various vampire and lycanthrope communities in St. Louis. I think he believes that it is partially his fault that I’m fucking the monsters as he likes to put it; that if he’d never brought me in then I’d never have gotten as deep as I have.

Plus… Dolph’s personal situation; his son Darrin is married to a vampire (and possibly going to become one), and Dolph and his wife Lucille are grieving over the prospect of a life without grandchildren. Dolph has a younger son, Paul, who apparently cannot have children. This led to some… physical altercations with me where he manhandled me at a crime scene; nothing sexual, he was just… rough. He also tried have my friend Jason Schuyler locked up in a secured facility simply for being a werewolf. That’s in the past but… we are now both very careful around each other and Dolph tries to minimize my involvement with RPIT.

Tammy Reynolds

She’s a Christian witch married to my good friend and protégé Larry Kirkland (who is also a Federal Marshal by the way and also raises zombies). The two of them have a young daughter. She’s the first detective witch to join the force and she chose to work with RPIT. Being a witch, she knows more about detailed spells or rituals than I do. I know the ideas behind stuff, first from a few general classes in college; and subsequently from the school of hard nocks. Tammy is five foot ten inches in height, somewhat younger then me, but she still has an innocence like Larry does. We frequency don’t see eye to eye.

Tammy and I are not friends in part because I wouldn’t talk to her about zombies. Larry would because… well I guess she had more paths and opportunities to interest him then she had with me. If I need to explain then you are really reading the wrong book (hint hint, wink wink).

Sgt. Zerbrowski
Another member of the spook squad (and still a friend). He’s the stereotypical rumpled, smart-alec, but highly competent detective. He’s of Italian descent and frequently reminds you of it. Loves to make wisecracks about my personal life and is a cheerful lech. Loves making inappropriate comments, but never really means any of it in a nasty way. I believe that he has some very slight psychic abilities when it comes to insights into crimes. Don’t ever ride in his car if you can avoid it. Just… don’t. Total toxic waste zone, I swear there’s ten year old junk food in there and likely zombie mice.

“How and why”?! Was my rather loud question. Guess her being involved with RPIT struck a nerve. Great, they avoid associating with me but they let an actual demon on the team?

She sighed. “How is simple. It is my… day job as it were is with the St. Louis police’s RPIT unit. I started four days ago. A… grant was given to facilitate this, they think it is from Russia. Both to RPIT and a larger amount to the department in general”.

She continued. “Why is simple as well. I am… investigating the sites of the rituals. I’m blind to the actual locations until they are found, but they have all been locations of murder so I felt a police presence would… help. I believed that there was a good chance that a ritual might be performed here due to the prior amplification of our link by one of the prior rituals. This… implied an interest in your little group by those casting the enchantments, that and apparent knowledge of your group”.

I continued to question the suspect I suppose. “The RPIT people think you’re a cop”?

“No. I am like you were, a type of consultant with the FSS. Although in this case it is an official position in the FSS with actual police authority. I do not know much about police procedures or protocols nor do I pretend to… much to the annoyance, and frankly disgust, of some in the squad”.

“And what happens when they find out that’s all fake”? Was my bitchy question. Wow, was I in a sudden mood.

“It’s not. The head of the FSS and I had a… conversation. We came to an… understanding and in return I now have a shiny badge and actual credentials if you make such inquires. That happened when I first went to Moscow. I was… upset and… apparently made an impression with the FSS officers I interfaced with”.

That… that is so unfair. Although… I recall my own original brief conversation with her so I can kind of see how that would go. She can be very persuasive when she tries and… now that I think about it, when she lacks any emotional involvement.
“What kind of murders”? Asked Micah. Great, I should have asked that question. Focus Anita, focus!

“The mass killing kind. To conduct magic at this scale takes vast power. Death is one way to provide such energies”.

“Are there others”? Asked Micah.

She looked at Micah for a few seconds. “A few, artifacts of great power, a now destroyed pyramid, and…”. Then she got a slightly shocked look. “Raise a demon, but not just any demon… Shards! I am being… forged as one forges a blade, but… for what purpose”?

Ok… that makes sense. But why do you need her? So don’t like the sound of that.

“So there’s likely a bunch of dead people at some undiscovered crime scene”. Was my insightful conclusion. “I see why being on RPIT might have its advantages”.

So RPIT now has a demon on staff. How… interesting. Man I can’t even begin to think of how many rules that breaks.

I continued. “And nobody senses it”? 

She frowned at some remembrance. “Detective Reynolds is very… well we already do not get along. I think she senses something… she is very nosy. And her husband Larry did look at me funny when he came to the station yesterday”.

Yea, that’s Tammy all right. Say something that she doesn’t believe and she decides you must be lying (but only if you’re female). She’d gotten cranky at me when I’d been sick at a crime scene and she thought I was pregnant. I said I wasn’t and she outright accused me of lying, and she then told everybody that she thought I was pregnant which went over oh so well with Dolph, as in not. Bitch of it was I was simply sick, but man the ration of shit that I got. Some of them still think I got an abortion or something.

Lie and be accused of lying, tell the truth and get accused of lying… So annoying and infuriating.
So… um… I thought upon some of her words and the dreams… familiar?

“What name do you go by”? Asked Asher.

“They know me as Natasha Romanova, although they tend to call me The Woman when talking about me, for some reason they don’t wish to say the name when I’m not there. Superstition I suppose, there is a Russian saying that the devil listens when you speak his name”.

I so just had to ask. “How on earth did you convince the FSS to cover for you”?

“It was not hard”. Was her indifferent response. “Threats tend to always work once one demonstrates the ability to carry out said threats, but I’ve found that… carrots tend to work better for the more bureaucratically inclined”.

She gestured and a small white portal opened above the table, say three or four inches in width. A trickle of gold coins started to rain down on the table. She spread her hand wider and the portal expanded. Now more coins were raining down and then a rather large gold bar landed on the table with a cracking sound as the table shuddered, the impact scattered some coins on the floor. As she closed the portal an egg shaped ruby colored gemstone fell onto the table as well.

“Carets and the stick”. I concluded. Yea… I could understand that. 24k carets.

“Plus… I did the deputy director a favor while I was there, there was a threat to his life from the Russian Mafia and I… intervened”.

Wow, that must have been interesting to see.

She picked up one of the gold coins and briefly examined it, then flicked it to Micah who caught it. She gestured at the fortune on the table. “Here, consider my dues to the Lycanthrope Coalition paid up. For me and mine I suppose, if there’s a news letter then send it to Egypt”.

Ok, blunt but effective. I picked up one of the coins, they had weird markings. Looked like Latin with some Caesar like guy on the one side and a globe on the other side. Hmm, (Pluvia aeternam), wonder what that means. I noticed that the other coins had other designs on them, and I swear there was a Nazi symbol on the gold bar.
Nathaniel asked a question that had apparently been on my mind. “How… um… How did the TV get cut in half”?

She had both an irritated and somewhat embarrassed look as she responded. “You were all fighting over me. Mounting rights I suppose”.

So did not like how that sounded, or how that had to have looked. “All the guys were all fighting over you”? Was my slightly angry question.

She corrected my statement. “No, you all were fighting over me”.

“And the TV”? Prompted Nathaniel.

“Anita cut it in half with a sword”.

I thought for a second, then replied. “What sword? I didn’t have a sword. I left mine it at home”.

Illyana appeared to suddenly think hard for second, but then casually replied. “Well… I… think you had one. Maybe it was… one of your knives instead. I wasn’t… really keeping track of things… I was… preoccupied at the time”.

Yea, it’s possible to cut a TV in half with a knife if you’re really strong (i.e. Hulk Smash!) , but not really buying that. A sword makes more sense. Got the feeling that she was neglecting to mention something. But Richard joined the conversation before I had a chance to pursue that topic.

“Who won”? Was his question. Of course one of the guys just had to ask that.

“Anita” replied Illyana while looking right at me.

That’s when I guess I recalled a flicker of a memory. I was… oh-boy… in a 69 with… oh-boy… Illyana. I was on top holding her down while I … oh-boy… while she had her hands on my ass and her head in my… oh-boy… I think Richard was behind me vigorously … oh-boy… and… oh-boy.
Um…

She answered for me and she actually blushed, which was ok as I was suddenly blushing as well. “Then... well... two women and six guys. Do the math. Anita and I were... busy with all of you and... each other”.

There was a brief lull in the conversation. Then Jean-Claude joined in.

“Might you now have the Ardeur”? Jean-Claude softly asked.

“I sure as hell hope not” was her suddenly angry reply. “The last thing I need is to become a raging...”. She paused, and then continued. “To have that problem”.

Ok, think I just almost got called a slut. A sliver of anger ignited within me.

“Do you need a morning after pill”? Was my cold question.

“No. I don’t... menstruate. I’m not fertile as it were”.

“So now what” asked Nathaniel. Now that I think about it, Nathaniel had been much more... vocal all of a sudden.

Illyana responded while rubbing her brow. “I’m going to take a long hot bath at my apartment and... think. Then... then I suppose first is a meet and greet with whom I’m bringing, you likely should bring in all the other big were groups like lion, hyena, and rat; plus their major players as well; guess everybody needs to see the new monsters in town”.

“I shall send word” replied Jean-Claude.

“Then, I suppose I must spend time with Jean-Claude while he contacts the council. I’m declaring... hmm how does that go...”? 

She closed her eyes for a moment and spoke with them closed. It was French. “Harm sur vous, la
guerre sur moi. Ahh that’s it I believe”.

Both Asher and Jean-Claude’s eyes got big. I puzzled out what she said (I’ve been working on my French for quite some time). It was… Harm on you, war on me.

“That is a… territorial statement” Jean-Claude delicately stated.

“Yes”. Was her simple answer.

“Are you declaring us to be yours”? Richard growled.

“I am stating that harm to you is war with me. I believe the last time the council was here they… played with you all. Well, no playtime, everybody out of the pool. This time they are guests and will act like it. Bring your own food I suppose. Take the rest as you wish”.

“So you are allied with us”? Asher asked.

“Like I have any choices left in that… so yes I suppose”. Was her somewhat angry reply. Well it started out angry, ended with a grimace from her. Then she continued.

“And then I believe I must have private time with each of you for you to… explore what you may have become”.

“No”. Was my sudden angry reply. “Hell no. We do this together”.

Like hell I’m leaving my men alone with this blond demonic... Suddenly my unease crystallized. I had lots of mystical bonds to the men in my life, and now this bitc… she had such bonds as well. And yea I was suddenly having all kinds of delayed relationship anxiety.

She looked at me coolly as she replied… “No. Nobody get to say what the others do in this”.

My anger burned brighter. “I do. In this I really do”.
She narrowed her eyes. “No Anita you don’t. What has happened is very… personal. You all need to the option for privacy. You may not wish to share”.

“And I say no”.

Ok, not feeling very rational all of a sudden. I noticed that none of the guys were saying anything. Guess I’ve trained them well to my moods and insecurities. They were seeing as to my resolve in this before expressing their own opinions.

Damian picked my side. “I think we should do what Anita thinks is correct”. Nathaniel nodded his head as well.

Micah went as I hoped. “As my Nimir-Ra desires”. Jean-Claude and Asher nodded their heads as well, each with an “Oui”.

Richard looked at us and then slowly agreed as well with a growled affirmative.

With a united front I then looked back at Illyana, only to see that she had a slightly bemused expression, which just pissed me off even worse.

“There, decided. No more talkie”. Was my so not helpful statement.

“As you all wish” was her surprising non confrontational reply. “I defer to the alpha female of the relationships in this”.

Then she squinted and I heard a thought in my head.

(I think this is how it the connections enable… ahhh… well promise what you want, but you can contact me if you wish it to be private).

Everybody froze so I assume they all got the thought.
And with that I was standing, my gun was out aimed right at her head with my finger on the trigger and all she did was scowl back at me. God I was so angry, so filled with rage and hatred at what she was. I just so wanted her to be gone! To leave us alone! To not be!

“Ms. Blake”. She said. Oh it’s Ms. Blake again, no longer Anita. “I don’t desire to take your men from you. Especially Richard, really double extra on Richard. The only reason we all fuc… had sex was the enchantment. It had it’s moments but… being the nail to Richards’s hammer is not on my list of priorities, nor is being a blood bag for vampires or weres”.

Ok, I can understand that. Richard is mostly into hard sex… ok really vigorous hard sex, and most women are just not into that but… I am most of the time. She continued.

“I’ll… concede to your demands in this but you really should hear me out as to why that may be a very bad idea… Oh and, please put down the gun”.

“Why”?

“Because I really don’t want you to end up killing everybody here if you let your anger make decisions for you”.

“Scared”? 

A look of irritation on her face. “Yes… very irritating, but not for me. I suppose if I push you then you might just shoot and… Well… what happens in your would of vampire bindings where one side is killed”? 

I took my finger off the trigger and holstered my gun, and with that the wave of hatred for her that had gripped me was gone… well mostly gone. “The other side tends to die”.

Ok, that was way overreacting to just relationship apprehensions. Something… something’s not right.

She actually looked relieved. She closed her eyes and sighed. “Please don’t do that again Anita. I… shards… care for you all and your deaths would… be very… upsetting”.

“Our deaths”? Asked Richard.

“That just… might have freed me”. Was her reply.

“But you’d be dead”. Stated Nathaniel with confusion. I think I got what she was saying, and I think so did Jean-Claude and Asher.

“No… the bindings would have disintegrated and the backlash would likely have killed all of you. I… I’m a survivor… I… always… well almost always survive”.

I sat back down thinking very hard about what had just happened.

“And yet you didn’t push”. Was my observation.


And then she was suddenly angry. “And yet how instantly you use force to try and get your way. How… quick a gun is pulled. Must try to remember that all of you hate me. Always happens regardless of what I try to do, regardless of what I actually do”.

She stood up and spoke with bitterness. “Fine, do it in public if that’s what you want. Learn if you’ve become a horror and share that at the same time with the ones you love. Make sure that the monster you may have become is laid plain for all to see. But do it before the full moon if you’re a were, do it before you try to raise any zombies Ms. Blake, and do it before you take blood if you’re a vampire. Do it before any of you… feed again. But it’s your call, after all, how much could I possible know about such things? I mean… how bad could it be”?

And with that she burst into flames! We all again pushed back from the table in a panic!

The flames ate away at her mortal form revealing her innate demonic form I suppose.

She absolutely radiated power, ethereally heated and simply flowing throughout the room, exactly like an enraged alpha. Except no were that I knew of grew horns, fangs, eyes that literally blazed, and legs with the extra leg joint and cloven hooves of a classic demon. It was still recognizably
Illyana's face, except for the eyes and the elegant fangs, so like and yet utterly unlike those of the vampires in the room. Her hair was strand for strand thicker and wilder, floating in the currents of her power and framing the extravagant horns that erupted from her skull. A long devil tail flicked back and forth, very like a seriously pissed off cat. Instead of that black and yell spandex jumpsuit she had been wearing, now she was clad in some form of gladiator's armor, polished like silver and yet so very, very not silver. The scent of hot rage, pepper, gunpowder, wolf, and brimstone filled the air as she spoke, her voice like and yet utterly unlike the young woman she had appeared to be moments before.

“Or you could find out just how bad it really can get. So talk it over, but don’t blame me if you refuse to listen”.

The fire faded and her moral guise reasserted itself, she was back into her human form, but the air as still filled with the scent of brimstone. “There... now you’ve all seen it so no need to guess. I’ll... see you later I suppose. Call it 6pm at... heck the throne room”.

She then looked at me. “And Anita... I’m really not interested in your men, although Nathaniel is the nicest of the bunch. Chill on the gun as well, very... annoying. As you so taught me, threats that can’t be done are no threat at all”.

She then spoke to the room. “The sex was great, really great, but I hope we never ever do it again”.

And with that she vanished.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Well the prior three chapters took a great deal of effort to write. I hope that I’ve stayed true to the characters. Apologies for the sex talk in this chapter, but this is an Anita Blake story and there was that little… orgy they all had. I know… I know… but it is an Anita Blake story.

I don’t generally put Illyana in sexual situations as Illyana is very standoffish of such interactions in the published comics for what are likely complex character issues. My Morning Light story was written on a dare from a friend (which was my most popular story for a while, much to my chagrin), One Night Stand was written as a bit of Guardians of the Galaxy humor, and Cat’s Cradle just kind of happened, along with the chapter where Illyana recounts how she was seduced by Dani when Dani was having a bit of a problem being a Valkyrie.

So… in my mythos, Illyana is no virgin, but you can thank Belasco for that (child molesting bastard). That means apart from a few flings with Dani which were all instigated by Dani, Illyana has never had voluntary sex (as all my stories that have that take place after this story). Now the Ardeur is not voluntary, but nobody in that little… orgy was doing it voluntarily. I think Illyana would be… upset about that in ways that only Anita could really relate to (guy vs. gal kind of thing).

As always, great thanks to LordGrise.

Part 10a: Ok, now what

“Well shit”. Was my statement upon her departure, and it turns out everybody else’s simultaneous statement as well. Jean-Claude and Aster said “Oh merde” somehow French makes it sound extra distasteful.

We all looked at each other, rather a telepathic moment I thought.

Then Jean-Claude clarified it as he addressed all of us. “Was that her or was that of our own volition”? 
Ummm… Good point. I think the curse was mine, but… The others don’t curse nearly as much as I do. Don’t know about her.

Asher dismissed the question. “Of no importance. The emotions and thoughts blend and flow across such linkages. She is distressed and we too are distressed, in that joint distress we curse. Of more interest is her changing moods. That was not the crying woman we left but a few moments ago”. Well, more then a few moments but I got his drift.

“Shields up”. Murmured Micah. “When Anita flies she has tremendous fear of flying, she always lets us know to raise our shields as it were. Might Magik be… shielding now? Might she be trying to block spillover from us”? Good observation I thought and yea, totally terrified of flying.

“So when we all awoke she was overwhelmed by the unexpected flood of emotions on the wide open links”? Half asked and half stated Richard. “Did… anybody else feel… shame”? Everybody nodded their heads, although I noticed that Asher didn’t until he saw everybody else nodding. Hmmm, she did appear to get more and more emotional as everybody woke up.

“So now she may be handling it better”. Finished Richard. “Wonder if that’s because the rest of us are less… frantic about it”.

‘Oui Richard. That may likely be the situation”. Commented Jean-Claude as he stood. “I suggest we adjourn to more comfortable quarters”.

We then left the blue room, and the mound of treasure which I suppose now belonged to Micah and the Lycanthrope Coalition. Bet the ruby was worth more then the rest of the treasure combined. Jean-Claude gave instructions to Bobby Lee, he and Claudine were outside the room as guards, to have the treasure properly secured.

We ended up in a mid sized cozy living room adjacent to Jean-Claude’s bedroom. A fresh refreshment cart was brought by Claudia with pastries, sandwiches along with hot and cold drinks. The weres all tucked in while I just snagged a coke plus a bagel with cream cheese.

I sat next to Asher this time. My men tend to get grumpy if I don’t mingle with each of them. Apart
from Richard that is, as we are still very much not an item most of the time so he got to be grumpy.

“Now what”? Asked Richard with a pained expression. Yea, good question.

“We assemble the significant weres of the city for an informal meet and greet, apologies will be offered for the short notice”. Was Jean-Claude’s comment. “I have already informed the kitchen and the staff”. I assumed he had mentally communicated to one of his vampires. “No presents are to be expected by her or from her”. Formal vampire and were society just loves to get gifts, and some of the gifts they give you so don’t want to get.

That meant appetizers and drinks, no dinner but an open bar. Vampires can’t eat, but I’ve been told that the French one’s always love showing off their cellar and cooking staff, mine certainly does. Jean-Claude could sense what I ate and was always having me tasting various foods. Was rather unhappy about the fact that I almost never drank and he so wanted me to try lots of wines.

Jean-Claude got all formal. “Ulric I ask that you attend and bring those that you will from the Lukoi. Nimir-Raj I ask this of the Pard as well. I have already sent word to Raphael of the Rodere (wererats), Narcissus of the werehyenas, and Haven of the werelions. I leave to each of you to decide what kind of appearance and presence you wish to give. I shall fully present me and mine informally but dignified. At that time I shall announce the impending visit by the Council and greet our visitors”.

Greet not welcome, yea I noticed the careful word selection. Subtle. This also allowed each of the Were clans to snub her if they so wished by not attending or not showing up with an appropriate delegation. But that meant rejecting a request from Jean-Claude, who might then remember that rejection. Politics they name is aggravation.

Funny thing was I wasn’t sure if Magik would even care. Then I thought about it for a bit more. Yea, she’d… notice. Don’t think much actually got past her.

Micah tossed out a question to the group. “Any ideas as to why she doesn’t feel dominant? Is she no longer an Alpha? She tried to intimidate without actually expressing much power, Alpha don’t do that”.

Yea, it’s not how big you are, but how powerful you were, and how scary. Funny she failed on all three with us.
“It could be because… Anita’s emotions were hindering her”. Mused Jean-Claude. “It is hard to frightening to those one cares about, even if that concern has been transplanted from Anita. And now… that problem grown in size from her perspective”.

“Or she might not be as powerful now and is concealing it”. Mused Richard right back.

Asher rejected that idea. “That is hard to… believe. The council is not easily fooled”.

“Does anybody feel any different”? Was my question.

This prompted a general discussion. The conclusion of which was while everybody felt… well invigorated. Nobody felt… really different.

One of the keys to my feeding the Ardeur was to feed outside of my mystical links, meaning you can’t really feed by eating your own flesh. Guess that was massively satisfied last night. Damn I hadn’t felt that… full since I feed off of all the wereswains by feeding on their king (which he totally volunteered I have to point out).

I got a sudden distressful thought “How many people know that we all… did her”?

Jean-Claude did one of those Gallic sighs that he likes to do. “Ma Petite, they all know. The scent of the… copulation and blood was quite detectable to vampiric and were senses. As well as the consequences to the Pard and the Lukoi. The feedings by her upon Richard, you, and Micah were felt most… intensely. Same as my vampires felt the feeding upon me. Not to mention the reverse rush of our feeding upon her. And all vampires blood oathed to me awoke even though the sun shown”.

Jean-Claude continued. “But only Claudia saw the physical consequences upon her. And she has been sworn to silence by none other then Raphael her king; whom even himself she is to not to divulge any details. Raphael’s instructions are to… preserve her privacy in this”.

“Ok… so what… is the gossip”? Yea, there had to already be gossip. Weres and vampires are no different from anybody else.

Asher gave a brief recital of what was being bantered about. A collection of what apparently the others had apparently heard while Illyana had been crying and then showering.
“She enslaved us. We enslaved her. You took another bed partner and it got out of hand. She’s a nymphomaniac succubus and wore all of us out. She’s the new ruler of St. Louis. Jean-Claude has replaced you with her. You’ve replaced Jean-Claude with her. Jean-Claude is now her master. She only had sex with the weres in their beast form. She likes it rough. She’s frigid and takes no pleasure in sex. She loves bondage and tied us all up. She summoned a horde of demons and we all screwed our brains out with them. We’ve sold our souls. She’s our love slave. All weres are now her slaves… The list goes on and on… As is so often, gossip and rumor spread much faster then fact”.

Great… not like my reputation was that good anyhow. Um… kind of hope nobody mentions any of those things to her.

We got back to the topic at hand. Both Jean-Claude and Asher felt that the significant changes were predominately on her side, but that there had to be spillover from her to us.

“Links work in both directions”. Was Damian’s comment. “Perhaps we should attempt a brief contact”.

Richard opined. “Might not be a good idea for us guys. It makes more sense for Anita to try as she is a she after all”. Hmmm, not a bad idea.

I gave a nod and then concentrated… and… there. An impression of a hot bubble bath, the scent of vanilla, and an irritated scowl.

(What? Can’t I get even a moment of peace?). And then the link slammed shut.

“A bubble bath”? Was Richard’s disbelieving statement as I described my impressions and her thoughts.

“Women like bubble baths”. Was my sudden defense. Heck I like bubble baths when I want to unwind or… Hmmm, I thought upon Micah spillover statement. Couldn’t help but wonder if she had been a bubble bath person before.

“Just doesn’t sound… demon’ish”. Commented Nathaniel.
I know, right? So much isn’t making sense in that regards.

“*I think… we need to ignore whatever we think we know about demons in her regards*”. Was Damian contribution.

Nathaniel went off on a tangent. “*Maybe she isn’t one but thinks she is*”.

“*Nonsense*”. Spoke Richard with his usual tone if disregard when speaking to Nathaniel. “*We all felt her before, well most of us, you weren’t there when she first showed up or anytime at all on her last visit here*”.

Nathaniel mostly lets such things slide, at least in public. He’s become more… sharing as to his wants and needs lately, but that was with me and the Pard, never with others. But this time he responded with a tone of sudden anger.

“*You can at least try to be polite Richard*”.

Richard growled a response back. “*Don’t correct me little cat*”.

Nathaniel actually hissed back at Richard and I felt his power rise. Now Nathaniel is a passive Beta. Never a pack dominant in the remotest sense. And never stands up to an Alpha. And yet he was suddenly getting in Richard’s face in response to Richard’s normal dismissive behavior towards him.

And Nathaniel’s power felt… stronger… hotter… and especially vicious. Which prompted Richard’s power to rise as well in response to the challenge.

Richard is one of the strongest weres around. And power just erupted out of him. It was hot and strong and angry. It filled the room and made it hard to breath as it pushed upon us so strongly.

Which prompted Micah’s and my power to rise as well. I felt sudden panic as everybody shifted their positions in anticipation of a fight.

**SHIT!** The last time there was a major brew-up like this, Micah was almost killed, so was Richard
and Jean-Claude! But this was over nothing! Massive sudden overreaction by both Richard and Nathaniel!

But before anything could happen there was a flash of light and an even larger power slammed into us all. We all froze as if we all had been thrashing hoses and somebody had abruptly turned off the water.

A silver armored Illyana was standing next to the refreshment cart. She was holding that burning sword of hers with both hands and she had a look of panic and rage on her face as she frantically gazed around the room looking for something. Just as Claudine and Bobby Lee also burst into the room with guns drawn in response to the bursts of power that had come from us.

And I heard screams again! But this time the shrieks of a dragon roaring out challenge in defense of territory.

Claudine and Bobby Lee were both smashed into the floor by the gale of power from her while we were all left standing. So much for the theory that she might be reduced. If anything her emanations of power were even stronger now. But now her power was not only hot and peppery, it also felt of wolf and leopard, the stillness of vampire, and the coldness of death.

Apparently she was not pleased as to what she found as her expression quickly morphed from panic to irritation. Then sword vanished and with it her armor; and the crushing weight of her power lifted.

Now we were confronted by an Illyana clothed only in bubbles and sarcasm.

“Great… does somebody need a time out? Damn it! That costs me to do in this reality! Could you please let me know next time you want to kill each other so I can just ignore it! SHIT, I thought all of you were being attacked! But instead I find you all squabbling over something. I told you to take it easy until we have a chance to explore what you’ve… become. And here I thought that I suddenly got a chance to kill something that was stupid enough to attack those I…”.

She didn’t finish the sentence, just scowled even harder at us. “… Thought I had a chance to work out a few aggressions, but no… just the usual soap opera”!

She glared at us for a few more seconds and I swear she was counting to ten, but then she glanced down at the refreshment cart. She proceeded to snag a few chocolate chip cookies and a coke.
“You folks would fit right in on my world. Everybody always fighting at the drop of a hat over stupid shit. Can you all just… chill for a few hours? Hell try apologizing for once”.

She muttered something in Russian. “Тупой ослов, еще более мыльной оперы”. And with another flash of light she was gone. Leaving just a watery puddle of bubbles and two very shocked guards.

We all looked at each other and… everybody stayed calm. Shocked but calm. Claudine and Bobby Lee got up and departed the room while shaking their heads and muttering something.

Richard then actually growled an apology. “Sorry… Nathaniel, I… shouldn’t have… dismissed you like that”.

This was private so an Alpha apologizing to another were group Beta had no stigma, plus… Shit… I guess that was when it kind of hit me, and it turns out all of us, that we were now all members of another group as well.

But was it a new group or her group?

“Accepted and… apologies back”.

Wow, I don’t know who just impressed me more. And definite massive Alpha behavior from her just then.

We settled back down.

“She has gained from us all”. Jean-Claude observed. “More then just… emotions. Power as well. One wonders what else has been changed”.

Damian pointed out an issue before I had a chance to. “Why did you guys apologize all of a sudden? One moment you’re about to have a full on Alpha vs. … crap it felt like Alpha vs. Alpha for a second there between Richard and Nathaniel and the next moment your both manning up and apologizing”. 
Both Richard and Nathaniel looked at each other, opened their mouths, and then said nothing as they just sat there looking puzzled.

I pointed out the obvious. “She told us... well them to apologize”.

Yea, she gave an order and they obeyed. Not good.

“So we’re her... slaves? Bound to her will”? Sighed Damian.

I thought about what has happened in the room when I first woke up, how… Illyana kept doing what I wanted with the weapons. I recounted that story to the guys. And what she had said.

“Might be... a bit of both” was what she said.

Ok, we all agreed that was interesting. And that we needed to... explore that the next time we met with her.

Asher sarcastically commented. “So, we now have a guardian... demon? And apparently a group therapy facilitator as well. How... undelightful”.

Jean-Claude opined. “I think our little cat has hit upon a very interesting point. She is... far from demonic in all that she does. Demon we have felt but... Ma Petite. Remember when the Mother of All Darkness bound you from being able to see or remember the charm you wear against her influence”?

“Yea... It was a blind spot. I couldn’t see it even when it was in front of me”.

Jean-Claude continued. “It is not unreasonable to surmise that she is damaged based upon both her brief tale and the talk that Anita recounted to me that the two had as Anita’s house burned. It could be that more has been done to her then she herself knows or comprehends”.

“Meaning she might not be as demonic as she thinks she is”? 
“It is possible. The evidence is… fragmentary at best. This could just be how demons are in her world”.

Well… something to think about. Ok… tonight was going to be interesting was my thought as I got up to get a drink. While I was doing this Richard made an observation.

“It just occurred to me, she didn’t ask any questions of us”.

I got a mug from the refreshment cart, poured in some hot water and made a drink for myself. I then turned to continue the conversation while I waited for my drink to finish brewing.

Odd, everybody was looking at me funny.

"What”? Was my question.

Jean-Claude was the first to answer. "Ma Petite, you do not feel different"?

"No. Why do you think otherwise”?

I lifted the mug and took a sip. Ahhh, just the way I like it. Hot and black.

Nathaniel began "Then why… Ummm… are you...". He didn't finish.

"Why am I what”? I said as I took another sip.

Asher finished it. "Drinking tea".

I looked down. There was a tea bag in my mug.

Russian black tea. I was drinking tea and not coffee.
Shards...

Part 10b: Discussions and recollections

I hurriedly got another cup and filled it with coffee from the decanter. This week it was a Hawaiian Kona and Blue Mountain blend, mild and delicate but tasty. Jean-Claude had a different coffee blend served each week as coffee and I were such good friends.

It tasted… off. The tea had been wonderful but the coffee was… kind of… well… yucky. I had Micah taste it and he said it was fine but… I love coffee! I even drink cop coffee which is usually horrible beyond belief. I’ve never really had… yucky coffee before.

I stared at the cup like it was a friend who had betrayed me while the others spoke.

Jean-Claude first gave a little lecture.

“They are Triumvirates, the power bounding of three, are rare, duumvirate, the power bounding of two, are more prevalent but also highly uncommon. In vampire situations there is always a master of the bounding and the subordinates of the bounding. Similar one supposes to a witch and a familiar. There is also sharing of abilities and attributes. For example Anita’s ability to meet the gaze of other vampires and not be captured or dazzled by them. The bounding amplifies power, but comes at a cost as the death of one can mean the death of all in the bounding. To date the Triumvirate I have with Richard and Anita is the most complicated as Anita subsequently formed a second Triumvirate, with her as the center, with Nathaniel and Damian. Anita is also bound to Micah as his leopard queen and is Richards Lupa until he selects another”.

Asher waved his hands about in Gallic annoyance I suppose. “Yes yes Jean-Claude, we know it quite well, what is your point”. Which earned him a scowl from Jean-Claude.

Jean-Claude got to the point I suppose. “Anita had four bindings, the most of us all, not counting the were associations. Now she has a fifth. Illyana has seven direct bindings if she is in truth bound to us all which should not be possible. Three vampire, three were, and a necromancer. Our emotions are shaping her, have apparently reshaped her. But her emotions and essence are reshaping us as well. You felt her power just now. Everybody please comment upon what you noticed the most as to its… taste one supposes”.
We looked at each other, then:

Damian: “Cold... death was in it and whispering evil things to me”.

Nathaniel: “Territorial, scent of the Pard. Angry Alpha”.

Richard: “Hot, raging, the joyful anticipation of the tearing of warm flesh and blood”.

Asher: “Calculating, varied, felt like the council. Silent as the night”.

Micah: “Rage, searching for a threat to annihilate”.

Me: “Panic, the scream of an outraged dragon protecting its own”.

Jean-Claude: “The rage of love under threat”.

Ok... we all got different impressions of the power.

Hmmm, seven links. I suddenly remembered one of my comparative religion and magic classes in collage. Seven pointed star was one of the... Gnostic symbols of heaven. Interesting... tidbit. Needed to think upon that.

I tossed out an idea. “She’s like me, multi incarnations I suppose. I’m human, yet I have the lycanthrope virus but I do not shift. She was demon, then dragon got added to the mix, and now... kind of human. But that means that we have likely received from her. So... what defines her”? Meaning what she was had to be reflected in what we had received. Rather suspected the answer but wanted the others to chime in.

We all tossed out a few words, all of which were good, which meant they were actually rather bad things.

“Rage”.

“Abuse”.

“Desolation”.

“Madness”.

“Power”.

“Longing”.

“Calculating”.
“Cunning”.
“Demon”.

Crap, no wonder she found a way to escape the rape of fang and claw by manifesting as dragon. I suppose those things in part define what a dragon was, at least according to J. R. R. Tolkien.

Jean-Claude finished pointing it out. “We likely have some of her rage or the emotional spill over of rage from her. If we are upset we must be… careful. That is likely why the tiff between Richard and Nathaniel occurred just now. But does not explain why Nathaniel suddenly has more… power”.

Yea… also explains why I had suddenly got so upset when she wanted some private time with everybody to explore…

I injected. “There are likely physical changes for the weres. That’s what she was implying about being a monster”.

“Anita, she said it about everybody…”. Richard corrected.

Gulp. Yea… she did. So not looking forward to tonight.

Decided to change the subject. Time to talk about what had happened.

About the sex.

I asked a loaded question. “Does anybody remember any additional details about what happened? I had a recollection… well I was on top of her and we were… eating each other out while Richard… went to town on me from behind”. Ok, there. I shared.

Several of the guys still said no but Richard fessed up that he had started to remember some things and Asher said he recalled some details as well.
Richard spoke while meeting everybody’s eyes. “It’s still just bits and pieces. I remember her… riding me while… she had a vampire sucking blood from each of her wrists. They were recharging I guess as vampires need fresh blood after they… um cum. She’s… were grade resilient I suppose as I’m pretty sure I’d have crushed her pelvis otherwise. Anita was next to us doing two others but I don’t recall who. Then there was this really big… orgasm and that’s when I think was one of the times she feed upon all the wolves through me. That and… snippets. It was like the Ardeur was plugged into a ten thousand volt cable or something. The only time anybody slowed down was when the vampires were recharging on blood from her. Just that… and the taste of her blood as well as I bit her breast and… and… drank as well”.

Ok, that painted an image. And I guess the ten thousand volt cable was her.

Jean-Claude asked question. “Did the… did you sense the feeding upon the wolves when you bit her breast”?

“Yea”.

“That was likely the moment that your link was forged”.

Ok, that would likely explain the weres and the vampires, but I didn’t… didn’t… Then I got another flashback of me again on top of her, biting her stomach and sucking on the blood and then flashing into a huge… Ok, real lycanthrope moment there as weres really do love flesh and blood, think my beasts were really in charge at that point.

Asher added his two cents. “Jean-Claude and I were both taking her, one at either end, I was at her head and... ”. Great, the conversation had degraded into group sexual positions. That one’s called the split roast by the way, one of my… well I like it when I’m with multiple partners.

Asher continued. “We each bit her neck and… I think that was the moment of binding for us”.

Yikes. Orgy sex talk. And if that group orgy was her first time… shit no wonder she cried.

Damian posed a question. “I wonder if she can feed through us like Anita and Richard are able to feed Jean-Claude or Nathaniel and I can feed Anita”.

Good question. If the dominant of a link does not feed then they start to draw energy from the
subordinate links. I’d almost killed Nathaniel by not feeding the Ardeur. Once I gained enough control over it to avoid it turning me into a bitch in heat every twelve hours or so I had thought that meant I didn’t need to feed. Turns out control does not mean not feeding, it just means I get more control over when and who I feed upon.

Jean-Claude answered. “Time will tell, we must all be observant to any unusual or intense hungers”.

Something was bugging me, then I got it. Asher’s bite! “Asher, your bite is orgasmic, and your power can cause flashback orgasms if the person thinks upon what you did to them”.

Asher replied. “And beguiling, the recipient can become obsessed with me. She did not look or act obsessed”.

“But she might flashback”!

I tried to speak to her on the link again. (Illyana, Asher’s bite is orgasmic and can cause flashback orgasms if you try to think about the sex you’ve had with him).

I received the feeling of irritation and some dismay, and the impression of a very wet bathroom floor. (That would been good to know about three… well two orgasms ago. Back when the water was in the tub. Figured it out after the second one).

(Second? Then why the…)? Impression of guilty pleasure from her.

Ok, I think she deliberately caused the third one. I also got the impression she was happy that the bathroom had a drain on the floor. (Anita… Later on I need to talk privately talk to you about… shards… female things). And then the link shut again.

I recounted what I had learned (apart from the female things conversation request. Hey you don’t share some things with guys). And of course Asher just had to end up with one of his irritating smug expressions, gads men are just men sometimes.

Nathaniel then said he now recalled some details so of course the orgy 101 talk just had to continue. “She was riding Micah and begging for it to stop, that she couldn’t stand the pleasure. Then you… grabbed her… breasts from behind and she screamed like the damned as I guess your
Ardeur ramped her up even more. I then… stopped her from screaming, at least very loudly while we all…”. He didn’t finish.

Yea, I can guess what he shoved in her mouth to shut her up, and with that I remembered a bit more.

She was riding Micah and begging for him to stop. That it was too big, that it wouldn’t fit all the way. That she didn’t want to do this any more, all the while she wasn’t stopping her up and down thrusting and moaning. I came up from behind and cupped her breasts and nibbled on her neck. She begged me to stop, for it to stop. That she’d do anything for me if I would just stop this. That it was driving her mad. But the Ardeur had me, had us all, and we wasn’t… rational.

I felt the Ardeur rise even higher and flow yet again from me into her causing her to tremble and scream, then I held on to her shoulders and slowly pushed her down and over so Micah could lick and suck upon her breasts while he held her ass in his hands and pulled her down as well. She screamed in yet another orgasm as we slowly made her stretch and stretch and take the final remaining inches of Micah. Screamed like the damned as I then feed the Ardeur upon her, fed like she was an inexhaustible supply of energy, screamed until Nathaniel muffled her cries. And then we all screamed was well she then feed upon us and the Pard.

Ummm… wow… we really seemed to be the sexual aggressors in all the recollections. Shit… we… really topped her. Weird, you’d have thought that she’d have topped us.

Nathaniel continued. “That’s when I guess she fed upon the Pard and I think you also feed upon her at the same time. It was… spectacular. I think that’s when the couch broke”.

Great. Sexual super stars, that’s us. Sounds like we took the gold in all categories and completely fucked her brains out while doing the same to ourselves.

Suddenly got another recollection flash. This time I was on the bottom and she was on top of the 69 while Micah was behind her and Richard was at her head. And all three vampires were bleeding her while Nathaniel was caressing her. Oh boy. Seven at once.

Shit not only did we all do her, but at last one time we all did her at the same time. Umm… wow yet again. Rather amazed she’s not a sex slave… Um… Shit maybe she is? Oh boy… No, can’t be because she was rather emphatic she hoped to never screw us again. But… wow… we topped a demon big time.
And that’s when I truly knew in my heart that the links were the only thing keeping her from killing us. Whoever cast that enchantment are so dead if she ever finds out who they are, assuming of course that me and mine don’t kill them first.

Asher of all people then changed the subject, thankfully I might add. “The Council will be quite upset at this turn of events”.

Jean-Claude gave another of those shrugs of his. “Oui, She controls Egypt and now the council will fear that she is branching out to control the United States as well. They will know of some of last night’s events upon their awakening as Primo woke while the sun yet shown and I suspect his creator will sense his awareness upon her awakening”.

I gave my opinion while I got up to get a soda as I given up on trying to drink the coffee. “Yea, Primo would tell all that he knew to his creator if she put him to the question”. The vampire known as the Dragon had been his creator.

Jean-Claude partially disagreed. “No Ma Petite… he may wish to but he is truly blood oathed now. He has lost volition over that. Bartolome and Valentina however did not awaken as they are not blood oathed to me, but they certainly sensed our… activities and will likely inform Belle Morte upon their awakening if questioned by her. They are still hers, not ours”.

CHARACTER INTERLUDE

Primo

A powerful vampire with great brute strength, who formerly looked to the Dragon as his mistress. He was supposedly created by her in ancient Roman times. He works at Guilty Pleasures as security and a bouncer. He’s been on my shit list for quite awhile, ever since Jean-Claude and I found out that he repeatedly let people in who are not supposed to be then, which resulted in fights until Jean-Claude and I intervened. At the time he was almost powerful enough to beat Jean-Claude. Almost, in the end I was able to blood oath him. He’d wanted to be master of the city, but was not powerful enough then and is now simply outclassed by Jean-Claude. He’s to be able to feed off violence, like Jean-Claude can feed on sex; which in part was why he liked to cause fights.

He also has the ability to cause harm from a distance. He can rapidly heal fatal wounds by drinking the blood of a preternatural creature. Bad bad dude, one of our grunts as it were for any fighting, but not trusted very much.
Bartolome

Formerly heir to a huge fortune, Bartolome is of Belle Morte's bloodline and a child vampire around the age of 12 or 13, but I suppose he was big for his age. Not one of our vampires but currently resides here because he feels that he owes a debt to Gregory (wereleopard) and Stephen (werewolf); brothers by the way. He and Valentina had caused the two massive terror and the two of them felt guilty about it as the terror had been about Gregory’s and Stephen’s child molesting father, turns out child vampires really hate child molesters. Bartolome has been made a vampire because he had received a mortal wound, otherwise Bella Morte would have preferred that he be made a vampire at his late teens or early twenties.

For the most part, he is rather well-adjusted given the propensity of young vampires to go insane over time, I think it’s because he was partially post puberty. He speaks fluent Spanish and English. Rather likes to seduce women, don’t be fooled by his boyish looks.

Valentina

Child vampire brought over by a vampire pedophile. Very very creepy woman and yes I mean woman. Old vampire trapped in the body of a child. Very pre pubescent, heck I think she was six years old when she was transformed. She’s an expert torturer and causing pain is her substitute for sex because she is a small child.

Jean-Claude has described her as disturbed (she is), and she’s fond of trying to break strangers. However, she’s not without a sense of honor and she despises child molesters. She choose to stay here, with Bartolome, to make amends for the damage they did to Stephen and Gregory (which they still have not found a way to make amends, much to their annoyance). Nicknamed Petite Morte - Little Death. I think she also stayed to get as far away from of Marmee Noir (Mommy Dearest) as she could. She sometimes plays the child to strangers, but she is no child.

Supposedly all child vampires go mad, she’s somewhat unique in that she might be the oldest surviving child vampire.

END CHARACTER INTERLUDE

Jean-Claude grimaced. “Yes, most upset. It will be good that she is there for the conversation. Likely even more dismayed once she declares Harm sur vous, la guerre sur moi”.
Asher responded. “There are many precedents. Dragon has her declared favorites, as well as Bella Morte”.

Jean-Claude agreed, but I suppose disagreed as well. “Yes, and they are frowned upon. The Council will want something in return for agreeing to such forbearance”.

“Forbearance? What does that mean”? Asked Richard.

“We will be hers to punish if the Council mandates such a thing. Harm sur vous, la guerre sur moi means other Council members do not… play with us without her permission. But that also means she must either personally enforce the Council decisions or agree with any action taken if she allows others to enforce”.

“So if the Council ordered our deaths or punishments””? Prompted Micah.

“She’d be the one to do it or it would be war with her”.

Hmm, don’t think that treasure was of much interest to the Council, but I’m rather sure they had a wish list of things that Illyana could likely provide.

Ok, whole bunch of things to think about. I raised a topic that I’d been mulling over.

“Do you guys think I should consult with Shaman, or the witches, or even that weird Dr. Strange guy”? 

Glances around the room by everybody. Then Jean-Claude answered. “I think you should… delay any such discussions until you converse with Illyana about it. She… entities of such… might do not tend to like others knowing their business”.

“The witches did try to snuff her”. Injected Asher. “Conversations with them might lead them to actions that would be… unfortunate for us all”.

Yea, good point. I commented. “And Shaman had also urged those snuffing actions when I spoke to him so… likely again the chance of him taking actions that we might not agree with”.
And Asher just had to poke. “What was it that Dr. Strange called you when Shaman and he were berating you next to your burnt out house”?

“Ignorant, selfish, uninformed, possessing of more power then common sense, maker of poor living arrangement choices, putting the world at risk, and an utter fool”. Was my answer. Well, that was the polite version of what they had said.

I distinctly remember being called a fang banging ignorant slut at one point by Dr. Strange. He’d really been upset at the little oath of mine that had granted her unlimited access to our world. I’d slapped him for that and we’d both exchanged a few additional choice words. Ok, nix the idea of involving them for the moment.

“And Edward?” was my response.

“Target rich opportunity if things go bad”. Was Damian’s reply. “He does love a challenge”.

Jean-Claude nodded in agreement but again urged caution. “Again I would suggest that you first speak with her about it. He did… light her up after all”.

“Um…. yea. Better make sure that she’d not holding a grudge about that. Wouldn’t want to… well get him killed”.

“That would be very rude”. Replied Richard with a smile.

Yea, but… Edward would so love this. Loved the challenge, he was Mr. Death after all. Decided that I’d check with her first. Hmm, be even better if I could arrange for him to show as Ted Forrester (his US Marshal guise) under some pretense.

Micah and Richard exchanged glances, then Micah spoke. “I think… she smells of the Pard to me. I think Anita and I… well the Pard should correctly welcome a new member”.

Richard replied. “As the Lukoi must also welcome its new pack member. I think… Anita and I did the same to her as you and Anita”.
I suddenly got another memory recollection memory and... oh-boy... yea... I guess we kind of did. Wow...

“Full moon in three nights”. Replied Micah. “The Lukoi is large so... assuming Anita agrees, she and I will formally introduce her to the Part in two nights and you and Anita formally introduce her on the third night, the night of the full moon”.

Ok, that was an olive branch. The full moon was more... honorable, most prestigious. I think the offer surprised Richard.

Richard agreed.

We discussed a few more things and then us mortals went and got a few hours shut eye before the big night.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Time for the rest of the monsters to meet the new folks in town. Rather a briefing kind of chapter, but there are many players in the Anita’verse so rather needed for those who don’t read the books. For those who want more info on Anita Blake I recommend a Wikipedia search using Anita Blake.

Part 11: Greet and Meat (part a)

Click clack went the sound of Illyana’s foot falls. She was slowly walking up to the dalais where Jean-Claude and I stood and her shoes were rather noisy in the now quiet room. With us were the rest of the senior vampires of Jean-Claude’s Kiss and scattered about the room were the various significant were groups of St. Louis.

Everybody in the room had fallen silent as they stared at her.

She was clothed in a blouse that has silver armored shoulders with spikes. Little silver skulls were woven into her blond hair and she had small, almost dainty horns upon her head with little silver tips. Long formal white gloves on as well, which went way past the elbow and almost half way to her shoulders. Now add red leather high heel boots that stretched up to her knees, and above that a white loin cloth that looked rather skimpy.

Click clack went her foot steps, like some slowly ticking clock or time bomb.

Hmm, not demon’ish enough for you? Well, there was her pupil less yellow glowing eyes, the long thin red devil tail that flicked about behind her and pervasive smell of burning gunpowder perfume that now accompanied her. That and the vampire grade incisors she was sporting.

Girl knew how to make an entrance, I’ll give her that.

Part 11b: What went on before
We were all in the big cave that Jean-Claude likes to hold the big parties in. Sometimes he had his throne there, sometimes not. This was one of those not time. This cleverly solved the issue of who would rise for whom as there was no place to sit. Just a nice informal gathering where everybody was already standing.

I tend to hate formal events. Even worse when it’s a formal vampire event. Everybody always jockeying for position as it were. Who was the most powerful? How scary were they? Who out ranked who on the social scale (With Vampires and Weres that meant who offered their wrist or throat to who).

This one was no different. Everybody was tense, you could feel it in the air. A Big Bad was showing up and that always was of concern. Especially when the Big Bad had wiped the floor with everybody the last time she was here. And that little detail of the Big Bad bringing others in as well.

I had a glass of Coke and some mushroom appetizer things with cheese and breadcrumbs. Tasty but I didn’t really feel like eating. When I got up after my nap the coffee still tasted… off. Really off. Irritating, I want to shoot somebody, off. So it was Coke for the caffeine I suppose.

The folks were milling around, but mostly keeping to their own types. We had some wererat and werewolf guards milling about as well; not to mention the two bartenders and the hors d'oeuvres table minder to make sure we don’t run out of munchies (weres tend to be serious eaters at these things as their metabolism runs hot and fast).

So… who was here who wasn’t a guard?

CHARACTER INTERLUDE

WERELIONS:

Led by a man named Haven. Werelions were not a large group in St. Louis, but powerful because… well lions I guess. King of the beasts and all that. The Pride was larger then the wereleopards Pard though. Haven had brought in few senior members and a few additional low ranking ones, both male and female.
They were all dressed to kill, not ultra formal, but sharp, like they were about to go on a major
night on the town at all the best restaurants and clubs. They had no knowledge of her and apparently
went the dress to impress route.

The significant lions were:

**Haven (the Rex, meaning king, of the local werelions, very Male)**

He’s pale, with short, spiky blue hair, dyed so that many hues of blue are present, all mixed
together, just like real hair. His eyes are also a pale blue. I tend to call him Cookie (in reference to
Cookie Monster) as he has tattoos of Bert and Ernie from Sesame Street, and he has some more
(but you need to be naked to see some of them, yea… I’ve seen them, up close and personal).

Haven was first brought by Augustine (Vampire Master of Chicago) as a pomme de sang candidate
for me (pomme de sang are folks you routinely feed upon and it is considered a high honor in
vampire society). He tried to try to take over the local pride and failed. I’d sent him back to
Chicago because I was attempting to preserve the local pride as a favor. However, that ended when
the local werelions refuse to help us when we were attacked, unlike the other members of the
Lycanthrope Coalition. Haven returned upon the invitation of Asher as we were all incapacitated
due to almost dying. Returned with his crew as it were. As a result, he took over the local pride as
the former Rex, his wife, and his brother fled (At least I think they fled, part of me thinks they
were killed, not sure and I don’t want to know).

He… claims that he is in love with me as he finds himself wanting to be better than he is in order
to not disappoint me. Words like that really impress a girl. However, yea there is a however, Haven
has issues with masculine dominance which is one of the reasons I keep my distance from him. He
also had massive problems with sharing, sharing meaning me. Just can’t… stand having other men
in bed with me and… well that’s a deal breaker with me at this stage of my life.

**Nicky (my bride… ick, Male)**

Nicky is a one-eyed werelion who had been sent to kill me. To make a long story short, he ended
up feeding the ardeur and being completely owned by it, hence becoming my "Bride" as it were
(As in brides of dracula). It was self defense but I really feel bad about that. Complete slave to my
will and completely in love with me. He sometimes sleeps over and the rest of the time he spends
at the Circus of the Damned.

He was standing with me and Jean-Claude and not the werelions. He avoids the Pride because
Haven would kill him as competition.
Rather big weight lifting kind of dude.

**Pierce (Male)**

Werelion brought with Augustine from Chicago as a pomme de sang candidate for me, part of Haven’s crew as it were. A brunette, with hair that looks like it might curl, but it's cut too short to have a chance. The swell of his shoulders shows that he lifts weights as more than a casual hobby.

**Kelly Reeder (Female)**

A werelion new to the St. Louis pride, recruited by Augustine and Haven. She previously belonged to a pride run by women, and believes that a pride should be like family. She’s short, slender, muscular, and blond. I’ve been told she’s a fighter who uses both physical attacks and weapons. Don’t think she and Haven see eye to eye on a bunch of things as Haven runs the pride more like a gang then a family.

**WERERATS (The Rodere):**

The wererats are the second largest were group in St. Louis, although there is some competition with the werehyenas for that title. Very strong and dangerous as the wererates have a great many ex soldiers and mercenaries in their ranks. You really don’t want a war with these folks as they understand very well what killing is all about. Raphael, the rat king, had brought a few Alphas and a few minor rats. There is a significant Hispanic presence in the wererats.

There were equally dressed to kill, Sunday best as it were. Claudia was currently standing with her king rather then being a body guard.

The other big rats (ha ha) were:

**Raphael (The rat king, Male and very yummy)**

Strongly Mexican, and is oh so tall, dark and handsome. Has a stern face and sensual lips (hey I
notice those kind of things, I... like men... a lot). He has a crown branded into his forearm to mark him as Rat King and his clan is called the Dark Crown Clan. He and Nikolaos (former vampire Master of the city, over a thousand years old, and massive bitch of a vampire), had been in conflict over control of the city's rats and wererats until I killed her. I also saved his life so he offers me bodyguards or any other help when I need it.

Rafael also has treaties with Richard and Jean-Claude. He has an ex-wife who moved with his child to another state to get away from him because of what he is. He has occasional visitation rights but those visits do not go well.

He’s one of my friends and I really value that. He offered himself up as one of my pomme de sangs in order to have a better mystic connection with Anita and Jean-Claude and therefore be more protected against outside forces. And it doesn’t hurt that sex with me tends to make weres and vampires more powerful as they seem to sometimes cross a power threshold when the Ardeur gets involved.

Shit, and now demons I guess... well... one demon assuming she’s actually a demon.

Crap. Really don’t like thinking about that.

Fredo (Male)

Slender, not that tall, and holed down to lanky muscle like the slender blades he favors. Six feet, with black hair and dark eyes. He works security at the Circus of the Damned. Although he carries a gun, his favorite weapons are knives. Teaches a short-blade class to me and all the bodyguards at the Circus, really good with swords and knives.

Dino (Male)

Dino is a dark Mexican in pigmentation. He is six feet tall and almost as wide as he is tall. He runs like a lumbering elephant but he fights so well that I never want to go against him for real. He also works security at the Circus.

WEREWOLVES The Lukoi)
The largest were group in St. Louis, ruled by Richard. He’d tried the democracy thing and learned the hard way that weres and vampires are hierarchical by nature. I believe in democracy, and I believe in a powerful person telling the monsters what to do; yea I know, bit of a conflict there. But I sleep better at night knowing that bad little vampires and weres have more then just the judicial system to worry about.

They were all dressed in casual jeans and shirts. Casual but all very very clean and neatly pressed. New in fact. Formal casual I suppose. Which made a kind of sense. She was supposedly now one of the pack as it were. And I suppose a statement to other were groups that they were comfortable with her (they weren’t but no need to explain that little nuance to them).

Richard you’ve already met, the other main wolves were:

**Jamil (Male)**

Skoll, or first enforcer of the St. Louis pack. Jamil is just shy of six feet, with rich brown skin and waist-length hair woven into corn rows. He is an alpha werewolf with enough power to keep Richard out when Richard lets his power wash over the pack. Jamil is very loyal to Richard. He and I originally had a good relationship, but when I was forced to use power to feed on him he feared me enough that I’m convinced I’ve lost a friend.

**Jason Schuyler (Male)**

Stripper at Guilty Pleasures, best friend to Nathaniel, good friend to me and occasional lover and/or fuck buddy, also Jean-Claude's pomme de sang. He's in his early 20's. He's a Gemini, has blonde baby-fine hair and sky blue eyes. Jason is also my height and loves to tease me or flaunt his being a stripper and/or sexuality. He has an intense fear of rotting vampires or anything similar due to being rotted on by two vampires in a sexual context (Icky on a level that defies understanding).

He’d recently cut his hair short businessman short. He has a surprisingly quick and discerning mind. As Jean Claude states so eloquently, Jason is the only person that can give me hard truths and not make me angry. He recently become my wolf to call.

**Shang-Da (Male)**

Hati, or second enforcer of the St. Louis pack. He is a tall man of Chinese descent and an unnervingly intense gaze. He prefers elegant clothes (with polished wingtip shoes) for everyday
wear. Has a strong dislike for me due to the fact that I hurt Richard in the only way Shang-Da couldn't protect him from by being repeatedly unfaithful and a bad Lupa.

**Sylvie Barker (Female)**

Richard's Geri, or second-in-command and a good friend. She’s a lesbian, has short curly brown hair and is about five foot six inches, and dates another female werewolf by the name of Gwen. Sylvie is an alpha were and one of the few others, besides Richard, that can partially shapeshift. She also has a collection of bones that came from her enemies. She occasionally takes out the collection and runs her hands over the bones to comfort herself.

**WEREHYENAS**

There was only one werehyena present who was not one of the guards. Just one. And that werehyena was not Narcissus, it was one of his subordinates by the name of Bacchus. Narcissus had claimed other pressing engagement but it was obvious he was making a statement.

The werehyenas once only had fifty members in St. Louis, but had grown their pack to over four hundred now. Originally it was male homosexuals only, the pack had a great many workout buffs and bouncers (the term muscle queens described them quite well), but after the pack had been taken over by a very bad man by the name of Chimera, they had learned the difference between fighters and warriors, between pressing weights and hand to hand combat. Between being strong and being dangerous.

Learned the hard way.

I’d have bet money on the wererats any day of the week, but since then the werehyenas had recruited more combat trained members, and had branched out to both female members and heterosexual males, which was why the females had been allowed in as the hetro males wouldn’t have show otherwise. Keep in mind that hyenas are a matricidal pack and weres tend to follow their animal natures on pack organization so Narcissus works real hard to keep any strong female weres away.

I was the one that killed Chimera so they owed me big time for freeing them.
Owner of the club, Narcissus in Chains (a BDSM club), and leader of the city's werehyena population. An effeminate hermaphrodite, Narcissus is into both sides of BDSM and not the fun, let’s have a safe word, kind of BDSM. Really likes hurting folks and being hurt. He had… enjoyed Jean-Claude back when Jean-Claude was not the master of the city when the prior master of the city had given Jean-Claude to Narcissus to… play with. Jean-Claude… really fears him, likely a leftover fear, but still a fear.

Really powerful were and not a person I like or wish to spend any length of time with.

Bacchus (Male)

Big, dark, curly hair and eyes of a strange shade of gold. And wearing a full dominatrix leather and spandex outfit. So did not like the statement being made. Bet Narcissus had heard lots of rumors about last night and was trying to make some kind of play at something.

Bet if he’d known about her crying he wouldn’t be playing this card. Well, you only get one chance at a first impression.

WERELeopards (the Pard)

The smallest of the powerful were group in St. Louis, ruled by Micah and I. They punched way above their weight class because Micah ran the Lycanthero Coalition very fairly, in that it was for all weres and… well me. I was the biggest bad in the town. The Executioner of all bad little weres and vampires. Both via the judicial system and sometimes… not. Your only as good as your threat and mine is very very good.

Nobody played with my cats without my say so, or there was hell to pay; and I’d collected more then a few times.

Just like the wolves they were all dressed in clean casual jeans and shirts. Again another statement of familiarity and pack as it were. Tomorrow night with the Pard was likely going to be… well heck no idea at this point. Likely something informal at my house. Hmm, need to have Nathaniel pick up a cake or something from Costco.
There were only a few present. You’ve met Micah (leopard King) and Nathaniel (yea they were both here), in addition to them there was just Merle and Vivian.

**Merle (Male)**

Bodyguard to Micah, resembles an aging biker. He used to be the Nimir-Raj of the Maneater Clan before Chimera took it over. Micah ended up taking his place as he was willing to sacrifice his human form and Merle wasn’t. Strong were and major bad ass.

**Vivian (Female)**

African-American, with Irish genetics as well, for a very pale but dark coloring. Think delicate beautiful fragile doll. I tend to think she’s most beautiful woman I’ve ever met, perfect in all her proportions. Quite the Beta, not a dominant in any way. I guess Micah wanted her here to get a female take on Illyana.

Everybody had a nervous energy but she was really tense.

**St. Louis Vampires**

The vampires had apparently gone the werelion route on selecting their clothing. Again not ultra formal, but sharp and spiffy, like they were ready for a night on the town and wanted to impress. Radiated class and good taste, apart from Willie McCoy who’d look… scruffy I suppose even in a ten thousand dollar suit. Jean-Claude wanted to project class and style and he defiantly pulled it off in those fantastic leather pants and formal lacy shirt he was wearing.

Aster and Damian were present, so were Bartolome, Valentina and Primo. Valentina was dressed in a pink dress, like she was some kind of evil Shirley temple.

**Willie McCoy (Male, weak vampire, not really sure why he’s here)**

Willie is a small-time hood turned vampire. Kind of my first vampire friend as he’s one of only two
or three vampires I have known before and after being turned. He manages The Laughing Corpse for Jean-Claude. Looks just like a two bit hood, loud tie and all.

Really weak vampire as he’s just a baby in vampire years. Hmm, so is Illyana in some ways but she… Well… she I guess she started with a whole bunch of… advantages as to the whole power thing.

Wicked (Male)

Brother to Truth, Wicked is a vampire of considerable power. Together with his brother, he was able to kill his entire bloodline after their Sourdre de Sang went insane and the vampires of their line began randomly killing people. The council voted on whether or not to kill Wicked and Truth, with Belle Morte actually voting to save them, but the brothers were left masterless, which weakened them. After traveling alone and masterless for many years I bound the brothers to Jean-Claude. Wicked and Truth ("The Wicked Truth") are considered among the greatest of all vampire warriors. Very much master class vampires.

Their bloodline has extreme speed and can pass for human, even to witches. If the vampire council wanted shapeshifters killed they sent for Wicked and Truth's bloodline, the "warrior elite". Really glad that we have them.

Truth (Male)

Brother of Wicked, Truth had nearly been killed trying to capture a fleeing vampire from the Church of Eternal Life on my command. That was when I bonded them to Jean-Claude (totally at their request I might add).

Requiem (Male)

Jean-Claude's third in command, Requiem is British-born vampire that Belle Morte offered to buy from his master to complete her blue-eyed trio (yea she collects people like some people collect Elvis plates). Jean-Claude was the darkest blue, Asher the lightest, and Requiem the brightest. He has the power to raise lust, straight lust, similar to Jean-Claude's ardeur. However, Requiem is always fiercely polite and sees taking advantage of this power as rape, refusing to use it uninvited. He has black hair and a trimmed mustache. His name comes from being "poetic, but damn depressing".
Another of my part time lovers but a bit morose kind of dude, liked to quote poetry to me.

**Meng Die (Female)**

Meng Die is short, delicate, and resembles a China doll. She typically dresses in skin-tight leather. Originally turned by Jean-Claude himself, Meng Die is an extremely powerful master vampire, an accomplished fighter, and like Jean-Claude, can call wolves. Unlike many of the master vampires of Belle Morte's bloodline, Meng Die does not appear to possess any variant of the ardeur (thank God for small favors). Although she is sexually accomplished, she does not have any particular abilities related to love or lust.

Meng Die is powerful enough to become a master of a city in her own right, and aggressive enough that her former master was happy to "loan" her to Jean-Claude, thereby reducing the risk that she would try to seize her former master's territory for herself. Jean-Claude originally invited her to visit his territory in order to increase his strength and defend his territory against challengers back when he was weaker and we lacked some of the heavies we have now. However, since Jean-Claude has subsequently acquired other, less difficult master vampires, I think he is regretting inviting Meng Die into his retinue, as her power, aggression and sexual jealousy of me make her one of the most difficult of his vampires to control.

Meng Die particularly resents me because one of her lovers, Requiem left her in order to increase his chances of forming a relationship with me. Spurned woman and all that.

**END CHARACTER INTERLUDE**

Well, that’s the who’s who. Thankfully nobody did the let’s be fashionable late routine. We all mingled and conversed for a few minutes with idle chit chat.

Mingled while continual reforming the basic clicks. Things were tense as nobody knew what to expect and by that I mean nobody. Some folks asked questions of us but we didn’t give any kind of useful answers. We were almost as in the dark as they.

Damn I wished we understood more, knew more. But we didn’t. I was really interested in the impressions she was going to make on the weres and vampires that we trusted so they could give us honest feedback. Our own impressions were… somewhat suspect at this point. We were too close to the subject as it were. And the only other person who had actually met her so wasn’t talking.
“What do you mean you won’t tell us”? Was my, and I suppose, our complaint.

Before the weres and I went to off to go take a nap, we had called Claudia in to ask her of her impressions of Illyana.

“I swore to Raphael, my king, that I would never share what I saw and sensed”.

“That doesn’t mean us”! Complained Richard.

She was rather emphatic that it did. “It means everybody. To know anything about… I do not wish to be noticed by her. I do not wish her to decided that I should no longer know something as it might just be easier to remove the person then to remove the knowing”.

This is where the hero says that they’ll protect you. Yea… I don’t like lying and I couldn’t make that statement. None of us could.

Jean-Claude softly stated a slightly disturbing opinion. “I take it you did not see a crying and hurt woman. Or that you… observed more then just that”.

“I saw and sensed… many things. You are motes in her orbit. I do not wish to join you. I do not wish to be consumed. I do not wish to be prey”.

“And if she… says you can share”? Asked Asher.

“Then I will share only as she commands it. I obey my king in this”.

She was scared of something. It would be nice to know what she was scared of. It might just be that she saw Illyana at her injured worst and some Alphas don’t… like anybody ever seeing them like that. Or it might be that she saw her with all of her shields down. And since she had no link to Illyana, she might then see and sense things we… might no longer be able to.
A rat reared with a kitten is forever the kitten’s pal. But… other rats are still just prey once the kitten becomes a cat. She’s a predator… Need to remember that.

Predator. Yea… Just like all of us are.

Except she’s a predator that preys on predators. Crap.

END FLASHBACK WITH CLAUDIA

So… here we all are waiting for her to arrive. The last folks had gotten here about fifteen minutes or so ago. Time to say hi, grab a drink, and a bite to eat, and exchange some gossip. Crowd has lot of questions and nobody was providing answers as we really needed her to… well kind of answer our own questions first.

Five minutes ago I’d felt my link with her open. No communication, but it was like… like I felt the rumble of an engine or something. I exchanged glances with the others and they all kind of nodded so I guess their links opened as well. Everybody nodded so I guess that made it kind of official, seven links.

And all of a sudden I got a song stuck in my head. Rather weird. It was Welcome to the Jungle by Guns N’ Roses.

...

...

Welcome to the jungle it gets worse here everyday
You learn to live like an animal in the jungle where we play
If you got a hunger for what you see you’ll take it eventually
You can have everything you want but you better not take it from me

In the jungle, welcome to the jungle
Watch it bring you to your sha na na na na knees knees
I’m gonna watch you plead
Rather annoying song and not one that I like…

Nobody who’d slept reported any odd dreams which I suppose was good but still left us in the dark with no additional information. None of us who needed to feed had fed, meaning the vampires and I. And… well I still felt full, and so did they. It was like my beasts were lazing in the sun with fully bellies. Lion, Tiger, Leopard, Wolf, all just… content.

Hate being in the dark about things…

Speaking of being in the dark… it was getting darker… and colder. Like… something was eating the light and warmth. I froze as I noticed that the walls had… faded into darkness and so had the ceiling. It was like we were now within some vast indistinct cavern.

And that’s when we noticed her. Just standing there in the middle of the floor. Looking at us. Half demon, half human.

How to describe the look she gave the crowd? Hmmmm, have you ever seen a cat waiting to pounce upon a bird or a gopher? Body pressed to the ground, still but tense, ready to spring, and the tail almost not moving, but instead doing little jerky motions.

It was kind of like that. Conversation didn’t so much die as it had an abrupt stroke.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Showtime! Took me awhile to craft the implementation of this chapter as this is kind of Illyana’s big coming out party in the Anitaverse. Again much thanks to LordGrise.

Part 12a: Greet and Meat (part b)

At first she just stood there.

Not moving apart from her tail making those jerky twitches and her head shifting about as she took in the room. Don’t know where the walls and the roof went, where they once were just faded into darkness, yet we still had light as if the lighting fixtures were still somehow there. I’d bet that it was some kind of illusions, vampire mind trick, or some mixing of the two…

Crap, if it was vampire mind tricks then she’d gained and apparently already knew how to make use them.

But what was equally creepy and foreboding was that everybody now suddenly had shadows and they all faced away from her as if she was some kind of light source yet… she emitted no light. There was brief verbal consternation as folks noticed other people’s shadows and then their own.

The shadows were not always the shape of the person casting the shadow. And even though she was just standing there… some of the shadows were moving.

The wererate Alphas cast shadows of their half man half rat form, tails and all, while the minor rats just cast shadows of big rats. Noticed that Raphael’s shadow had a crown and his shadow’s head kept turning as it if were checking out the room.

The werewolves all cast shadows of standing wolves, no half man shaped shadows. But Richard’s shadow had red eyes (how the hell does a shadow have red eyes?) and… crap there was a whisper of a growl from his shadow as it bristled at the Micah’s shadow and crouched as if to spring.
The wereleopard’s shadows were also just leopards, but they were extra inky dark. You could see the hair on the wolves but nothing on the leopards, just… blackness. And Micah’s shadow was crouched and facing Richard’s shadow, and its tail was waving back and forth, almost as if to taunt the wolf shadow.

The Lions Alphas all cast half man half lion shadows, and Haven’s shadow had a massive black mane tinged with gold (shadows with colors, don’t ask me how but yea… golden). The Betas all just had lion shadows that were submissively crouched before Haven’s shadow, which I swear looked like it was preening as it raised a massive paw and swiped at a beta werelion shadow tossing it half way across the room.

Bacchus, the lone none guard werehyena, just the shadow of a massive hyena that was bobbing its head up and down as if in amusement.

Most of the vampires cast human shaped shadows that faced her and did not move in any way. Like they were frozen between fight or flight. Most… Jean-Claude, Asher, and Damian shadows had red eyes and were moving in that they faced each other and looked like they were having a casual conversation with much hand movements and gesturing. Irritatingly Asher’s shadow appeared to have a martini glass that it kept sipping from.

Really didn’t like my shadow. It…was shaped like her. Her demon shape and every movement of her tail was echoed by the shadow I now cast. Just two little differences, my… shadow had a gun in one hand and what looked like a sword hilt over the shoulder. Rather liked that my shadow was using a gun as so many were’s and vampires just try to rely upon strength and speed.

At that point Richard’s shadow sprung at Micah’s shadow and the two shadows silently fought across the floor with no discernable impact upon the actual people. When the tussling shadows got to close to other Alpha shadows those Alpha shadows snapped at them or reacted in some way like swiping a paw.

The conversation died out again as apparently the shadow drama did not actually affect the real world and all eyes again focused on her. I think mine got there sooner and I noticed a hint of… concern and surprise on her face as she saw the shadow play, a hint that vanished just after she saw my eyes.

Wondered why she cast no shadow and then I had a wild idea. Maybe… just maybe, the darkness was her shadow. So didn’t like that idea as that meant… well meant that she cast a really big shadow.
Well… everybody stared at her and she stared right back. And as she did this… I saw colors all of a sudden. Now, if I mediate for a long time, I’ve found that I can sometimes see auras. Mostly my own and the auras of other’s I’m bound with. But now… all of a sudden… wow.

Suddenly everybody had a glow of colors about them, and those colors… told me things. It was like at a glance I could see what they were as their lycanthrope condition was just… there. Like splotches of color on a primary base. I could see their emotional state, and… other things that I didn’t understand. Each lycanthrope type had their own color as it were, so did the vampires. For lack of a proper reference vampires were pale cold blue, wolves were red, leopards were green, rats were yellow, lions were purple, and so on.

And Illyana… Well crap, she blazed. Her base color was black but sheathed with red flames and… splotches of blue, red, green, gold, and other colors. Blazed with power. I wondered to myself if this was how she viewed the world? If so then… again wow.

I glanced down and interestingly I couldn’t see my own aura. But everybody else who’d been with her had a dark streak of black in their aura, black flecked with gold.

I could see terror in some, concern in all, and deceit in a few. Were senses could normally tell if a person was lying, but not with me as I’ve been told that my scent and heartbeat apparently don’t change when I lie; but that’s mostly when I go to my mental place that I kill from, more of that sociopath thing that I have going. Rather freaks out the weres as it makes my threats extra scary as they can’t tell if I’m lying.

If she was able to do this then lying was so not a good idea with her. Or playing poker I suppose. Talk about negotiation advantages…

Then she started to slowly walk. Click clack went her noisy footsteps, which again had to be deliberate. The floor was stone, but nobody’s else’s shoes made that kind of noise. Almost like she had top dancing high heels (is that even a thing?).

She came to the first grouping, it was the wolves lead by Richard. She stopped and stared at them and they stared back. The Beta wolves did not meet her eyes as they showed submissive behaviors as one does when greeting an Alpha; and so did their shadows. But Richard, Jamil, Shang-Da, and Sylvia all stared back. I could see the uncertainty in all of them except Richard.

Then her scent changed, I suppose I was picking up that detail from Richard. It now had wolf in it. And then she did something that shocked everybody.
She offered her right wrist to Sylvia with a small smile.

In were and vampire society your ranking really matters. In formal events this is shown by either offering your wrist or more formally, your throat, if you acknowledge yourself subordinate to somebody. By making such a gesture she was stating that Sylvia outranked her… at least in the Lukoi, the werewolf pack.

I thought furiously. Wow, by offering a wrist to Sylvia instead of Richard she was stating that she had no… plans. No take over. Everybody here knew that she’d screwed Richard, and that she’d feed upon the entire Lukoi via Richard. By making that gesture she was publicly stating that she was not Lupa (Lupa was queen wolf to Richards Ulric) and had no plans on being Lupa or… or… had her eye on Sylvia’s position.

Without saying a word she’d just made a statement to one and all, assuming she was telling the truth that is. And apparently wasn’t going to hid in anyway what we’d all done the nasty. And something that was tense within me relaxed a bit, and I noticed in the corner of my eye that my shadow hosted her gun.

Sylvia’s eyebrows rose in complete surprise. She glanced to Richard and he nodded. She took Illyana’s wrist and brought it to her mouth and gave it a lick. And with that I could see much of the tension flow out of the wolves both physically and in the shifting of their shadows as some of the shadows sat, heck one laid down as if for a snooze, the Beta shadows stopped submitting and Sylvia’s gave a silent howl. There was still tension, but… it looked like she was following pack rules, rules that they understood and animals are so in the now.

Sylvia released her wrist and Illyana started walking again with that slow click clack again. The next group was the wereleopards, the Pard. Again she stopped and stared and her scent again changed, now flavored with leopard as well, and yet wolf was still there. She stared and they stared back, again the betas showed deference.

Damn I could just see that Vivian was trembling. Really wanted to let her know that things… well… I so was not going to let there be a repeat of what happened to her the last time.

And as they all stared at each other Illyana’s devil tail gently reached out and took an unopened can of Coke that Nathaniel had been holding. The barbed tip opened the can with a hiss of escaping CO2 and the tail raised it to her lips for her to take a sip. Then she returned the can to Nathaniel and then… Her actions drew gasps from everybody.
She offered her wrist to Vivian, the most beta of the leopard present!

Damn, I could see Vivian’s terror really spiking in her aura and her shadow just groveled before Illyana. Vivian had been so savagely raped and tortured the last time some members of the council had visited. I’d given the bastard Fernando to the Lukoi for what he’d done to Sylvia. Bastard was now dead and folks know just what happened to those who abused my cats but such trauma does not just fade away.

Vivian slowly took Illyana’s offered wrist, like it was a cobra or some kind of trick, then… give it a lick as well. And with that most of her terror faded. Illyana was again making a very specific statement, but this time to a very low ranking Pard member. No threat. She offered Vivian no threat. And with that Vivian’s shadow transformed from a leopard to the silhouette of a kneeling crying woman.

This… was interesting. Not… what I, or anybody expected.

She started walking again and as she did so Vivian’s shadow stood and watched her.

Now Illyana came to the wererats on one side and the werelions on the other. She faced the rats, but this time no wrist was offered. They stared for a long moment and I could see Claudia’s concern. Then… Illyana gave a small bow to both Raphael and it looked like the Rodere in general. A gesture of some kind. Not per any vampire or were protocols that I knew of but… looked respectful and not sarcastic. There auroras of the rats all looked… pleased.

She gave then turned to the lions and again they stared. Haven stared her in the eye, but this time it was a stare of challenge and as he did so his shadow bristled and assumed a dominant stance. Guess all her behavior had made him think she wasn’t all she had been made out to be. A stare that she returned and you could feel both of their powers rise.

Heck, I could even see it. Haven was strong, really strong, all dominant Rexs are that way. His power rose and so did hers, like it was some kind of arm wrestling or a tug of war between the two of them.

He was tense, straining. She looked relaxed, but her tail was swishing in agitation. Then the struggle broke as her power slowly enveloped his and began to squeeze. He grunted and relaxed his power, and as he relaxed she also backed off on her power. Contest over.
She turned her back on Haven and dismissed him with a sniff and a flick of her tail. Okay, guess that was one point for the rats, lost point or points for the lions.

She started walking again towards the dais. Bacchus was on her left and she just walked past him as if he wasn’t there. Not possible for her to mistake him for a guard as he was dressed all bondage like. Then the first word was spoken, and it was Bacchus who spoke.

“Narcissus extends his welcome and offers you the hospitality of his club and the enjoyments within”.

Great, no gifts. The message to all had been no gifts to be offered and she would in turn not be offering gifts. Narcissus just so had to try to play by his own rules.

Illyana slowly turned around and confronted Bacchus and gave him a look. Not a nice look and Bacchus quickly assumed a submissive posture and so did his shadow. I got a whisper of screams on my link, her screams. Some memory of hers I think and not a nice one.

She smiled and spoke for the first time. “Accepted”. Turned and resumed walking. I think… Narcissus just made a big mistake and it looked like Bacchus thought the same.

She reached the dais where Jean-Claude, the vampires, and I were standing, and stepped upon it and approached. The three gabby vampire shadows (Jean-Claude, Asher, and Damian) all now faced her as well. I also noticed that Micah and Richard shadows had stopped fighting and were staring at her.

We exchanged looks, not stares as she approached. For a flick of a second I would have sworn she looked apprehensive. Then, as I rather now expected, she offered her throat to me.

Throat, not wrist. Yet another statement.

If you’re planning on being Lupa you don’t offer your throat to the current Lupa. Ditto if you’re planning on challenging for Nimir-Ra as well. And utter ditto for those who might think that she’d replaced me with Jean-Claude.

Girl really know how to play politics. Everybody knew we’d all had a blowout orgy. The beast with… well heck I guess eight backs. This… really put to bed most of the current gossip; but of
Part 12b: Greet and Meat (part c)

Afterwards she turned around and faced the gathering and spoke.

“I do not answer to Dragon, that name is used by another and the two of us agreed that it was hers”.

Which is culturally correct. I’d been told by Jean-Claude and Aster that all the old vampires held to the tradition that only one vampire would have a specific name and personal vendettas had been waged over the use of names. So there was only one Aster, only one Jean-Claude, only one Dragon. But the plethora of modern vampires had caused that practice to fall out of vogue with the younger vampire crowd, unless a young vampire wished to be known by a name that an older vampire used and took exception to another using it. Funny, nobody was fighting over the name Willie.

She continued. “Childe, Darkchilde, Magik, these are common names for me. Natasha Romanova is a public name I’ve started to use as I’m currently working with Regional Preternatural Investigative Team, on loan from the Russian Federal Security Service. For seven of you I am also known as Illyana”.

“Yes I am a demon. Yes this form is real, so are my other forms, including dragon. I am now also a type of vampire in that I feed upon life energy similar to how Anita feeds upon it, although physical intimacy is not needed. In dragon form I feed upon both flesh and energy”.

She started to slowly pace up and down the dais. “I’m… going to be staying here for at least a week, possibly longer, possible much longer depending how some things work out. Some of those things involve the Vampire Council. Six nights from now the entire council will be here for negotiations as to my joining the council and taking the empty seat”.

That got the crowd stirred up as there was a brief gasp and mumbling amongst everybody who didn’t already know. We’d told Silvia and Vivian before this little shindig so they at least know the bad news. She paused while this happened, and then continued after thirty seconds.
“This time the council are guests of Jean-Claude and the rules are simple. Bring your own food. They have no claim on anybody in St. Louis. They will not allowed to harm or feed upon anybody without their consent. Blackmail does not fall under my definition of consent and my definition is the one in force. They can bribe you, make you offers, that is all per the rules. Threats are not, blackmail is not, lack of choices is not, lack of consent is NOT”.

“Why? Because you are all mine... and yet I belong to... them... the seven. It’s complicated. Don’t think you can manipulate it for your own gains... you will fail and I will... be angry. Suffice it to say... nobody gets to hurt what’s mine”.

I could hear some sighs of relief and could see more then a few folks thinking about panicking. Damn this aura viewing thing was fantastic on insight… hmm bet she was doing right now which… likely explains why I could suddenly see.

“They will all be here by the sixth night, but nothing prevents them from starting to arrive tomorrow night. Expect council servants to start arriving tomorrow”.

And again some consternation and brief conversation broke out. She continued after twenty seconds or so.

“It is expected that I, as a council member, have a court. I’m not really big on hangers-on so I’m currently only bringing three to this party; but I suppose I could bring every vampire and were from Egypt if I had sufficient reason and motivation”.

I suppose she then answered some of the whispered mumblings.

“Some of you may be wondering if I have the power to enforce my rules. The council wishes me to join so they are motivated to keep their little pet monsters on a tight leash and I…”

Her power rose. Not fast, not hard, just rose like the tide or a moon coming over the horizon, and the sheer magnitude of it froze everybody in place. Not by any act of that power, just the act of prey freezing in place and hoping not to be noticed.

“…Will get very upset if certain things that now matter to me are harmed. Very upset. The last time I got upset the Master of Egypt and his whole court died and were consumed by me”.
The power relaxed, but was still there, like an avalanche about to fall…

She then shouted. “Ōyutaka Masachika stand forth”!

There was a flash of a circle of light and now I once again beheld the biggest Fing werelion I’d ever seen or heard about. And the strongest werelion as well as power just radiated from him. He cast a shadow of a lion, not a half man half lion and his shadow was as big as he was.

He was Japanese and obviously some kind of Sumo wrestler. Six foot ten inches and at least 400+ pounds. And when I say big I don't mean fat, yea there was a load on him, we are talking Sumo wrestler after all, but there was a massive amount of muscle on him as well. Think a really wide slightly shorter version of Shack O'Neal and you'd be close. He was dressed in traditional Japanese black and silver silk robes and had two Japanese katanas in his silk belt.

He bowed low to Illyana. “Kurai aijin, I great you. What is your will”?

“Learn the city, work with the weres. Do not kill unless commanded. Make yourself… friendly with the local lions. Consult with Micah and Richard”.

Wow, the werelions had all just frozen when Ōyutaka had appeared. They’d heard of him but hearing and seeing are two very different things.

Ōyutaka rose from his bow, briefly scanned the room, and then walked in the direction of the werelions. Everybody held their breath. Was this a challenge? Was Illyana taking over the werelions?

Ōyutaka reached the werelion group, they’d already adapted submissive postures, even Haven, can’t say that I blamed him; and so had their shadows. Ōyutaka was just so much… bigger and stronger.

Ōyutaka enveloped Haven and Pierce into a hug that lifted them both from their feet as he loudly proclaimed. “We shall drink sake and consume sushi my brothers till we pass out”!

Ok, not a challenge. More of a frat boy ritual I suppose. I could feel the werelion relief from here,
Illyana gestured with her hand and another circle of light flickered next to her and then vanished. In its place a vampire now stood next to her.

She introduced him. “Gunther Fisher, Master of Egypt”. His shadow looked like it was in some old military uniform, even had a spiked helmet.

He was roughly five foot, eleven inches or so. Very German looking I suppose with a wide face and black hair. He had on an elegant dark blue suit with a grey shirt and a red tie. Looked mid thirties in age but was supposedly over a hundred years old which made him massively young to be a Master of a city.

She gestured to where Jean-Claude and I stood. He bowed slightly and walked over to stand at the end of the dais, next to Meng Die. Noticed that her shadow had started checking out his shadow.

She then gestured one more time another circle of light flashed into existence, but this time it stayed; and that poised avalanche of power of hers began to drain into it. Illyana was now clenching both hands and mouthing unheard words. Little sparks started spiting out of the light circle as all power she has summoned flowed into it.

Then she screamed one word. “S’ym”!

There was a cracking sound and in the place of the light circle was an eight foot tall bald purple bipedal creature wearing a black vest and green shorts. It had a massively thick tail, long claws on its hands and feet, a single short horn protruding forward from the top of its forehead. It smelled of old ashes, blood, sulfur, burnt tobacco, and was smoking a cigar of all things. It radiated a massive sense of evil and cruelty. And its shadow was dark, jagged, and hurt to look upon it.

The creature… no not creature… he smiled, sucked in a lungful of smoke which caused the cigar to glow red, and spoke with a smoky growl.

“You rang boss babe”? 
He looked around with room with a grin that quickly developed into a scowl. He stared at me, Jean-Claude, Aster, and Damian for a second (we were all standing in the same locality) and then he glanced back to Illyana and then stared at the room for a few seconds.

He then spoke some unknown language in a questioning tone. “?”

She answered in what sounded like the same language. “,”.

No idea what the heck they were saying. Obviously a private conversation and one that had to involved us.

There were a few more exchanges of incomprehensible gibberish which resulted in Demon boy (yea I’d decided he was a demon) looking both annoyed and slightly downcast. Then she said something that perked him as he gave a toothy smile.

Why did I conclude it was a he you ask? Well… the groin bulge made it a him in my mind.

The creature spoke again. “Evening gents. Name is S’yem. Boss’s enforcer”.

And that was that, apparently not a big talker.

Illyana then gestured and again we felt her power rise, but this time it was directed at this creature call S’yem. Power enveloped him and as it did she spoke and gestured with both her hands and tail.

“And it was that, apparently not a big talker.

Illyana then gestured and again we felt her power rise, but this time it was directed at this creature call S’yem. Power enveloped him and as it did she spoke and gestured with both her hands and tail.

“And with that the creature transformed, shrank down into just a seven’ish feet tall, the tail shrank as was looked like it got sucked into his body. His skin went from purple to black and his body sifted into that of a very large bald African America from what ever the heck he was before. Still smoking by the way.
She looked… well looked is the wrong word. She looked the same but she felt… tired to me. Like what she’d just done, bringing this creature and doing whatever the heck she’d done to him, had cost her a great deal.

The creature examined its now human hands and then its body with a look of vague dismay but said nothing.

She spoke. “S’ym, I have a job for you. An individual by the name of Narcissus has kindly offered me the use of his club and the enjoyments within. Please show him what I think of his offer”.

Bacchus suddenly looked like he’d learned that his pet dog had died horribly.

S’ym sucked on his cigar and the tip glowed red, then spoke. “Rules”?

“Nothing… permanent. No harm that can’t heal in a day under… were healing conditions. Nothing too… structural to the building. No mental damage. I don’t wish to ever again be offered the filth that he has tried to peddle me. Convince the man… and his ilk. They like pain so… show them pain”.

And with a flicker of two light circles Bacchus and S’ym were gone.

I noticed my shadow had her gun back out and was aiming it at Illyana. Jean-Claude telepathically whispered to me (Ma Petite, should we try to intervene)?

I sent back (Na… let him eat his own cooking for a bit. We’ll ask her to go easy once we’re in private… We… must help them I suppose).

Jean-Claude smiled a not very nice smile, he so had cause to dislike and fear Narcissus. (As you wish Ma Petite).

Hmm, don’t think people are going to be quite so… rude to her in the future. Or publicly invite her to do… well those kinds of things without first finding out her… opinion on such things.
We needed to have her go easily on them… Heck! Bad cop… good cop. She’d just played the heavy and we got to be the good guys. Which would elevate everybody’s opinion of our ability to… manager her. While… possible not being actually true at all.

Ok, her political skills are obviously first rate.

Now… just who the heck is S’ym?
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

It’s been a while since I’ve done much Mother of Darkness writing, been writing other things like Tag I’m It, What to do about Magik, and some other minor stories. I plan to focus on Mother of all Darkness for awhile (apart from LordGrise prompting me for some additional Pride, Prejudice, Zombies and Illyana chapters in return for proofreading).

As always much review and critique by LordGrise, and input as well as he helps craft my sometimes clumsily wording into better prose. In our various correspondences LordGrise has been the first to come to the realization that Illyana actually had her soul the entire time (something that I’ve dropped hints of in much of my writing. Yea! Somebody finally commented upon it or figured it out). This will be a topic for additional writing in this storyline.

How is that possible you ask? Go to the New X-Men issue where Illyana encounters her brother again when she’s about to go on a giant soul energy stealing binge. Just look her expressions (shame, loss, hurt, realization of love for her and for her brother, of comprehension of what she once was, of what she has been reduced to), and just examine the sudden change in decisions she makes. My take, and my stories, are that she has been driven insane, has stroke like brain damage on her emotional centers, and is unable to properly interpret her sensory inputs or make correct decisions about most emotional things, all of which is not understood by the X-Men as her mental shields prevent any telepaths from seeing just how damaged she truly is. Plus she has a screaming subconscious voice in her head constantly telling her that (YOU ARE NOT HER) which comes from the abuse Belasco did to her after his attempt to summon her resulted in her being re-embodied in the demonic form she died in rather then the blond toy he was so desirous of.

Bastard got exactly what he wanted, and then proceeded to destroy her in every possible way.

() denotes mental communication.

Part 13a: Greet and Meat (part e)

And I guess that was it for her speech. She turned to the crowd and… and the darkness started to fade at the edges. Like it was being drawn back into her. As it withdrew, the walls and ceiling came into view, and the misbehaving shadows vanished. And my ability to see auras around people vanished as well.
As the darkness appeared to draw into her, her form shifted into her blond female human form dressed in that very tight full body spandex getup she wears, deep blue with the stylized yellow X and the yellow boots and gloves. Not a zipper in sight on that getup, can’t help but wonder how the hell she gets in it.

(Polystable molecular weave) Was her mental whisper, along with an embarrassingly sensual impression of what it felt like sliding over her breasts. *(It's amazingly stretchy, and quite silken in texture. Never binds at all and wonderfully supportive while still being firm in all the right places; and is very resistant to harm. Think thin stretchy Kevlar; able to resist all kinds of attacks).* Well that was helpful information, I also surmised that she was likely commando as there were no panty or bra lines that I could see.

And as the last of the darkness withdrew the form of the darkness was finally discernable, and as I feared, it was the shadow of a dragon with outstretched wings. Once that was done she stepped down from the dais and made for the open bar, and everybody got out of her way. I found the look of panic in the bartender’s face, he was a werehyena, to be rather funny *(yea, I have a mean sense of humor)*.

Meanwhile, the most senior werehyena guard present was making a beeline right for Asher, which made sense as hyena is Asher’s animal to call. Bet the guard was going to to plead for Narcissus.

Asher sent a telepathic prompt, apparently being bound to Illyana now gave all of us the ability to send thoughts to each other, sure beats texting. *(How… receptive should I be?)* was his thought.

*(Open but… stern is my suggestion)* sent Jean-Claude. *(We said no gifts. Narcissus has stuck much more then his foot in it)*.

*(Treaties). Sent Micah. (The vampires have a treaty with Narcissus, as do the wolves. Not to mention that they are also members of the lycanthrope coalition. We can’t just cut him or them loose).*

*(Gah. So we need to help the annoying antagonistic sadistic little shit). Grumbled Richard on the link, he was not a fan of Narcissus or his… hobbies.*

It was pretty much a party line at this point. Funny though, I could tell Illyana was blocking any communication with her but… I wondered if that meant she could still listen in? Bet she could and that she was. Hell, I would, so very… sneaky. Hell, I wished I knew how.
The guard reached Asher, he went by the name Dalliance, and as expected began to quietly plead for forbearance. Asher adopted a stern look and made some acknowledgements while pointing out that Narcissus had massively screwed up and had disrespected him, Jean-Claude, and apparently had made her an offer that went way beyond being rude. As this took place I quickly mentally laid out my good cop/bad cop theory. Everybody agreed with it and felt that it was promising as to our ability to supposedly intervene.

(Agree to intervene but extract a promise of a favor in Narcissus’s name. If this does not cost him, he will not value it. He must… remember such things). Prompted Jean-Claude.

I glanced at the crowd. The wolves were in conversation with the Pard and the lions were already… gone. Guess Ōyutaka had already led them out in search of sushi and booze, I suspected that they were in for a long night. I noticed that Meng Die was chatting up the Master of Cairo and appeared to be liking what she both heard and saw, I’d bet a dollar that that they’d be making the beast with two backs before the night was done…

At this point I noticed that the wererats, Raphael, Fredo, and Claudine were approaching Illyana. She’d gotten her drink from the bar, and two not so little pigs in a blanket appetizers, and was also surveying the crowd with her back now turned to the bar.

Ut-oh, something was up. I hurried over to the bar without trying to look like I was hurrying, which of course implied that I was hurrying... Illyana had a cup with ice and what looked like Coke and was eating one of the pigs in a blanket. I caught the end of a statement from Raphael the wererat king.

“… greet you in the name of the Rodere. I have been told you are familiar with the use of the blade”.

Illyana eyed them as she swallowed and then took a sip of her drink. “I am”.

Raphael replied. “Might I… extend the offer of Fredo to… spar with you if you are in want of a sparing partner? He is the best of us weres when it comes to the arts of the blade”.

Smooth. Not a gift. Just an offer if she was interested in that kind of thing. And yea he really was the best of all of us mortals. The vampires Wicked and Truth were better, but heck, they were vastly older in age, but Fredo was the one always teaching classes on blade work.
She stared at the three Rodere and I thought I saw a flicker of color around them, then she replied. "I accept. I could use more practice".

Fredo prompted. "Tomorrow if the lady is so inclined"? My my, so polite.

All the politeness apparently prompted an actual grin from her. "The lady is so inclined. I believe I shall be working during the day so… tomorrow, 6:30pm in the gym here unless something comes up"?

That met with approval and the Rodere bowed and backed away.

Okay, that went well. And a lesson to the other groups. She’s approachable and rational but… don’t be stupid. And showed yet again she knew our layout.

Illyana turned to apparently say something to me but she shut her mouth as both Richard and Micah suddenly loomed behind me. Richard and Micah exchanged glances, then Micah spoke first.

"The Blood drinkers Pard wishes to properly welcome its new member. Normally this is done on the night of the full moon but the Lukoi has claim upon you as well. Richard and I have reached an agreement in that, if it meets with your approval".

Now Richard spoke. "The Pard requests your presence at a barbeque at Anita’s house tomorrow night, call it 8pm. Then the following night, the night of the full moon, your presence is requested at the gathering of the Throonos Rokke Clan".

Well… nice to have my house volunteered without discussion. But it was as good an arrangement, as might be reasonably made, and I found my flash of irritation fading as I considered the matter. Still, they were both going to hear from me about due discussion before making commitments. Even as I thought it, I felt their embarrassment and unspoken apology. Hah. Bountiful foot and back rubs galore will be mine, and maybe… some other enjoyments as well.

She at first had a look of puzzlement as they spoke but then she froze as I thought upon potential naughtiness. And that’s when I felt the panic. Not my own. Her’s. It was leaking thought our link, though not that you could see it in her body language. She stared at us and it looked like she didn’t have the foggiest idea on what to do.
She actually hesitated. “Um… I… umm…”.

I sent a telepathic text as it were (It’s not a sex thing). I could see how she might… be concerned about that. Interestingly the panic only slightly subsided.

She took a long drink of her Coke, then closed her eyes briefly before opening them and replying.

“I accept”.

Weird. We were about to go converse with the council and not even a hint of a sliver of hint of concern about that from her, but a request to attend a barbeque and a party causes her to panic? Major clue about something or some things.

Also a potentially major Achilles Heel where certain Council members were concerned...

**Part 13b: Meanwhile…**

“Things… are off track”. Muttered male voice number one.

“Talk about the understatement of the year…”. Grumbled male voice number two.

“Miss Blake was supported to be dead at this point”. Complained high pitched female voice number one.

“And so was the head vampire of St. Louis”. Grumbled back male voice number two.

“His death was always a stretch goal at this point. We have no way of knowing what will actually happen upon Miss Blake’s death. Many vampires survive the death of their servants”. Points out male voice number one
“And many don’t”. Injected the high pitched female voice number one.

“Stop bleating about damned broken eggs”. Observes a new male voice, one with a Russian accent, call him male voice three. “And start bleating about why magic has gone… strange In St. Louis”.

“We have reports that Miss Blake and Childe did not meet alone, but instead met with all of Miss Blake’s significant others beneath the circus. And there is much discussion about the… effects of last night’s event upon the werewolves, vampires, and we think the wereleopards. That is likely why magic is… odd”. States the male voice number one. “Of course most of us are not in that locality so we lack any first hand experiences”.

“Similar effects on weres and vampires have been noted when a head were is fed upon and through them all that they control, but never magic going odd”. Contributes male voice number two. “For example, when Marshal Blake fed upon the Swain King. But… this feeding was likely… not from Marshal Blake. Therefore they must have been side affects of Childe feeding. I thought she wasn’t supposed to be able to do so”?

“Not just feedings. There were Bindings, as well”. Complains a new female voice. She sounds old, she gives forth a dry cough before continuing. Call her female voice number two. “The signs are obvious, even discounting the gossip sweeping the St. Louis were and vampire community that our agents have picked up”.

“And likely bindings”. Agrees male voice number one. “But one wonders just what… kind of bindings”?

“We know she lives as she called in sick”. States yet another older sounding male voice (Male number four). His voice sounds like it is from a telephone speaker and not actually present. “But we have no details. And yes… magic is… odd at times. Like milk that you do not know if it is spoiled or not. I actually witnessed our dog’s shadow chase our cat for a minute”.

“If she shows up to work tomorrow then we should be able to get a close look at her”. States male voice number two. “And some or all of the others as well. Hopefully Mr. Zimmerman will return to work as well. And… some of the others will resurface in public”.

“She is blind to us… but not to our agents. Yet care must be taken”. States male voice number four.
The first male voice replies. “Yes yes, Nathan, we know of your concerns in this regard, you have voiced it countless times. Care will continue to be taken. She cannot learn details from someone who simply does not know any details. Her… involvement with RPIT was… unexpected. But does create the opportunity for… educated close observation”.

“That it does”. States male voice number four with a grudging tone.

First male voice. “Your… agents will continue to be in the dark as to the why of our interest or even as to our existence. Even if the demon were to realize the observation, she will not be able to extract from our observers what is not known”.

“We all knew that binding such a demon and killing all of the blood suckers wasn’t going to be easy”. States the Russian male voice. “I still maintain that Miss Blake must be removed, permanently removed”.

There was a brief burst of agreement from all parties, although the second male voice was somewhat reluctant in his agreement.

The Russian voice states the consensus. “Da then, it is agreed. More… extreme measures must be taken to remove Miss Blake from the master equation. Her continued presence unbalances… things. If she still lives then I wager the next harmonics reading will continue to show her exaggerated influence upon what we are working to craft. I shall see to it”.

“No pussyfooting around this time”. States male voice number four. “She is heavily guarded so hit her with everything you’ve got”.

“Da… I will pass on that exact direction”. Agrees the Russian voice. “Collateral damage is approved”?

Again there was consensus. Approved. There is a brief dial tone as male voice number four hangs up.

“Anybody care to join me for supper”? Asks male voice number one.

“More meat I assume”. Disdainfully speaks female voice number two.
“That would be a big Moooo”. Replied male voice number one with amusement.

“That count me out, eating meat is very unhealthy”. Sniffs female voice number two.

“My kind dislikes such food”. Replied female voice number one.

“Regrettably I have much to do”. Stated the Russian sounding male voice. “Much needs to be arranged”.

“Well, count me in”. States male voice number two. “I love a good steak”.

Part 13c: Greet and Meat (part f)

And now we were all just standing around being uncomfortable. Thankfully Jean-Claude and Asher choose that moment to approach with a small posse of vampires (Willie, Primo, Valentina, Bartolome, and some other vampire I’d never seen) trailing in their wake.

Valentina and Bartolome didn’t appear to be paying much attention, instead they were focused on each other. I assumed they were communicating mind to mind as I’ve seen them have that look slightly distant look before. More then a few master class vampires are able to do that and Valentina was most certainly master class for all her childish size and pretended behavior.

Asher spoke first, with his voice in its usual seductive tone. “Illyana, we would ask a favor of you”.

As expected, here’s the windup, the pitch…

“We beg forbearance upon the Hyenas and Narcissus”.

Something far too intense to be merely labeled irritation flashed down the link from her for just a moment... A black angry howling of despair, pain, hurt, and suffering. And then it was the
ruthlessly cut off. Yet not the slightest change in her body language.

I reflected for a picosecond that she should have been expecting this... And then I realized that she had, and what I had felt was undesired leakage. Not good, that meant trouble. Narcissus had clearly hit quite a nerve with her, and I suspected she was not in any mood to play good cop/ bad cop.

I could just so tell that every person in the room was straining to hear what she said next.

She attempted to make light of it. She really did. “Let me guess... S’ym and the Hyenas...”. She paused, and then she actually slightly giggled for a moment. “Sounds like a good name for a band, reminds me of the time...”.

Suddenly the air went icy cold as the temperature must have dropped thirty degrees or more and her expression froze as a well, and her tone went icy. “I loathe what was offered me. Likewise... people who offer me the opportunity to participate in such acts. What would you do Jean-Claude if such an offer was made it you... especially after what you have experienced in the past. At the hands of others, and at Narcissus’s own hands”.

Jean-Claude answered steadily. “Ensure that the offer was never made again if I had the power to make it so”.

“Exactly”. She purred in reply, then she clearly enunciated. “I DON’T. DO. THAT. Not Now... Not ever. Ask the Master of Cairo what happened to those who practiced such vices on the helpless”. She turned back to the bartender for a refill.

Jean-Claude replied to her back. “And I would make sure that any mercy I showed had a price”.

She did not reply at first. Just got a refill of her Coke, ate the second pig in a blanket, drank some of her Coke, then turned back. “They have nothing I value or hold to be of worth”. Definite bad cop.

She gestured with her left hand and suddenly there was some kind of soundless hologram like display projected upwards from the palm of her hand. It showed Narcissus’s bedroom that was on the second floor of the club, back in the private areas (yea I’ve been there and no, not for sex). The bed was smashed. Everything in the room was smashed. Various bodies were strewn about and S’ym was doing something very unpleasant with a knife to a figure that was crucified to a wall. And yea... the crucified figure was Narcissus. Narcissus may swing both sides of Sado Masochism, but he was clearly way beyond any possible enjoyment.
S’ym looked hurt as there were various bleeding cuts and a few honest to God bullet holes in him, not that he appeared to mind. And he was still smoking that stubby cigar. The hologram flickered and vanished leaving just her with a very satisfied look.

Crap… she apparently knew that Narcissus has tortured Jean-Claude in the past when the former Master of the City had given him to Narcissus to play with. And not the safe word kind of bondage play. Jean-Claude had rightfully feared for not only his life, but just what kind of damage Narcissus might do. Jean-Claude does not talk of those times but there was a small secret part of me that really wanted to hurt Narcissus… exactly what Illyana was having done. Oh shit…

Asher injected “But others do. I… ask this of you”.

Micah jointed in as well. “Illyana please don’t destroy what we have… what I have struggled to build”.

I simply mentally sent (Please).

She looked at Asher, then at Jean-Claude, Micah, me, and then back to Asher. “You… ask this of me? Do you all truly wish this”?

We nodded. I noticed the emphases on ask; bet everybody did. I didn't want to; Narcissus was not our friend, for all that he was supposedly an ally. But if we didn't do this then a lot more of our treaties and arrangements would become shaky, and much of Micah's work would be at risk. And… revenge suddenly didn’t feel so sweet.

She actually growled a bit as she scowled, then she replied. “As you wish”. She gestured at the bartender.

“My Lady”? He asked. Guess he’d decided to copy the Rats. Smart move on his part.

“Give this to S’ym”. Suddenly there was a little envelope in her hand, sealed with blood red wax and some indiscernible impression in the wax. “The faster you get there, the faster his acts are… mitigated”.
The bartender took the envelope and looked pleadingly at Asher and Jean-Claude. Jean-Claude gestured. “Go to Narcissus, and remind him that we are owed for this. The envelope is not to be given to this S'yrm until Narcissus agrees. If Narcissus is unable to respond then give it as well, but then we consider Narcissus bound to whatever future favor we decide”.

We watched the guard frantically run off as Illyana drank the remainder of her Coke.

Okay… that was a rather impressive good cop bad cop routine. And one that firmly reminded everybody as to her Alpha status. Very effective dominance demonstration, and yet she did as we asked so… effective at many levels, including us.

I said the first thing I could think of that might refocus her. “Council time”?

Which earned me an irritated frown from her and an “Oui my petite” From Jean-Claude with also giving one of his Gaelic shrugs. “Oui”.

Part 13d: Welcome to the Jungle, we’ve got fun and games!

Not everybody was going to the council meeting. Just Jean-Claude, Illyana, the small posse of vampires, and little o’ll me. Rather surprised that I was going to be there but apparently that was Illyana’s decision. The others were back at what was left of the winding down meet and great.

The three of us were walking down a long corridor that was far from the areas I’d been to. Illyana in the lead, then Jean-Claude and I walking side by side, being followed by the little vampire posse as they were apparently needed. As we walked Illyana was slowly shifting back to the demon form she’d first appeared with. Back to the white blouse with the silver shoulders with spikes, tiny silver skulls in her hair, white gloves, those dainty horns, red high heel boots, but no tail. Guess she was getting her game face on.

Jean-Claude explained to me why we had the vampire hangers on. “The council will use their forms to manifest, as Bella Morte has done before. Of course the Traveler will simply occupy a body, in this case Willie as he has served as a host before. The Traveler promises to take no advantages of Willie this time”.

Which elicited a nervous laugh from Willie, which I certainly understood. The Traveler had sexual tastes that Willie did not share in the slightest.
Nathaniel sent a thought on the link to us all (*Do you do that a lot Illyana*)?

If she noted the sexual undertones of his question, she ignored them and gave him a completely bald answer. (*What, abuse others? Make them suffer for my enjoyment? The former, yes... but only as needed. The latter, almost never ever. I dislike torture.*)

He was persistent. (*But you have done it*)?

A feeling of... loss from her. (*Yes... I learned well from my... instructors*).

Damn... I had a mental image of sick bastards instructing her on just how to hurt others. Probably started with small animals and had her work her way up from there.

(*No... it was not like that*). She sent, along with a hint of... old pain and despair. (*I learned by being the recipient*).

I sent. (*Oh... crap. Belasco I assume*).

(*How... old were you*)? Sent Nathaniel. Any flavoring of lust from him was now drowned in something between embarrassment and shame. Nathaniel had been horrendously abused as a child as well and had run away at age nine to live on the streets where he was abused as well.

(*Belasco ... and S'ym. I think I was... nine-ish when it started? Belasco used to have S'ym punish me when I was bad or disappointed him in some way. Sometimes even just to prove that he could, that I was... powerless in all things. If you don’t have power then you’re just a victim*).

Richard sent a shocked thought. (*And you keep S’ym around*)?

(*Sigh... it’s complicated. Let’s just say S’ym is an entailment of Limbo. I did eviscerate him when finally I finally achieved the power to do so... but I later found that he had survived it. In order to get him under control, I took his oath in exchange for his life.) Ugly overtones of rage and hate, and a certain sense of satisfaction, suffused what she sent next. (*Then there’s what I did to that evil bitch the Enchantress, in repayment for what she so enjoyed doing to me.*)
Suddenly we were in the midst of a memory cascade from - somewhere in Illyana's past...

*How many days have I hung here?*

*Left in darkness*

*The heat sucked from my body*

*Bleeding, hurt unending*

*Famished, parched*

*The feel and smell of my own filth*

*Random injuries*

*Malicious torture*

*Bound here undying and unhealing*

*All the while my enslaved darker self hunts my friends*

*I would cry, but that would be giving in to Her*

*I cling to the hate and endure*

*Then...*

*I've sent the New Mutants back to Asgard*

*Then I visit my guest*

*Mistake*

*I should have kept Dani or Karma around*

*All of me is filled with rage, hate, lust for revenge*

*Delayed reaction from the trauma leaves me trembling*

*She mistakes it for fear*

*She taunts me*

*Calls me weak*

*Threatens to kill me and mine when She is free*
Threatens to do it all over again
She is wicked and evil
I lose control
I bind Her to Her version wall
I show Her what evil is
I teach Her the depths of my displeasure

She threatens for a little while
She begs for some small amount of time
She screams for a long long time
Until I tire of the noise and cut out those parts of Her that can scream
Then I keep cutting
Godlings are hard to kill, but only my magics keeps Her alive
Keeps Her conscious all the while
It does not keep Her sane

After a long time I finally stop, only to find myself drenched in blood
Her blood
Her eviscerated body still lives
If you can call what little remains a body
Her eye, for one is missing, is filled with madness
S’ym gloats in the corner (Didn’t think you had it in you boss babe)

I look upon my work in horror
I...

The trip down memory lane slams shut like somebody slamming a door and nailing it shut. And I could feel her self disgust as well. All that was left was a lingering smoky chuckle of a memory with the voice of S’ym. (Glad ta see you’re getting the hang of it Boss. If someone displeases You, they pay.)
(That’s monstrous)! Sends Richard in a tone of revulsion and disgust.

That’s my very, very ex. Richard always knows just the wrong thing to say to a woman to make her feel extra bad about herself. He’s called me a monster more then a few times, heck even once after I had saved his mother’s life… In order to do so I had to torture a man for the information to where some Satanist bastards were holding her and planning on sacrificing her to a demon. I was able to do what had to be done, something I have to point out Richard was unable to do even to save his own mother. I understand his revulsion of my actions… it was monstrous… but… there was no other way. They had cut off one of her finger and sent it to us just to gloat over the horror, and the delivery bastard knew where they where. Well, we saved her… and the bastards who did that to her died. And so did the slime I had to torture. And… what I did to save her rather… hurt me in a way that I don’t think I’ll ever fully recover from. Some lines you cross you just don’t get to cross back from.

To know just what your are capable of doing.

(Yes). She sends. (I am). Then a tone of exasperated irritation. (So… why did you want me to do that to him? Next time make up your damn minds).

(We)? We all sent, some in confusions, some… less so.

(Yes you. Anita and Jean-Claude were the loudest, hell almost screaming it at me, then Richard, then the rest. You wanted Narcissus to…). A sense of confusion from her (To pay… feel fear… suffer… for him to know what you felt at his hands… to bow… to grovel… bleed… to… it’s all very confusing as you all want different things for different reasons).

(I asked for no such thing). Sent Jean-Claude.

Her thoughts still felt confused. (You all wanted it and I felt… ). Then the confusion vanished, replaced by cold assessment, suppressed anger, and vindictive evil satisfaction as to what Narcissus was undergoing. (Some of you like what he has to offer… I greatly dislike being made to feel enjoyment in such acts. The links were very open, next time… I’ll check to see if you really want it. He wished that I partake of what he has to offer. I granted the wish but not his intent. You all fear him and that fear… well… I dislike your fear of him. It… pains me).

That’s when her devil tail uncoiled into existence and proceeded to lash back and forth in agitation.
(Could you please refrain from torture from now on)? Sent Micah. Ok, that was kind of ballsy, but… I guess he was testing the limits. He did say please. I think we all held our breaths.

(I’ll take it under advisement). Was her chilly, offended reply.

Then Micah kept at her. (We have treaties and agreements Illyana. The Pard with the Lukoi and the Vampires. My work with the lycanthrope coalition. The Lukoi with the Vampires, the Rats, and the Hyenas. The Vampires with the Rats, Wolves and Hyenas. Then there is Anita and her involvement with just about everybody. Those agreements are important and… if we are now yours and yet you are now ours, those were your words, then… those agreements and treaties are yours as well.)

A feeling of almost resignation from her. Micah continued (I am no rebuking you for Narcissus. That was… very ill-advised of him and in true were social norms you have shown him exactly just how offended you are. How you dealt with Haven and lions was well done as that was just rude of Haven).

Tones of irritation from her. (He thought me weak… tested to see if I was prey. I showed him I was not… and that he was if I so choose).

Richard chimed in (Again well done. The Lukoi members are… eager for the night of the full moon now. They greatly respect what you did in showing submission to the pack hierarchy. That… calmed them. Sylvia is greatly relieved).

Micah continued. (Likewise the Pard, Vivian was… very afraid, she still fears… but… not really you. And the Rats are… impressed. I think they actually like you. Power and competency is always respected).

(But check with you before I do… major things here). Was her reply.

(Please). They both sent.

The feeling on being involuntarily constrained but… grudging acceptance from her. (I will… try).
And again I privately mused upon how… receptive she was to our… requests, and just what might or must be prompting that.

We walked in silence for a few minutes after that. I could feel mental walls rise blocking off everybody but Jean-Claude and I.

(How many forms do you have?) I telepathically sent to her on our link. Rather pleased that she replied.

(Three that I know of. Human appearance, demon, and dragon. There are many variations between human and demon depending on my moods).

Hmm, human appearance. Nice that she wasn’t playing pretend with me… well us I guess. I wondered if looking human reduced her abilities.

(It does). Was her silent response. Oops, need to try not to leak my own thoughts on the link.

(And you need me here because)? I was understandably nervous as my prior encounters with the Council were very problematic at best.

(You insisted that I not be alone with any of your men). Was her mental reply.

Okay… walked right into that. Then she continued.

(Plus… the Council will want to see what has become).

Yea… what has become.

I glanced back at the little group following us. Primo looked his usual arrogant self, Willie was nervously adjusting his tie, Bartolome was trying to look bored but not quite pulling it off; instead he had a suppressed nervous energy. The hereto unknown vampire (his name Burt Russell, so not seeing any vampire wars over that name) looked resigned, and Valentina looked… well she was looking very intense. Like a cat that’s spotted a bird with a broken wing. The bird in this case being Illyana’s back, or maybe it was her tail? Something was up with her and Bartolome and I didn’t
have a clue what it was.

**Burt Russell (Male)**

Very young vampire. Felt only a decade or so old. Apparently he had been sent to our city to serve as a conduit for this very meeting as he was of the line of Morte D'Amouf (meaning he was a rotting vampire). He looks like a clerk you’d find stamping a passport or something.

Then I picked up a sense of unease… I think it was coming from her.

*(Nervous?)* I sent. Damn, I’m chatty all of a sudden. And… hmmm… so has she.

She walked for a few steps before deciding to reply. I felt the link broaden to include Jean-Claude. *(Kind of… it feels like I’m introducing a girlfriend… ok… a girlfriend and six boyfriends to my future in-laws. Rather… odd feeling.)*

I wanted to say I wasn’t her girlfriend, but I knew what she was trying to say.

*(The linkages are deep.)* Commented Jean-Claude. *(And there remains the question as just who… or whom… are the dominant members of the links.)*

*(I am, at least in regards to power. Rather unsure about other aspects of the links.)* Was her reply.

I didn’t want to agree but… she had been easily the most powerful one before so that meant she had to be at the center of the links.

I thought upon her answers and then sent *(In-laws?)*

*(How much do you know of the bindings that link the Council members together?)* She sent to us.

*(Nothing. I wasn't aware there are any.)* Was my mental reply.
(Rumors only.) Stated Jean-Claude in a cautious tone.

(In-laws describes it well.) Was her reply. (The actual details are secret and only known to council members… and those they invite to join.)

(No chance of us being informed then.) I stated.

Incorrect. You are… we… are bound. You will all be playing a part if I join the Council. All of the servants of Council members who have servants… know. I shall summarize.)

And then she shared knowledge as I guess I just knew… I understood and also knew that I could only share the knowledge with the other members of… well her circle as it were.

Turns out that joining the Council is rather like a marriage. Nothing physical unless the members wish it but… it was a type of binding. A council member was not able to harm another council member. And that applied to each other's servants as well.

And I don't mean not supposed to harm, I mean unable to harm. Blood was involved, of course. It always is in the major vampire workings.

An interesting fringe benefit of this was that after this none of the council members, or their bounded servants, could come after me or mine. Of course, the opposite applied as well.

(Why the heck to you even want to join)? I sent.

(Allies… I need… Allies. To help search out what is being done to me. I am… blind. That is deliberate by whomever is doing that. With the resources of the Council I should be able to locate them. And... the rituals will alter me. I think in such a way that should prevent additional changes by those who are casting whatever the hells they are doing to me; at least for a while).

That made sense, but there had to be more to it. Hmmm… Need a better description for us then her circle… The phrase the Magik Seven came to me? Sounded like the classic western Micah and I had watched last week on Pard movie night at my house.
We finally came to the end of the long and winding corridor. It opened into a rather impressive cavern that was hung with lights, several old art deco looking chandeliers. The stone floor was flat and clean, but the air had dusty tang to it as if it has been freshly cleaned.

“This used to be a speakeasy back in the day”. Commented Jean-Claude. “It has not been used in quite some time”.

“It suffices”. Stated Illyana. (It is private for both the council, and our other business afterwards).
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The Vampire Council. Ohhh… I wonder just what’s going happen. I’ve been writing more then my publishing pace might indicate, but the content is in later chapters. And as always a shout out to LordGrise for both his reviews, his input and his ideas on a various scenes, plus massive rewrites of part 14d.

A reminder about the timeline of this story, chapters one and two are Illyana in the X-Brig after killing the Elder gods and regaining her soul (but still very mentally messed up, and in fact likely getting worse). The remaining chapters are pre launch of the New Mutant comics as it takes places on Illyana’s journey (remember, story within a story); and is the sequel to my first Anita Blake/Illyana story called Snowflake’s Passage (Scary things), and the end takes place… well… you’ll just have to read the entire story to find that out.

Yes this is taking longer to write then I planned, hope you’re enjoying the end product, if so then write a review. If not then, write a review as well and explain why.

Part 14a: Welcome to the Jungle, We got everything you want, Honey, we know the names

So you might think that it’s some massive magic ritual to summon the council? Mystic sequences with fiery pentagrams, the blood of a dead goat, screaming enchantments spoken in dead languages, and of course a fight scene. Well, naaaa… Decidedly anticlimactic.

All of the power for the summoning was actually coming from the council members as they each manifested in different ways. Several of the council vampires are able to make use of vampires of their blood lines as conduits. This was true for the Dragon, Morte D’Amour, and Belle Morte. The Traveler could just throw his consciousness into most vampire bodies. That just left the Master of Beasts, who was the weakest member of the council as he apparently lacked that extra vampire pazazz to manifest other then being physically present; but apparently he’d now found a way to do all the other cool council members were doing.

We’d gathered in a circle, roughly at hands length. Jean-Claude and I were behind Illyana, behind her shoulders. To her left was Willie McCoy who was to be the Traveler’s host, then proceeding counter clockwise was the Bert who was to host Morte D’Amour, then Valerian for Belle Morte, then Bartolome for vampire Padma (Master of Beasts), then to her right Primo serving to conduct his former mistress, the Dragon. Wondered if the order meant anything, I’d bet it denoted how they were already interacting with Illyana. Rather nice that Padma and Belle Morte were roughly as far away from us as possible.
As we setup I noticed that the room was growing colder. Not sure if it was an actual temperature drop, or just what felt like mists of evil and malice that was beginning to radiate from her. Either way it was getting creepy. No weird shadow play as of yet, but… I’d swear there were things just out of sight and for a second I though I heard… ragtime music?

“How do we know that they’re not already here?” Was my whispered comment to Jean-Claude. Illyana answered.

“Because it would be rude, and a violation of the agreements that have already been reached between me and the council. Plus… I would know and such knowing would make me… upset at the offenders. One’s word means something with one such as I, regardless of the worth the giver may hold it.”

Yea… demon. In the films it’s always a contract in blood but… Ah crap… Blood. Been there and apparently had already kind of done that. I asked another question. Rather sure I knew the answer.

“How will they know that it’s okay for them to manifest?”

“Because I will tell them.” Was her reply.

Thankfully Jean-Claude commented upon the almost perceived manifestations that played in the corners of our eyes. “Illyana… things are flickering in our perceptions as if they are almost present but vanish if one attempts to gaze upon them, and… there are snippets of sound. It is if ghostly impressions of the old speakeasy that once was here, are manifesting. Is that of your doing?”

She innocuously replied. “Manifestations of power.” But sent mentally. (I’m… not quite sure. Before I was bound in this world, demons can not summon other demons or the dead, but now… now I…. or… it might be Anita… or both of us… but… Shards, I appear to suddenly be inadvertently attracting such things due to my expressing power for this meeting. Before, when I raised Khufu, I needed to use Anita as my instrument, but now… I’ve been changed and I wonder just what… limits have been removed and if that removal was planned or… accidental. Do not speak aloud of it.)

I sent (So you’re not deliberately doing it. Consequence of our links?) Damn, for a second I thought I saw a… dance going on? An old-time ballroom kind of dance, like from the twenties.

Jean-Claude added his input. (Likely ma petite. The blending of abilities. Those you sleep with have
been known to grow in power. Perhaps your necromancer influence upon Illyana?)

Yea… that’s me. The sexual energizer bunny. A rather irritating ability in that many now wished
to share my bed, or send people to my bed in the hope of a power bump after a power grind I
suppose. Others actually feared sleeping with me.

(My influence?) I sent as I noticed the others also looking at things out of the corners of their eyes.
The… phantasms vanished if you stared directly at them. And they weren’t ghosts… no sense of a
presence… just… images and sometimes sound.

An apprising reply from her and a very unpleasant bit of knowledge that yet again she knew way
more about me, and likely us, then was safe. (Yes yours… Do you not ward the zombies that you
raise to prevent entities that seek a body from inhabiting the zombie? Plus your ability as a
Necromancer was first truly shown when you slew two of Mr. Gaynor’s bodyguards in your circle
of power when he attempted to force you to commit human sacrifice of another. You raised a vast
multitude of zombies from the cemetery and slew both Mr. Gaynor and what was her name… ahh
the Senorita I think she was called.)

(No comment.) I sent back.

Crap she knew. Death sentence for me if it was ever proven. Killing in self defense by magic is an
automatic death sentence. No appeal, no leniency. People suspected that I had a hand in it… but
only suspected as there was no proof. Only Jean-Claude truly knew and… bet that was how she
knew, back when she mind rolled him the first time she came here.

She sent (Sorry… forgot the dire consequences for those who defend themselves using magic…
and yes I felt your mental turmoil over my statement.)

Jean-Claude inquired. (How much of our minds can you sense?)

(With the links open this wide and my having to not block the two of you because… well you’ll see,
way more then I desire. Very… distracting. And no I don’t usually like having a tail. It has its uses
but… reminds me that I am not as I wish to be, and tends to be off putting for almost everybody.)

Opps, guess she’d caught that thought as well. And kind of a wow on the concept of a body
shamed demon. Just another part of the wide wonderful world of female experience, never even
thought that female demons get that kind of crap as well. I tend to get grief about the scars on my
arms and shoulder, not to mention my belly. Like there’s something wrong with me for surviving vicious attacks. That and attempts at slut shaming that I get from some people (and even vampires) … sigh… Like I want to be a sexual living vampire.

I sent. (Valentina and Bartolome appear to be greatly interested in you.)

(Yes…) Was her musing reply. (I am rather curious as to the reason for their attraction.)

“It is time.” Illyana verbally announced. And then it was like I heard the bong of some large bell. A ringing clear tone. The others all stiffened, and then their body language changed as well.

Willie McCoy was the least changed as the Traveler just took possession as if he was slipping on a coat or a comfy pair of slippers. He went from nervous to very relaxed and casually confident as he adjusted his tie. If a vampire could smoke I swear he’d have lit up a cigarette or something. He gave a slight flourished minor bow in our direction as he stated “Magik, I see you have brought two of your servants. A linkage of seven I sense? Most… extraordinary, and supposedly quite impossible. Yet again I am pleased that the council continues to entertain my suggestion of you joining our ranks. Do… the bar room specters serve any… purpose?”

Ok. Kind of wondered who’d come up with the idea of her joining. And apparently he could see the specters as well.

“Greetings Traveler and… No.” Was her casual reply. “The spirits just showed up, I believe the powers being expressed are somewhat moth to a flame for them.”

A chuckle from the Traveler. “An example then of magic behaving oddly, we have heard reports of such things since your… coupling.”

Illyana said nothing, but I felt a flicker of distress from her at the word coupling.

Burt’s transformation was similar to Willie’s as apparently Morte D’Amour just kind of moved in, something that he was able to do only with those who were of his bloodline (a common ability it seems for most master vampires that were at the top of the pyramid power scale as it were). Burt went from resigned to looking smug and I’d have to say, somewhat sleazy. “She wishes to show off, to emphasis herself, to present her power and abilities. She being the flame of course.”
And Bella Morte made her appearance rather dramatically as a full size ghostly image of herself overlaid upon Velentina. Her ghostly image was beautiful, pale and yet hinted at dark hair, with eyes the color of dark rich honey promising... Um... Velentina spoke, but we heard Bella Morte's sensuous voice and I felt things tighten within me. Damn, even her voice could do things to me. To know her is to love her, or so it is said. And as I'd said before, she'd and I had been very intimate that time she'd pulled me into her mindscape.

“Come now Morte D'Amour, she is being honest with us. I find it most refreshing, she knows that we must know some or even all of what has occurred. She presents the results so we might view it first hand. The... specters are rather unique touch. Jean-Claude, was this not Nikolaos's... bar during those oh so convenient prohibition times?”

A reply with a nastily tone from Morte D'Amour “She has taken two... my mistake, three of your favorites I believe. Asher, Jean-Claude, and even the elusive Anita. Not to mention other men that you desire.”

Bella Morte replied with scorn. “They are not my favorites, such do not leave me. But Magik... I am pleased to see you take to our ways so... emphatically. Jean-Claude, will you not give answer?”

Jean-Claude apparently made a silent question of Illyana. She slightly gestured with her right hand while saying. “You may reply without seeking permission Jean-Claude. Likewise Anita may also speak without prior approval.”

Bitch, I wanted to say something nasty but... I understood what she meant. Inability to control one’s servants was taken as a sign of weakness. Something that... causes Jean-Claude problems from time to time as most ancient vampires don’t even have the concept of free will for servants and I so don’t fit in the servant category. That’s me... uppity.

Jean-Claude spoke. “Yes... this was the site of Nikolaos's speakeasy. Nikolaos was quite pleased with the operation as it provided way access to prey. She did kill all of the gangsters involved once probation ended as she no longer had any use for them.”

And now the bastard Padma made his appearance. Bartolome took what looked like a lie rat from his pocket and looked into its eyes. Then said “Yes.”

Like the Bella Morte a ghostly image of Padma manifested over Barolome. Less clear then Bella Morte, but definitely him, turban and all. His image’s body language was one of anger and hatred as he stared at me. I’d killed his son, it was either him or his son and he’d chosen his son’s death so
he might live. To say that he hated me would not begin to describe his feelings towards me.

“I hope it is not to flaunt her servants.” He spit out the words.

“Right back at you Padma”. I replied. One rule I have is to always to get in peoples face when they are being difficult, make them back down. Sometimes it’s not the size of the dog in the fight, but the amount of fight in the dog. And assholes like Padma always get surprised when the little people mouth off a him.

You could see the rage on his face as he opened his mouth to make a reply. But Illyana beat him to it.

“In this time of truce and negotiation I have sworn to make no offense to any of you, or your servants, so likewise did you swear.”

You could see him swallow the words he wished to say as he replied. “You did not have servants then.”

“Irrelevant, we swore.” Announced the Dragon from Primo, guess she’d finally shown up. Rather weird hearing a female voice from such a large man. “Or do you now wish war Padma? If so, I think you might end up standing alone as you will be forsworn upon your oath.”

A scowl was his only reply as he backed down.

The Traveler chuckled. “And yet again things are not as we planned. I propose a new condition, that none of Magik’s servants may join or be a member of the Council so long as Magik is a member of our august body.”

Wow, apparently they thought that we were now a major threat to their personal positions. Um… not good. Such folks tend to get killed.

Before things took a turn for the worse Illyana replied. “Agreed.” The others all nodded and voice their agreement as well. I briefly heard a trumpet playing a jazz tune as if in celebration.
Then, from their perspective, Illyana dropped the other shoe. “Likewise I have a new condition as well due to my changed circumstances. I declare Harm sur vous, la guerre sur moi over St. Louis and all those resident. The wolves, vampires, leopards, they are all mine. Nobody touches what’s mine without permission. It’s bring your own food (BYOF) while you’re here. I will permit negotiations with people for sex, food, blood, but… my rules. Threats and blackmail are not considered negotiations by me. Failure to comply will be met with… punishment.”

Part 14b: Welcome to the Jungle, You can have anything you want, But you better not take it from me

And of course consignation broke out as several of them began to argue. Interestingly it was just the men arguing, both Bella Morte and the Dragon said nothing and just observed the bickering. Likewise we said nothing as well. Illyana’s tail flicked back and forth and as they argued, shadows grew.

Padma’s host now cast a shadow that ever changed from one animal to another. Lion, tiger, bear…

Morte D’ Amour’s host cast a shadow of a man that kept rotting to just a skeleton and then back to a normal shadow. Heck, it even threw a rotting hand at the Traveler’s shadow at one point.

The Traveler’s host cast a shadow of what looked like an old man, bent and crooked, and using a cane; which he used to bat the shadow rotting hand out of the air when Morte D’ Amour’s shadow threw it.

Really strange seeing Primo casting a female shadow. You’d have thought somebody called the Dragon would cast an amazons shadow, but no… just what looked like a nondescript woman, apart from a massive battle axe that she kept swinging about from time to time.

Valerian, Bella Morte’s host, cast a shadow of Valerian, but kept morphing into Bella Morte and then back again.

Jean-Claude’s shadow decided to go dancing and proceeded to twirl off with my shadow. The two of them danced about the walls of the room; I think… I think I saw my shadow flip the bird once to Padma when she was behind his back. Left me feeling rather proud that even my shadow could be a bitch.
This time Illyana cast no shadow at all.

The shadows had given them brief pause, but then the discussion continued after Padma dismissed the shadow play as “Feminine theatrics.”

Many words were said, with more then a little hand waving as wel. Both Morte D'Amour and Padma felt that it was completely unacceptable, first Egypt and now St. Louis? What was next? All of North America? The Traveler had reservations, but felt that that the declaration was reasonable considering the new situation. Reasonable assuming that they got something in return. The argument went on for a few minutes. In the end it was summarized by the declaration from Padma that…

“She seeks an empire!”

The Traveler was not buying. “Ridiculous. If she did then several of us would likely already be dead. You rail because you were planning some entertainment while you visited. Entertainment that you must now ask for, and … likely will not be granted. I advise that you do not bring up the topic.”

“None of us have such sway. Why should she be granted it?”

Bella Morte now injected. “Because she’s in love. And in that we have sway over her that we never had before. Things are at risk and she moves to protect them. She is protecting what her servants value. In so doing she revels herself.”

The bickering felt silent and the all looked at us. Then Bella Morte spoke.

“The bindings are most complex. Anita, Jean-Claude, do you love her?”

Jean-Claude and I looked at each other, but before we could reply there was a chuckle from Illyana.

“That… is not council business. And very personal as well. I once met some ladies who thought of themselves as angels; they had a saying ‘nothing for nothing’. Such intimate questions have a price. If you wish an answer then I first will have a similarly personal question for each of you, otherwise… mind your own business.”
A few chuckles from the Dragon and the Traveler, but just nasty looks from the others. And a comment from the Traveler.

“I warned you, she plays the game well. Young yes… novice… no.”

Morte D’Amour spoke. “We have much to offer her. Resources for those who are plaguing her.”

“And she has much that we desire as well.” Commented the Dragon. “Specifically Marmee Noir.”

Bella Morte sounded like a cat with a dish of the very best cream before her. “Our might combined with hers will allow us to… retire the Sweet Dark and then select a new occupant for her seat.”

Crap, they’re planning on killing Mommie Dearest. No wonder they want Illyana on the council.

And then Illyana added the sugar to the medicine. “In return for your… acceptance of my demands. I will concede on that point, and swear to never be the head of the council.”

Silence as they all looked at each other. Then the Dragon spoke. “You must agree to undertake the responsibility of… punishing those whom you have declared such control over. Otherwise the council’s rulings will have no force.”

Illyana nodded in affirmation after a few seconds. “I trust my servants will… inform the City’s vampires that though the Harlequin have no jurisdiction here, the councils rulings will stand if I join. The Council, their servants, and those who serve them are welcome starting now; so long as they abide by the rules. If harm is done then I will return the harm two fold to the instigators and compensate the victim.” Hmm, nice turn of phrase, applied to everybody equally. Liked the use of the word instigator, bet that makes them think twice of setting up a patsy.

Morte D’Amour rebuked her. “It is not allowed to speak their name unless certain conditions are met.” The others all nodded and looked irritated.

I swear I could almost hear the smile in Illyana’s voice. “As declared the Mother of Darkness I would point out. The… enforcers reported to her has head of the council, leaving the enforcers rather unrestrained since she succumbed to her sleep. Enforcers that you wish brought to heel as
well. Since my use of the word is of great annoyance to you… so I will forbear using word until such a time as our negations are concluded. If I do join then I will abide by the rules as to the use of their name.”

Additional demands or conditions were raised by the Council and Illyana. They got agreement from her that she would not take any of the Mother’s servants into her service. The Mother’s Servants were these weird half lycanthrope half vampire creatures that were sleeping. Sometimes one or more would awake and be taking to the service of whatever Council member did the awakening. They agreed to not bring anybody who might be deliberately brought to cause problems. Smart as failure could result in most of their court’s being slaughtered if Illyana felt she had been egregiously harmed, rather liked how she refused to be pinned down on the definition. Our guests would be on their best behaviors, but you just knew that somebody was going to fuck up. I mean… right?

At the end they all looked… well… not satisfied, but done. Our dancing shadows apparently got tired of dancing and returned to being attached to our feet, and then faded away.

Illyana concluded. “*Please pass your travel plans and needs to Jean-Claude if you wish us to attend to them. Don’t bring involuntary slaves, they are free the moment they enter the city.*”

That earned us a dirty look from Morte D'Amour and Padma. Great, the council was coming and looked like we needed to provide the bedrooms as well for those who asked.

With that they all departed in their own way. Padma vanished as Bartolome dropped what was now a dead and mummified rat. The Traveler, Morte D'Amour, and Dragon just left.

Leaving Bella Morte who smiled… then eyes of dark honey filled my mind.

**Part 14c: Welcome to the Jungle, it gets worse here day by day**

Red lips. That’s… what I first noticed.

Stunningly red lips. Just like in the beauty magazines. Moist, gleaming, and the fangs prominently displayed as the mouth that possessed the lips smiled.
The body that possessed the delicious lips was curvy and sensuous and taller then I. Dressed in something tight but centuries out of date, with a corset that definitely emphasized the pale bosomly goodness that was on prominent display. I noticed that her feet were bare and the scent of roses filled the air. She’d let her long dark hair down and was staring at me… no… not just me, me and Jean-Claude with a look of attraction and intent.

Now I know just what a goldfish feels when a cat just stares into the fishbowl. Crap, we were in Bella Morte’s mindscape. I’d been here a few times before and… damn she looked good. Yummy yummy finger licking good, I wanted to…

Damn it, I’m not gay but… Belle is the only woman I’d make an exception for. She’d had me as it were when I was almost dying and she’d brought me into her mind and fed me energy and… yea sex was involved, with Bella sex is always involved. Umm, crap… A sudden recollection of Illyana sucking on my breasts and… it occurred to me that Bella was not the only woman who now did it for me as I felt things clench up.

Which re-awoke a fear that I had not yet discussed with anybody. I’m hetro, very hetro, but… It was the general consensus with the guys that my Ardeur was gathering bigger prey as it were as more powerful food was a better feed. And that Ardeur could change you, had changed more then a few of my men… Might… might it have changed me? As food for the Ardeur, Illyana was like a sixty four ounce t-bone steak with every side dish thrown in as a bonus. Might I… might it … damn. Lot of self questions about what my preferences were now. Such questions I resented (which is kind of a standard response from me).

Bella was leaning against a giant for poster bed, and when I say giant I don’t mean California king size. Jean-Claude had an enormous bed as well, orgy sized I called it, and… hers is bigger. Cats were her animal to call and I could almost swear she was purring as she looked at us. We were about ten feet from her. The room was rather vague and undefined, just the bed, the floor and ceiling, and a single window that looked upon a dark sky with a full white moon.

Needed to remember that this woman had at one time secretly ruled half the countries of Europe for hundreds of years. I tried to contact Illyana mentally but nothing. Like my cry just vanished into a big empty space without even an echo.

Jean-Claude protested. “Bella, this is most inappropriate. We are servants to another and treating a sourde de sang is this way is…”

“Hush Jean-Claude. These are… extenuating circumstances. And I’m blocking access to your new toy. And I surprisingly find it easy… almost as if she is now of my line…” A grin that found amusement at things that are not nice.
Jean-Claude was presenting his cold and emotionless persona, like he always did when there was great danger. Damn, he’d love her once... no... that wasn’t true. He loved her still, just as I did. You love Bella Morte, she never loves you. Bella loved nobody other then Bella.

“She is not. She is of her own line, if there is such a thing for her.” Jean-Claude finished.

“Let us go Bella... please.” See, I can say please. “I’ve seen Illyana angry and this will make her angry and... well...” Um... might that not be a bad thing?

Bella just smiled and took a step towards us. “I just wish some private words and the answers to a few questions. Is that too much to ask after all that I’ve done for you?”

Done to us would be a more accurate way of describing her actions.

She took another step and spoke. “Such... fire I feel in the two of you. Is fire one of the things you received from her? One can’t help but wonder. Linkage of seven, an impossibility and yet... self evident. And the Ardeur sleeps within you two. Sated in a way that I have never felt before.”

Yea, another little thing we’d observed. Regular feedings keep it... fed. But when I’d gotten up and tried to feed upon my wake up sex... nothing. Nothing at all.

Another step. Rather proud that both Jean-Claude and I held our ground, really wished I had a gun or a knife but no... just my clothing. Apparently her mindscape, her rules. Desire was like a perfume in the air and I just knew that if she touched us then the Ardeur just might awaken and... crap.

A warning from me. “Don’t, she’ll consider it rape and she kills rapists.” And then I wondered just how I knew that.

“Don’t what?” She playfully replied as she took yet another step.

“Try to awaken the Ardeur in us. She was vulnerable and may yet still be. She will totally kill whomever forces her into sex.”
Bella paused in her progress. “Why? Was the experience so… unpleasant? For her? For the two of you? I got but a hint from Anita a few moments ago, and a quickening of her pulse. You enjoyed it so very much, and so, I think, did she. Tell me… was she a virgin? Her emanations are as if she is an awakened virgin.”

Great… of course Bella wanted to talk about sex, likely all the little details about how we’d…

The two of our bodies entwined, head to tail as we feasted upon each other’s sex. Once again I was on top. The men joining in as well. I scream into her sex as the pleasure takes me and I feed the Ardeur as if she was a bottomless well of power. She screams back and feeds as well. So do the vampires and I think even the weres somehow participate. We all feed and scream and scream and…

Crap, another mental flashback, and a big smile from Bella.

“So sweet. And she does have such interesting blue eyes, perhaps I should start a female collection as well?” Then her tone went a bit snippety. “But you lack such eyes Anita so… no I think.”

“You think to collect her Bella?” Asked Jean-Claude in that cold distant tone of his.

“I tried once, she defeated me but now… you have breached the defensives and I have so much love to offer.”

“Lust, not love Bella, lust.” Replied Jean-Claude. “In the end Bella is loved, but Bella does not love. That is why I, Asher, Auggie, and others left. To love so hard and never have it returned… we left rather then endure such torment.”

And that summed her up, her greatest power was also her blind spot. And of course she got huffy. “Nobody leaves Bella Morte!”

In my quick glances about the room I had noticed a desk behind us. There were some papers and a paperweight upon them. I planned on grabbing the paperweight and using it as a weapon, that and my martial arts training. That’s when I noticed another scent had intruded upon the aroma of roses.
A hint of jasmine!

The others noticed the scent just as I did.

“Sweat Darkness!” Warned Jean-Claude while Bella blurted out. “Marmee Noir!” And I cried out. “Crap, it’s Mommie Dearest!”

Then darkness erupted from the window and enveloped us all.

**Part 14d: Learn to live like an animal. In the jungle where we play**

The scent of jasmine, thick in the air, strangling the scent of roses like a python with a mouse. The smell of rain on the air, as if it is just about to rain. Scattered fireflies flashing little twinkling of light in the cool dark. Quiet jungle sounds of insects and birds.

We were in a nighttime jungle, there were some small flickers of moonlight reaching the jungle floor through the foliage of the trees above; but only enough to accent just how deep the darkness really was. We, Jean-Claude, Bella, and I, were also now naked as the day we were born. Before us was an equally nude Marmee Noir. Female, slim, pale as the moon, long black hair that looked blacker then the night itself, that’s all I can recall. I can say nothing as to what kind of woman she looked like other then she had cat green eyes that reflected the light.

Bella, for all her faults (conceit, self pride, arrogance, the list is long), was human as it were; at least in comparison. But Marmee Noir, she was as pure a psychopath as you get. Distilled and aged over so many millennia that it was doubtfull she was actually Homo Sapiens originally; or even ever really human. Only Marmee Noir mattered, everything else was us prey at best (yea… at best, at worst… I did mention psychopath.)

We were now in Marmee Noir’s mindscape. Bella’s little power play had dramatically gone wrong for her, but more importantly, it had really gone wrong for Jean-Claude and I.

And apparently Bella was having a massively bad hair day as it were. Her form was thin with but a small bust, plain for form and face, and her hair lacked… well, it was short, dull and looked brittle. I wondered if this was what she really looked like or… if this was what she had once looked like.
Jean-Claude and I went back to back practically automatically. First rule with an ambush predator is never give it your back. To my surprise Bella joined us as well, this left Jean-Claude and I partially facing Mommie Dearest while Bella faced away. That spoke volumes about Belle's mindset: We were her natural allies in this. She trusted us to not let her be blindsided, and she was doing the same for us.

That thought started a domino chain falling in my head. Belle was a freaking Council member, and this was how it was? She was hiding behind us? I felt helpless because, well… how do you fight the night? My weapons weren't even here, this was a mindscape, Marmee Noir’s mindscape. She was the primordial dark make flesh. She was why humans feared the dark, the very darkness itself, not what lies concealed within the darkness. There was a time she walked amongst us and fed; and when darkness falls, somewhere in the back of our minds, we remember the hungry dark and are afraid. I was helpless, just another tiny, hairless monkey, just meat for the slaughter...

And that lit my burners. That last thought wasn't mine, it was hers, and it was a lie. I focused, struggled against some unseen weight that somehow defined us, restricted us, condemned us… and it was if my rage found fuel as I felt something metaphysical crack as my power flared. A circle blazed up around us, silver and blue flames flickering and defining a space I claimed as my own. The oppression of night humidity in a jungle and the smell of jasmine cut off, and we were free to define ourselves again. And neither I, Jean-Claude, or apparently Bella, ever went unarmed in enemy territory.

Jean-Claude went old-school, of course, his garb and weapons straight out of the Renaissance: period aristocratic garb, complete with a rapier and a matching main-gauche dagger. There was a monster of a muzzle loader holstered at his side: It looked like a lupara (sawed off shotgun). I went with my vampire hunter rig, pistols and blades in all the right spots. Bella… Bella was dressed in plain ancient Roman looking garb, she d had a Roman short sword at her side but was principally armed with a heavy spear, like a boar spear but shorter, braced under her foot to receive a charge.

Marmme Noir spoke and it was if the darkness that surrounded us gave voice. “You seek to end me Bella… Take my place… as if a child such as you can understand the ocean that is I. You must be punished and there is only one penalty.” Then, I suppose, she addressed Jean-Claude and I. “A new servant and my new host. It is time Anita, the magics that bound me to sleep are unraveling and the underpinnings of creation itself have shifted. Your resistance is done.”

As she spoke she morphed into her saber-toothed weretiger form that I had seen before. It was an animal with a huge head and long saber teeth, golden and tawny fur, with reddish tones, shaded rather than striped, more lion than tiger, with eyes like golden fire. And a hunger we could all feel.

She began to slowly circle us, at a distance, and we turned to keep her in front of Jean-Claude and I.
Jean-Claude with his rapier and main gauche drawn, I with my Browning in my left hand and my short sword in my right. She gave a half growl, half purr and the darkness spoke again. “Too long have I been bound, denied, captive. Finally to be free, free to feed and free to bath the world in blood.”

If this was just a real tiger, regardless of size, I’d be willing to bet on us; after all we had guns, swords, vampire strength and speed. But, I’d seen the kind of damage creatures a lot less impressive than Mommie Dearest could almost instantly heal from, and this was… well… metaphysical as well. Our weapons apparently gave her some slight pause. And elicited a response from her, apparently wondering how the hell we’d done it.

“I know not how you manifested such… but… it will not suffice. You are mine and mine alone.”

She continued to circle us, and then a shadow briefly passed over the moon and Mommie Dearest froze, heck we did as well, but… I’d been expecting it. Ever since something had fed my rage and my power.

A flap of giant wings, the sound of air moving over a large surface as something swooshed over head. And a chuckle that also came from the darkness. “Hello Marmme Noir…. ” Then nothing.

A stillness then, nobody moved. The jungle went silent and everything… waited. I felt a drip of perspiration fall the tip of my nose.

Suddenly the canopy disintegrated into woody debris as a dragon smashed to earth, right where Marmme Noir was… or to be more specific, had been, as Illyana literally dropped in.

Illyana in dragon form is freaking enormous, and apparently she can be silent when she wants to be, like when she's pouncing prey. Somehow Mommy was able to sense the attack at the last possible moment, lunging to one side, but she didn't avoid it altogether as God alone knows how many tons of scales and claws slammed into the dirt of the mindscape, Illyana got her pretty good, raking her and damn near pinning a haunch. And yea, Mommy Dearest's yowl of pain was music to my ears.

Illyana had come in a direction that took her away from us rather then towards us, so most the falling wood and branches went past us. But… crap. Really hard to shoot at Marmme Noir without hitting dragon because Mommy Dearest’s direction of travel was away from the dragon and right at us. Dagon on your side in a fight is great… right? Well… not quite. Imagine that you’re in a fight with somebody and your dragon is protecting you. Great for stomping the foe, take that you bitch! But… really good chance of you accidentally getting stomped on as well. And if you want to shoot at said bitch, well, mind the dragon that's on your side that is in the direct line of fire. First rule of
shooting, always know where your gun is aimed.

The tiger charged us as the dragon’s head turned to look our way (Damn, her head was half the size of a horse when in her dragon form). Which put us squarely in line with dragon fire as well (which thankfully she withheld from belching forth). I think I was the tiger’s target but Jean-Claude stepped forward and met her charge with a flourish of blade work that almost managed to impale one eye, but only resulted in a massive slash along the left side of the tiger’s head as she dodged most of the strike. I managed to put three rounds into her (as the angle cleared Illyana) during the charge before a side swipe of a paw cut open my chest with inch long claw marks and sent me hurling away. A moment later Marmee Noir scored big as she sank one saber-tooth into Jean-Claude’s left side.

I screamed at both the act and the shared pain, and the dragon screamed as well (downside of so many links I suppose). Jean-Claude just manly grunted at the strike as he then struggled to grip the other fang.

Then it was Marmee Noir turn to scream as Bella did a side attack that firmly planted her spear in the tiger’s left side right up to the boor stop; looked like she’d tried to stake Mommy Dearest. The tiger turned its head as it opened its jaws, only to have Jean-Claude rip the other saber-tooth from its mouth in a spray of blood as he forced himself off the one impaling him.

More screaming ensured, this time I think Jean-Claude joined in, as the tiger rolled over the two of them; trying alternately to regain her bite on Jean-Claude and snapping off the spear shaft. I added 9mm rounds into the melee as opportunity presented. I was just wondering if a psychic pistol ever ran out of ammo when it did just that (Oops, my bad. Damn it! Next time believe that the gun could fire forever). Just as that happened the tiger rolled to her feet, Jean-Claude and Bella beneath her claws as it bloodedly roared at me just as my gun clicked on empty. I could feel Illyana’s frustration as she couldn't re-engage with Jean-Claude and Belle beneath her. Great. Face-off with a literally prehistoric magical vampire weretiger... and all I had was my blade. She prepared to spring...

Apparently Jean-Claude, as crumpled as he was, still had had enormous muzzle-loader. He bought us all a moment as he rammed it up into Marmee Noir's soft belly, angled towards her heart, and fired both barrels in a muffled thump of rupturing tiger flesh. She staggered...

That’s when Illyana’s sword flared to life as she strode from where the dragon had been. She was still in full female demon form, eyes glowing yellow with power and hate and now the tiger was minus a tail. Marmee Noir turned to confront the new threat and…

And somehow I was holding the sword (??). It… was just there, and so was Marmee Noir's neck. Hot blood drenched me as I half severed her neck with my overhead swing.
Both a tiger’s and a demon’s scream, Marmee Noir’s was from pain, Illyana’s was from suppressed almost unfathomable rage as she screamed “NO ONE TAKES WHAT’S MINE BITCH!” Hellfire surrounded Marmee Noir. She instantly went back to her humanoid form, writhing in the eldritch flames and…

Then…. We were back in the chamber under the circus and all was as it was before. Apart from half the room being on fire that is.

Oh… and I knew without a doubt that Illyana had set us up.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Yet another difficult chapter. Early draft had LordGrise critique that he felt Anita was underplayed and underpowered. He contributed content to help reshape the chapter and of course being the Anita character police. And I point out that the basis of this chapter 15b was his idea (we discussed it over many a text).

Part 15a: Boil over

“Bitch!” I snarled as I swept her legs out from under her while my left hand grabbed her throat and forced her down faster. She impacted the floor and I swung over her, one knee in her stomach while my right hand drew a dagger.

Damn it hurt as I did this. Apparently not all of the damage from the dreamscape was metaphysical, I’d noticed that Jean-Claude was standing in a small pool of blood, his blood, I’d apparently mentally recovered faster, and I also noticed that some parts of my clothing felt wet (I suspected blood).

**Little pro tip:** when you’re trying to make a point with a weapon, don’t get distracted. That’s when I learned that her tail was not just decorative.

It grabbed me from behind by coiling around my neck and yanking me backwards. Yanked hard, really hard. One second I’m on top, next second she’s on top, and one of her knees is now strongly planted in my stomach; and my hands pinned above my head by just one of her hands. The dagger was still in my hand and quite useless at the moment. Because, as I grunted from the blow, I found that I couldn’t free my hands and that I was now pinned. And because she was reaching over my head her posture rather prominently reminded me that she was rather skimpily dressed (yea…I got rather a big eyeful of firm cleavage).

Now I’m strong, not fully were strong, hell major wereis have been know to pick up and throw small cars, but I’m really strong for my size. I can bench press well over five hundred pounds with proper leverage and bracing (and I only weight a tad over one hundred pounds) so… crap, rather disconcerting. Guess she’s stronger then me when in her demon form.

Ok, she was now really in my face with her burning eyes and snarling mouth which had some
really pointy teeth. She only had time to snarl “What the fuck is wrong with…” Before it was her
turn to learn not to ignore the other person in the fight as Jean-Claude gripped her from behind and
flung her across the room, right into a flaming wall with an impact that would have killed a human,
I think I hard stone crack. Her tail jerked me back up before she thankfully released her grip,
otherwise I’d have gone along for the ride, and the impact, blade first of course but… happy to
avoid the impact.

I had time for a brief glance at Jean-Claude, parts of his clothing were blood soaked, but he looked,
and more importantly felt, functional. Then she emerged from the flames. If her anger was
smoking before, it was a raging fire now.

I felt my teeth draw back in a grin that vampires would be proud of, and so was not intimidated by
tall, buxom, burning, and hooved. “Come on, Bitch! Feed me to your fucking enemies, will you?!
We'll see about that…!” And I drew upon all who were bound to us, all the groupings of the city,
while the others fled to the far side of the room (even Primo which I later thought was a bit of a
bitch move); except for Valentina who was still projecting a rather surprised looking Bella Morte,
and Bartolome who stepped between Valentina and us (to shield Valentina I supposed).

“ENOUGH!” She screamed as her power slammed into us.

Slammed into us... like iron into rock and the flames behind her morphed into a flaming dragon, as
if the flames were her shadow now. Metaphysical sparks flew, and involuntarily I drew deep upon
her rage... and things shifted again. All across the City, the bonds that I and Jean-Claude had
forged gaped widely, their power flooding to meet our need, and as they met the hot flames that
were pouring off Illyana they created the kind of alchemy one only reads of in mythological stories
flashed into being. I could see it happening before it happened: The bonds flying open and my rage
sparking theirs. Power roared up, hot, predatory, wolf, leopard, lion, tiger, all of them, surging into
me, riding the flood of her rage.

And I suddenly had receptacles for that power. God help me, the dead heard me and tried to rise.

I felt the shadows, ghosts, and other things. I'd felt them before, long ago, and sort of walled that
away. But not tonight. Crap… There were hidden mass graves down here in the catacombs, and not
all the dead buried things had been human. Mingled with the normal dead were old and ancient
creatures, hungry for renewed existence. Things that swore to be bound to obey me if I fed them
Illyana's rage, Illyana's power. What was hers was also mine now. My Rage, My Power. I knew I
could stand them all up, enrobe all those spirits, give them flesh once more.

Yes she was more powerful than any of us. But all of us? Once upon a time that answer would have
been yes; but now? Now I think the jury just might be out to lunch. Gods her rage was intoxicating
and the power burned ever hotter...

Then the moment ended as Illyana metaphysically slammed her links shut upon me, ripping the power from my grasp, and the hungry maws of the clamoring dead.

How dare she set me up! I am so not her fucking slave!

We were poised for combat, hovering on the brink of conflict when Bella Morte broke the mood by sarcastically commenting “Troubles at home?”

“What the hells are you doing?” Illyana hissed at us, ignoring Bella Morte.

“You used us as bait!” I spit the words back at her. “You set us up you bitch!” Words that earned me yet another glare from her as she replied.

“She was stalking you, the mother of darkness. What we… did… pushed her into a more wakeful condition. She was waiting for an opening, but didn’t know that I could sense her presence. So… I arranged, with Bella Morte, to provide her what she thought was such an opening. At a time of my choosing, not hers. Bitch fell for it and now she’s more asleep again.”

Jean-Claude answered while I chewed upon what she’d just said. “An opening that she fell for, pulling us into her mindscape and…”

Illyana finished. “Granting me access as well as we are… intertwined.” And a growl from her, more of a dragonish rumble, but one easily interpreted if you’ve ever tried to take some bones away from a dog that so was not having that happen. And the feeling that I and Jean-Claude were those bones. Damn, nothing humanoid should be able to make tones that deep.

“How did you know that Bella Morte would pull her little trick?” Was my question.

And Bella Morte was the one who replied. “Because Magik came to me seeking my assistance in this. She was so… worried about you ma petite; although she attempted to conceal it. But young love is so obvious and so very sweet. In the end she convinced me to help.”
“You do nothing for free.” Was my angry reply.

A small smile as she replied. “No… I don’t. Magik and I reached an agreement over some items.”

“What?”

“Ask your master, perhaps she’ll share.” Bella Morte replied while starting to look bored. Damn, just rubbing it in.

The oppressive power lifted, and the fires died out at the same time as her dragon fire shadow faded away (which really was impressive by the way). Ok… if true… well shit… she’d just saved us from literally from a fate worse then death. Crap… I’m so not apologizing first, guess conversing with us about any plans was beneath her.

"She's not…” I choked it off. Finish that sentence and any agreements Illyana had made would now be in question as the council considered us her servants. And a master that can’t control their servants was thought of as weak. And… so don’t want her having to try to prove that she was in charge.

I felt her right there as I thought it, and she apparently agreed. I thought upon what had just happened and Bella Morte’s words.

(We have unfinished business over this) I sent to Illyana and Jean-Claude.

She sent back a reply, flavored with bitterness (Of course. Why should this reality be any different? Regardless of my actions I am yet again in the wrong.)

Which I think was just being bitchy. I mean… yea she was in the wrong. Ten consecutive seconds of explanation would have kept this entire fight thing from happening. I mean… she deliberately set us up just so she could... Um… but still… Well Crap… No, not apologizing first.

A telepathic shriek of frustration and angst from Illyana on our link. (I HAD NO CHOICE! The Bitch would have sensed it! I had leave you in the dark! She was so focused on you that I was able to set it up without her noticing! Fine, I apologize. Next time I suppose I could just try leaving you all to die.)
Damn, the pain and fear in that shriek felt real.

(Quit reading my mind bitch!) I thought back only to receive a (I wish, shards I so wish that. This must be what the telepaths have to put up with...) Ok… that mean something, but before I could pursue it Bella Morte spoke.

“Family squabbles are so tiresome to behold, as our business is completed. I will bid you adieu…”

That’s when Valentina interrupted Bella Morte in that little Shirley Temple like voice of hers as she took the hand of Bartolome and asked a question of Illyana.

“Can you save us? Bartolome and I that is. All such as we go mad and are inevitably destroyed. They say it is because we are adults trapped in the body of a child. That is to be my fate, and likely Bartolome’s as well. Not today… not tomorrow, perhaps not for many years for Bartolome but… for myself I fear it will be soon. Sometimes I find I cease to care, other times, like now… I so wish to find a way out of this hell. I ask, can you transform our forms as you did your servant S’ym? Can you… free us from these child shaped prisons that condemn us to madness?”

Illyana shifted her gaze from us and now stared upon Valentina with a neutral expression.

For a moment I saw what Illyana must be seeing, a pretty little girl, and superimposed upon that girl Valentina as she actually was. The evil that takes joy in other's suffering, growing from black frustration and desperation, and at the bottom of it all, a growing depression and apathy consuming what little was left of her. Not her humanity, but her sanity, such as it was. Then… just the pretty little girl that was so not a child.

Her gaze shifted to Bartolome and a creature of blackness and evil was shown as well. Not as bad as Valentina, but similar in many ways.

A long silence and then the ghostly image of Bella Morte raised a protest. “You would leave my service Petite Morte, the both of you?”

Bartolome answered with a small bow. “We would beloved Bella Morte if it meant our lives. I thank you for all that you have done for me, for what you have done for Valentina. But you cannot aid us in this. No one can, or could. If she can then… Then Valentina would have hope and I… I as well.”
Bella Morte locked eyes with Illyana. “Taking members of another’s court for your own is frowned upon.”

Illyana replied with a contemplative and yet dismissive tone. “I have taken nothing. They wish something of me that you could not provide.”

Bella Morte’s ghost crossed her arms. “Can you?”

Illyana stared at them for a few seconds, then answered. “Yes… not here, not in this… world. But yes if I so choose. I have done such before.”

“Will you?” Inquired Bella Morte.

“That would depend”. Answered Illyana with a swoosh of her tail. “Are members of your court slaves or can they decide to leave?”

“All love me and stay because of that love.” Was her response. Yea, Bella Morte really did believe that, or so she told herself. The fact that Jean-Claude, Aster, and others had left her did cast self doubt that Bella dismissed with the usual obliviousness of one in denial. And yet… Maybe it was the lie that allowed her to function, and maybe for her it wasn’t a lie. It occurred to me that Bella Morte did not know that we had seen her wear a different form in Marmee Noir’s dreamscape.

“Then they are free to leave if they so desire, regardless of the love they bear you?”

“Yes.”

“If…and it is a very big if… I accepted, then I would require them to take a blood oath directly to me. This would transfer any mystical bounds.”

“As do all who serve a court or a master.”

Illyana addressed Valentina. “So… Petite Morte, little demon, you wish my aid. For you... for
your… friend. Why should I bother?” Hmmm, cold and bitchy but… I understood this was political theater as it were for Marmee Noir.

Valentina bowed low as she replied. “All such as you have need of services that such as we can offer. Save us and we shall take your bindings and give our oaths.

“We so swear.” Then spoke Bartolome who likewise bowed as he spoke.

The links might have been locked down, but I could still feel some of what Illyana was feeling and apparently it was not pleasant. It was disgust, but not at them, interestingly it was at herself. Something about what they were asking for appalled her.

Damn, the whole servant thing was really bothering me, and yet… she did say bit of both as to the bindings. I had hated being bound to Jean-Claude, even though it had saved my life. Hated it and had fought it. Fought until… until I guess I stopped fighting it as I grew accustomed to the benefits.

I had three of the four marks that a vampire could give. Why not the fourth? That mark was kind of forever, can’t be undone unless the vampire dies. When I accidentally formed my bindings with Nathaniel and Damian it had all been done at once, all four marks, but with me as the center. Doing all four marks at once was believe possible because I was mortal and the rules were not understood about… such… things… Shit! No wonder she said that killing her was going to kill us.

I suppose that was why I suddenly pushed so hard, why I insisted that she help them. To show that she wasn’t in change of everything. Proof that we were NOT her fucking slaves! To proved it to myself and… I suppose her.

(Do it!) I sent.

I could feel her reluctance as she replied. (It would involve the master spell, the core of my abilities, a reshaping of another. I have not done that since the creation of my soul sword. To reshape a thing… is… I am crippled in this, they may end up worse then they are.)

(So explain it to them. Let them decide.) I sent back.

(Perhaps if we assisted? Assuming such a thing is possible?) Send Jean-Claude.
She did and… I really didn’t like what I heard. Illyana could reshape them, give them new forms but… it might not go well. That was not the part that bothered me, it was when she explained that her innate nature could change them. I suppose they could get more evil, but what stuck in my mind was the fact that coffee now tasted bad. Had… I been reshaped? Had all of us? Just how much of me was still… me?

And… if she can do this… Could she heal Aster of his disfigurement? And what would be the cost?

Bartolome and Valentina looked each other in the eyes, I suppose they had some silent conversation, and then they verbally agreed. Bella Morte gave her grudging consent and departed after she and Illyana exchanged a few last cryptic words.

“I can have anything I want.” Said Bella Morte with a seductive smile.

“Just better not take it from me.” Replied Illyana with a frown.

(Just what did you trade for her help?) I sent, which earned me a grumpy (Not in the mood to share) reply. Great, she’s as moody as I am after an emotional blowup.

Then she sent. (Anita, a word of caution. Don’t listen to the voices. The other kind of dead. Yes you can likely raise them, but the bindings won’t hold. Such power always finds a way to break such bindings.)

(And you know this how?) I replied. Which earned me the cryptic answer (Ask Belasco.)

And yea I got it. The bastard who’d raised her back from the dead and tortured her. He’d been in control right up to the time she’d snuffed him. Ok… likely really good advice.

We sent the others out of the room, and boy were they glad to leave.

Then…. Illyana took all of us to hell.
Part 15b: The Shaping

I don’t remember much of what happened. I think Illyana did that on purpose, she never explained and… we never asked. No idea how long it took, not sure if time had any meaning.

I just have images, recollections.

Burnt orange sky
Basalt like ground, rocky and black
Hot wind with the smell of brimstone, burnt metal, and grit

Pain!
I hurt to be here
This place is… hurt
Not only a place of pain, a place in pain
It screams… It screams like Illyana screams
Like the land is but a reflection of her

A blazing red fired pentagram with a naked Bartolome and Valentina at the center
Holding hands
Not resisting in any way
Oath’ed
A wash of silver flame over them

There was a power and a will in the air
Reality felt like it was but her echo here
Her will was all
Energies gripped the two of them
Her energy… our energy

Shaping
Forming
Molding

I watched and yet…
I participated
As did Jean-Claude

We… we did this

My talent used as if I was a knife in a surgeons hands

A knife to cut
Extract
Excise

Jean-Claude knowledge of what to cut
What to reshape
What to remove
What to burn out
What to mold into

Her power to…
Make it
Force it
Bind it
Burn it into reality

Force existence to be what she willed

In the end a tall thin woman

A tall man, muscled like a runner

Elegant

Dangerous

Vampire

Hers

And yet…

Ours?

Illyana returned us to the chamber

Valentina and Bartolome wept as they clung to one another

They now were as they had wished to be

Bloody tears of joy

Of astonishment

Of grief

Of pain

Of fear of the unknown

For they now had a chance at a different future…
Part 15c: Steak

A darkly lit steak house. Our two male voices are busy consuming high grade bovine products.

“Not quite as good as the Bowery Meat Company, but it gets the job done oh so well.” States male voice number one. Then… in a more hushed whisper.

“Any signs of anybody not buying it?” Male voice one stated as he chewed.

“Nope, their all still onboard. And why not? The cover story is a good one.” Answers male voice number two. “And it is true… well mostly true. Apart from not telling them about destroying the forbidden zone in Russia, and the little fringe benefits we also want.”

“We need another aura reading. It’s critical. I’m… concerned that the effects from the last ritual… and just how off track we may have become.” Grouses male voice number one.

“I’ll pass the word.” Promises male voice number two. “So… just how off track might we be?”

“If… and this is a big if… if nobody is dead then she has likely forged a second link. My guess is either Jean-Claude or Mr. Zimmerman. Those two are the strongest. My hope is the vampire, my fear is the wolf.”

“Why is wolf worse?”

“Wolf is different, mortal, earthly, hot rage vs. cold rage. She’s a demon. Miss Blake was meant to be the temporary mortal component of the rituals; and I emphasize temporary. More mortal components… are bad. Plus we still have no idea why she continues to wear the body of the still unknown sacrifice victim.” (Author Note: See the first story, Snowflake’s passage, first story Scary Things, and no she is not wearing the body of a sacrifice. This is one of the things these two idiots have gotten wrong).

“You’re still not buying the delusional demon theory?” Replied male voice number two after both literally and figuratively chewing.
“No… that smoking ruin of a pyramid in Egypt rather disproved that, at least to me.”

Male voice number two gestured with his fork. “Let’s assume it’s not the Master of the City or the head werewolf, that leaves the head wereleopard and the other vampire. I’m discounting Anita’s weak vampire and wereleopard as that would make no sense. Micah has been a busy little were with that whole Lycanthrope coalition of his, he could have all kinds of light were mythical connections now a byproduct.”

Male voice number one agreed. “Shame if it is him as the coalition has done good work. I would prefer the vampire Asher over the leopard, again that mortal thing. Gads… what more mortality does to the equations… the magical instability of the enchantments would rise…” The voice paused. “Um… dramatically rise… shit… but… even two moral components in the equation at this point should not cause… what some have supposedly observed.”

“Yea, my girlfriends even a member. Is it possible that more then one additional link was created?” Mused male voice number two with a concerned tone.

“No… not possible. That has never happened.”

Then silence while the two men thought upon the idea. Then male voice number one spoke.

“Blast it, the solution is obvious. It’s the wolf, Mr. Zimmerman. Yes, he’s a strong one, but he’s the head wolf. All that extra potential due to being pack leader, and his own link to Jean-Claude as well results in extra energy spillover.”

Male voice number two agreed. “Yes… that makes sense. The aura reading will provide the exact details. But that means that Mr. Zimmerman needs to go by-by as well as Blake. I’ll pass that on to our Russian friend.”

Male voice number one chuckled. “And the leopard as well, best to be safe. Had a brief moment of panic there. Can you imagine the impact of more then two links?”

“No I can’t. The… well… the feedback potential would… would…”

“Would be beyond unstable… and apocalyptic.” Finished male voice number one.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Time for the Magik Seven to find out just what has happened to them. I’ve been writing the following chapters for quite some time but did not publish as I needed to make significant progress in order to ensure that all the pieces fit together. As always, lots of feedback and input from LordGrise.

And as always, comments are greatly desired.

Part 16a: Intermission

(You are quiet ma petite. In this case that means you are either upset, sad, or thinking. I would wager upon the thinking). Jean-Claude sent as he walked over to where I was standing by myself.

Valentina and Bartolome had departed, after first being given some robes (Jean-Claude had summoned some staff). They had brought robes and other things like a table, chairs, and a refreshment cart (absent any coffee).

Primo, Willie McCoy, and Burt had also departed. Apparently they remembered nothing the moment their respective council members had taken over (at least that was their story) until the council members had departed. With their departure, the others of our little group had arrived. Asher, Richard, Micah, Nathaniel, and Damian. Plus three additional people had joined our little party. They were:

Jason Schuyler As I said before, a Stripper at the club Guilty Pleasures. He’s a werewolf, best friend to Nathaniel, one of my occasional lovers (he calls it a fuck-buddy which tends to make me blush), and he’s Jean-Claude’s pomme de sang (Apple of my blood). A pomme de sang refers to a person who has agreed to regularly feed a vampire (or me, sigh… that little sex problem I have). A pomme de sang is considered a submissive position, but valued, similar to a "kept man or woman" among humans. Pomme de sangs are protected from interference from other vampires, and are typically given gifts and otherwise treated as a human might treat a lover. They are NOT whores and sex does not have to be part of the deal for a pomme de sang who gives blood. If they are weres it tends to not change their pack ranking, but… also usually does not hurt; especially if they are pomme de sang to somebody really powerful.

Jason’s in his early 20’s now, he met me when he was younger, he’s a Gemini (which somehow embarrasses me to know that), has blonde "baby-fine" hair and sky blue eyes. He’s also my height
and loves to tease me or flaunt his being a stripper and/or sexuality. He has an intense fear of
rotting vampires or anything similar due to being rotted on by two vampires bitches, now dead, in a
sexual context (I was there and a massive yuck does not begin to describe it).

He’s one of my best friends and always keeps me honest, like a good friend should. As Jean Claude
states so eloquently, Jason is the only person that can apparently give me hard truths and not make
me angry. And he recently became my wolf to call (Meaning I can call just him). Animal to call
means to can summon and control both were and none were animals of a certain type (unless they
are strong enough to resist). I can’t summon wolves, just him (e.g. my wolf to call).

**Remus**, a werehyena and currently Asher’s first blood, calling him a *pomme de sang* is way too
strong a description as Asher tends to switch to a new ones ever few weeks or even more often,
partially to do with his winning personality was my suspicion. Currently the hyenas are his blood of
choice as hyena is his animal to call.

**Kelly Reeder** is a female werelion, She’s short, slender, muscular, and blond (why are they always
blond?) She’s a fighter who uses both physical attacks and weapons, and is not anybody’s *pomme
de sang* or on the blood donor list. But she’d made her wishes known that she wished to participate
however Illyana may have use of her. An obvious political ploy but… one that was discerning.
Apparently she was going to be Damian’s blood source for tonight.

Damian did not have a regular *pomme de sang*, too low ranking, and he’s not a master class
vampire. Rather think the low ranking has just changed, and I suppose we’re about to learn just
what also has changed. Wouldn’t be surprised if there was sudden interest by some in being his
*pomme de sang*.

**BEGIN RECOLLECTION**

After we had returned from hell… or Limbo… not really sure of the difference, Jean-Claude and I
were a bit… numb I suppose. Numb from what we’d seen, and done. Jean-Claude just held me at
first as I shivered.

Valentina and Bartolome also just hugged each other and cried for a while, whereas Magik gave all
of us room I suppose by keeping her distance and standing by the opening to the cavern. In
hindsight I noticed that going to hell had no impact on her, which I suppose it wouldn’t but… talk
about coming from a bad neighborhood (yea I’m trying to make a joke but… hell… literally).

After a few minutes Asher and everybody showed up, along with the three others who were
apparently to be blood donors for tonight, and robes for Valentina and Bartolome (Jean-Claude had
given mental orders). Asher gave them both a very long and hard looks as they departed, still clinging to each other as if nobody else in the world existed or mattered.

But Illyana stopped Kelly as she entered. “You are not the one arranged for.”

“I took his place.” Was her submissive answer, eyes downward and shoulders slumped.

Illyana had a cool tone in her voice as she asked. “Why?”

“I wish to be... I persuaded the other that this was not his place.”

Illyana said nothing but had an expression half examining, half inquisitive, which prompted more information from Kelly.

“He refused and we fought, I won. He lives, but will limp for a few days.”

Illyana observed. “Your Rex will punish you for this as you did this without his knowing.”

“Yes...”

Illyana shrugged. “On your tail then. Your blood is acceptable.” That’s when Jean-Claude and I broke our hug and walked over to converse with the others.

Illyana had then started to discuss what was going to happen. First she was going to examine the vampires, then they would each take blood one at a time, from one of the blood donors, as she examined them. Apparently she believed that this would give her the opportunity to influence any… potential issues as she believed that the taking of new blood would unlock such issues.

Ditto for the weres, except that we would be teleported to some remote forest and the weres would apparently transform and kill a deer or something; Richard looked annoyed at her words and grumbled a bit about expectations for monsters.

And I got to go to an ancient cemetery, although Illyana was a bit vexed with me as I had drawn on
her rage and she now felt that most consequences for me may now be fixed and beyond her ability to influence. And annoyingly she would not go into any more detail until it was my turn.

And because of my prior insistence we all got to do it together. Yippe! Next time I really need to think before I bitch.

**END RECOLLECTION**

It was obvious that Kelly was up to something, my guess was lion Pride politics. Were groups are very hierarchical, and frankly almost all are little dictatorships. Strongest wins. Make a leader look bad and they had to punish you to demonstrate their authority and power. Very much animal alpha nature. And… sigh… human as well. I can’t really interfere as that just causes more problems then it solves. I know… I’ve tried.

I sent back to Jean-Claude. *(I could be angry.)*

He reached me and gave me a slight kiss and a caress on my cheek. *(No, ma petite. You are rarely quiet when angry. You ponder, and I think that place… that Limbo… is the reason.)*

Jean-Claude had me there. I tend to be very in your face and mouthy when I’m angry. Which is not always been the wisest thing to do. Heck, the first time I did that with a bunch of vampires I’d ended up bounded to Jean-Claude as he had to share his energy with me to save my life from the fractured skull they’d given me (Jean-Claude was not the one who struck me by the way).

*(Can she hear us?)* I sent.

*(I do not think so my love. Unless she tries that is. I am not sure just what she is truly capable of if sufficiently motivated. I do not think the voices she spoke of are our actual voices or thoughts. And for some strange reason I think… she does not wish to eavesdrop.)*

*(Just… aspects of us?)*

*(Oui ma petite, I suspect it is just that. One supposes we shall soon learn more.)*
(Just how... strong is she? I mean... she’s really strong here, and there... it was like... like...)

(Like we were little things ma petite? Worms beneath her feet? No. In that you are wrong. She could not do what she did without us. And she would not have done it without your passion for her to do as you demanded. She did as you demanded, in that you were in control as it were.)

I mused upon what I could recollect of what had happened in Limbo. (The reshaping... it's like she's blind to so many things.)

(Perhaps, as she said, she cannot remake something without remaking it into her own image. A significant deficiency for one who wields such power. One wonders at the cause of such a flaw. She is finite ma petite, do not forget that, for I believe she most certainly has not. And whatever she is there, she is far less here.)

(And yet she remains here.) Was my thought.

(She said it hurts to leave our world, that she is ever stronger bound to it now. That her rules are being altered. And I suspect... Tell me ma petite. What did you do to the two vampires who enslaved you?)

I went cold as I replied. (Killed them. Alejandro forced all four marks on me and I killed his ass. Seraphina enslaved me and make me love her with only one mark, and I caused her to be burned alive; God that hurt, hurt so much. But I did it.)

(Nobody makes you their slave Anita. It is one of your more enduring traits. That fierce will. That strength to do what must be done. Do you believe her to have such strength?)

(Yes) I cautiously sent.

(And yet we live. Did we not burn her alive? Did we not... have our way with her?)

I pointed out that... (She was going to kill us. You saw the stakes, my knives, my gun. They were all beside her.)
(And yet she could not do what you have done? The answer to that ma petite is the answer to much. False love should not be that strong. So... what has such power?)

(Quite being coy Jean-Claude. Spit it out.)

(She was soulless, yet apparently has one now. How could she kill that which provides the salve for her pain? Combined with love? In that her hand is stayed. And...). A pause.

(And what...) I sent.

(The ardeur. Your version can adjust another, sometimes grant what is desired if it is within its ability.)

(There is no way I gave her a soul.)

(No... yet... the ardeur was present during... It was part of the wild magic that was out of control. Do not so lightly discount what your ardeur may have done ma petite. Did you not win the fight for first...)

(First fuck? ... Yea... Not proud of that. But...) With a tone of both some humor and irritation. (What do you think Valentina and Bartolome are up to?)

(I believe ma petite that Bartolome is teaching Valentina the act of physical love. He always did like older women and Valentina is so much older then he in years.)

(You mean screwing their brains out.)

(So vulgar ma petite. But yes... I suppose they are doing just that.)

And that was that for private musing as Asher suddenly started a verbal fight with Illyana.
Part 16b: Demands

Illyana had a paper cup holding some hot tea, well past tense as Asher had suddenly knocked it from her hand while he grabbed her arm and shouted.

“No! I will not wait till later! We will converse upon this now!”

Apparently Illyana and Asher had likewise been having a mental conversation, although from the sound of it Asher has been ignored as Illyana had been verbally discussing what was to going occur with the vampires and the blood donors.

And now Asher proceeded to rant about how he should have been included in the body transformation magic that had just occurred for Valentina and Bartolome. And how dare Illyana, and us, treat him so badly by having excluded him. How yet again his needs were ignored and obviously were of no concern to those present.

The others had the good graces to look embarrassed at his antics whereas Illyana just stood there and did not look impressed. Asher dismissed Jean-Claude’s, and mine, attempts to verbally intervene.

“No! No words from you can excuse this. Let her speak! Let her speak now! Let her…”

Illyana was staring at Asher the whole time he was ranting and I thought I saw… weird, it was like there were glowing circles of words and equations surrounding him, some of them looked… lopsided and warped. She finally interrupted him, but only to address the group.

“Is this a thing? He rants and whines and you all pay attention?”

Ok that was rude, but… sadly rather accurate. And his rage… felt just like Asher being Asher. Damn it, this Prima Donna act of his was getting old.

“I! DO! NOT! WHINE!”

“Then what do you call this?” Was her bland response.
“Giving voice to my just grievances!”

“How are?”

“You did not heal me! You did not even give me an opportunity!”

I suppose there was some justification to his anger. We had not even thought of asking him. I mean, there was no guarantee that it was going to work for Valentina and Bartolome. Jean-Claude and I had decided to first see what would happen to Valentina and Bartolome before we dared to risk Asher. So of course he reached the conclusion that we’d ignored him when we hadn’t. I was more than a little irritated with him as he had not been ignored! To date Asher had refused any attempts to see if modern plastic surgery could mitigate the scars that were on the left half of his body. We first wanted to see if modern medicine might work damn it!

A bit of history for those who are not familiar with Asher’s history.

Asher is a Master Vampire of Belle Morte’s line, and is a lover of Jean-Claude and I. Centuries Asher was formerly part of a menage-a-trois with Jean-Claude and Asher’s human servant Julianna, until the Church burned Julianna at the stake as a witch and tried to "burn the devil" out of Asher with holy water in a form of Chinese water torture. The holy water left Asher badly scarred, and for many years he blamed Jean-Claude for rescuing him too late, and for failing to save Julianna.

I’m able to see beyond the terrible scarring and I came to love him (likely due to massive emotional overlap from Jean-Claude… crap overlap, just like Illyana… umm). This allowed Asher to overcome his hatred for Jean-Claude (though he still carries heavy emotional baggage). Gods can be such a drama queen at times. Plus he really likes S&M, and mostly doing the S part of S&M although at times…

“lt was neither the time nor the place, and…” Was her attempted reply before Asher interrupted.

“I SAY WHEN IT IS THE TIME OR PLACE! NOT YOU!”

A momentary pause then… “So… I am your… slave now?” She inquired simply. “Only fit to do as you demand? Do you bidding? Some kind of magic genie to cater to all of your wants and whims?”
Crap. No good. Really not good. And it really bothered me that Illyana was not physical resisting in anyway way. Not because I felt she was under his sway. No, it was because I felt she was letting him dig his grave as it were, something we girls sometimes do by the way guys. I tried to intervene only to get another verbal slap down.

“Keep quiet Anita! This is between me and our new master!”

Aster’s voice suddenly sent low, seductive, as he looked into her eyes and said.

“They need. My pain. My want. Did you not enjoy what I did to your body? Did you not enjoy the after affects? Think of the things I could do for you… to you… The dark pleasures I could inflict. I could constrain you and force you to experience pleasure beyond your ability to withstand or comprehend. I would pleasure you. Hurt you. Make you love ever moment. Don’t you want that little one? Don’t you want that? Desire that? Crave that? Give me what I desire and I shall…”

That’s as far as he got. And yea… apparently she can get so angry she can catch on fire. She ignited as if she was doused in gasoline and the flames spread to Asher as well!

Vampires do not do well with fire, or holy water. She was burning like a touch and so was Asher! Asher screamed and let go of her arm and flailed about as she stepped back and just casually walked over to the refreshment cart! As she walked away her flames died out, Asher’s did not.

The weres and I quickly pulled off our jackets and rushed Asher to smother the flames! We rolled about the floor beating out the inferno. The two vampires stayed away as the flames were a threat to them as well.

We finally smothered the flames and I shouted at Illyana as I got to my feet “God damn it you bitch!” The weres were behind me and growling at Illyana, apart from Kelly who looked like she was really wanting to rethink this whole thing that she had gotten herself into; Jean-Claude and Damian were trying to slowly flank her on either side.

She looked at us as she slurped a freshly opened Coke. “Yes… most likely. But why in this case?”

“You didn’t need to burn him!”
“I didn’t.”

“Then explain! ... this?” I pulled a knife with one hand as I pulled the jackets off of Asher with another, revealing his mostly naked body (his clothing had mostly turned to ash) and scarred form… scared but not burned. Not even his hair. He stopped screaming and looked astonished at his un-burnt body.

She relied after a slurp. “He’s fireproof now, at least to ordinary flames. Wonder if the other vampires are as well? And the weres I suppose. I’ll need to take a closer look... but I’d bet money on it. Can’t have a familiar to a hell lord who’s flammable, that’s just… impractical. I noticed as I examined him during his rant. Makes me wonder as to your flammability index as well Ms. Blake.”

She then popped an Oreo cookie in her moth and she just stared at us as she noisily chewed.

**Part 16c: Take two**

Ok... have to admit that she made a point. Not sure what point she made, but she made it. Jean-Claude sent for yet more clothing while we all huddled together and examined Asher, who had stood up and was looking with amazement upon his unburnt skin. Except her of course, she sat down on a chair and just watched us.

Asher started to mutter threats or something. “Cette salope... I shall...” Which was silenced as I punched him in the stomach. Hard.

And now it was my turn to rant. “You utterly stupid self centered prick! Of course we thought of you! There as a high chance it wasn’t going to work!”

“Ma petite is most correct Asher, that was inept even for one of your tantrums.” Growled Jean-Claude. “One grows weary of such unnecessary theatrics.”

I sent. *(You tried to mind roll her with sexual bondage?! Her?!)"*
Jean-Claude added his own comment. *(Did not the example of Cairo, or the Hyenas give you any pause?)*

The (Let’s pick on Asher) party was abruptly cut short by her sarcastic and angry comment.

> “What interesting ethics you all have. He tries to mind fuck me and all of you just stood around and barely even protested while he was attempting it.”

We all exchanged various levels of guilty looks. Yea… It’s not like she’s one of us but… Suddenly a couple of Sunday sermons were in my mind, and… not liking the role I’d just played.

Nathaniel offered up a brief and weak defense. *“Anita always pulls a gun or a knife and… Asher is just that way.”*

> “Which Anita and Jean-Claude tolerate.” Grunted Richard. That pissed me off, but the eyes of the others all appeared to agree what Richard had just said.

It got quite for a bit and then she just sighed. *“Crap, even Sam apologized after trying to kill me… Ok. That’s it. I can’t kill you, but nothing says I can’t hurt you. I give up, guess it’s kind of do unto others as they just won’t stop doing unto to you. Next time you set out to hurt me, I hurt you back.”*

Ok that was a threat, I had been rethinking other prior statements of hers that may have in fact not been threats, but that was definitely a threat. And yet… she sounded frustrated and… upset.

The air was filled with tension when suddenly Micah suggested *“Take two?”* Which earned him an inquiring stare from her.

He continued. *“Do over. We’ve done unto you. You have done unto us. Past is the past and we don’t mention or reference it again. What happens going forward from this point on is the only thing that matters.”*

She stayed silent and looked… contemplative.

Nathaniel quickly agreed. *“Take two.”* Damian agreed as well. Micah and Richard looked to me to
answer first while Jean-Claude and Asher stayed silent.

“Take two then.” I slowly agreed. It… made a kind of sense, and was a way out of the social situation we had all created. I saw relief flicker on all of the men present.

“Agreed.” Spoke both Richard and Micah at the same time. Jean-Claude and Asher likewise voiced agreement.

She was the last “Agreed.” And no follow up threat… that’s good.

Nathaniel added a question as Asher stripped off his burnt rags and put the newly summoned clothing (Jean-Claude had already changed out of his bloody clothing into a new white lacy shirt and black leather pants). “What were you trying to tell Asher before he interrupted you?”

She got up and got another cookie. “That what we did for Valentina and Bartolome would not work for him. I cannot reshape a familiar, or in this case a servant as that is the word you use for this… co-relationship. It doesn’t work that way.”

Asher stared hard at her, then his shoulders drooped a bit and he closed his eyes. “Then you cannot heal me.”

We all perked up as she said. “No, that is not what I said. I said what we did for Valentina and Bartolome would not work for you.”

Suddenly there was the flicker of hope in Asher’s face, I really hoped she wasn’t being cruel. “Does this mean you can heal me?” He gestured at his scared right side. “Heal… this?”

Which elicited a scowl from her. “Gee why don’t we let the arch mage get done examining you first? Or is that too much to ask?”

I had to admit it was somewhat satisfying to see Asher bite down on his reply. She continued.

“Still need to do a group vampire examination as I need to see the differences between the three of you, but first I suppose Asher gets an early examination. Everybody please step back.”
We all did, which created a circle of people with Illyana and Asher at the center as she walked forward and the started walking around him in a rather clinical and way.

Asher inquired will trying not to sound sexy. “Should I take my clothing off… la magie (French for magic).”

“No, I am very… conversant with your naked form.”

I could see the comment hurt his feelings. It went without saying that Asher was sensitive about his scars.

“Too appalling for you.” Was his bitter complaint. A complaint she appeared to not understand as she looked distracted.

“Your scars? Naaa, I mostly don’t notice, seen worse… Hells, I’ve been worse more then a few times… No…You’re too distracting. All that yummy… um… it’s distracting.” And that’s when she blushed. Hell Lord super bitch blushed like a seventeen year old girl.

I got a glimpse of insight then, the links really were two way. I may not like coffee anymore, and I might, just… might, be attracted to her. But she liked what she was looking at, just as if she was me. Shards, she’d even used my word for it… yummy. And Asher didn’t look quite so dejected anymore. Interesting… just how much the bindings were altering how she thinks? Gods, if so, then she’s the only one who appears to have had their speech patterns affected as of yet. Need to be on the lookout for speech pattern changes in the others, thank the gods that I appeared to be immune so far.

As she continued to stare I began to see the layers of symbols and circles and equations again. They encircled Asher, some were even embedded into him. And again some were distorted, lopsided, even… smeared. Some were golden and silver, others were burning red and black. I think… I saw a few words I understood, they were names. Jean-Claude, Anita, a broken and shattered circle that contained the name Julianna, and a blackish red circle that contained the word Illyana.

Then a comment from her that was aimed at me, a comment that had to be a joke.

“Anita, how on earth do they manage to pull off being sexy in lace? Men in lace is not sexy, yet… the three vampires pull it off. Spectacularly pull it off.”
I licked my lips in surprise and responded. “Um…. it’s an old vampire trick, and I think a French thing. Non of the modern vampires or weres can pull it off.”

“Lace was once the height of fashion.” Was Asher’s disdainful explanation. Which made no sense, and yet somehow did.

She finally stopped walking around him and the equations faded away. She commented.

“They did good work when they healed you. You should have perished.”

Jean-Claude had rescued Asher from the church, taken him back to Bella Morte, and the council, and begged that they save him. They had, but the price had been high. Jean-Claude had been boxed for two years, meaning he was trapped in a coffin bound with silver and a cross. Most vampires can survive it but… survive is not the same as being unharmed. Afterwards he served the council for ninety eight years, and was a real favorite of the Traveler’s hobby of possessing other peoples bodies for sexual playtime. At the end of his servitude he departed for the new world. Asher had hated him all the while, blaming Jean-Claude for Julianna’s death. He’d felt that Jean-Claude had let her die rather then risk himself. That was not true but… Jean-Claude had also blamed himself for her death and Asher’s maiming.

She continued. “They mostly did not have the means to fully restore you, especially Bella as this is beyond her for a variety of reasons. I suppose the Traveler could, but he lacks the motivation and of course the connectivity.”

She then had Asher, Jean-Claude, and Damian stand side by side, like some kind of sexy vampire casting call. Again she started to walk around them and again I began to see glowing equations inscribed within circles, glyphs, and other glowing writing. Jean-Claude had the most, then Aster, and then Damian. One of Jean-Claude’s rings had a warp it in as well, whereas Damian were all smooth. I felt a slight sense of amusement on my link with her as she said out loud.

“You did always want to see the rules as it were Miss Blake.”

That explained what I was seeing, the so called “rules”. And just my luck I lacked a magic decode ring… although… I suppose I did have a Magik decoder ring.

She flicked at a strange golden glyph that was part of Damian’s rules, it shimmered and I noticed
similar glyphs in the swirl that surrounded Aster and Jean-Claude. Then she dropped a bomb shell of a comment and all the vampires froze.

“Day walker.”

“Damian?” Asked Jean-Claude in a very careful tone.

“All of you.” Was her reply. “Of course I’m sure you’ll likely be most hesitant to test that statement. One proof will be that you will sleep when you choose now, not when the sun rises.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Yea… rather not following the canon in the books at this point. That does not mean that some magic wand might not restore things at the end of the story but… I tend to dislike such tricks as I believe that discards character development. Plus I really disliked the last book Laurell K. Hamilton wrote (Crimson Death), although Cringing Death would have been a better name for it (my God it was bad).

Part 17a: Asher

She flicked at a reddish black circle inscribed with black burning glyphs that was slowly rotating around Asher, I noticed that there were likewise glyphs around the other two. “As I said, fire proof.”

She stepped back and had Asher’s blood donor come over, the equations fading from the other two but not Asher. She positions the other two vampires at either side of Asher “In case he gets over… enthusiastic. Not sure what first blood will do.”

A comment that earned her a slight dismissive look from Aster as to the possibility that he might lack control. But… I suppose the concern was valid. Asher and I had been having sex and… and it got out of control. Both Asher and I had finally accepted that my love for Asher is real and not simply an artifact of my connection with Jean-Claude. But… crap… I surrendered my self-control more completely than I had ever done with any of my lovers, and… Asher lost control as well under the force of our combined powers, nearly killing me. That little… ok, massive, orgasmic bloodbath had resulted in Asher coming into his own power as a master vampire, gaining the power to call hyenas and werehyenas.

Only the love Jean-Claude had for Asher prevented him from killing him over that. As a result Asher and I are not allowed to have sex by ourselves any more. I… see why… I was dying and I loved it. Loved it to death. That really scared me… but I keep having sex with Asher so… um… Let’s not go there.

Asher was smaller then Remus, so Remus had to bend his head down. Asher used his left hand to tilt Remus’s head so as to expose the neck. Looked at the pulsating vein, then bit.

I saw a red pulse of power go threw all of the equations as Asher suddenly grew a black shadow
with red burning eyes as he drew upon the blood. I looked around, no shadow from anybody else… crap… excerpt me. I had her devil girl shadow again, which I swear had the gall to wave at me (which is like weird).

Then… A swirl of memories, all from Asher’s perspective. It must be the links! I try to close the link to Illyana, but she refuses to let it close; and I guess I learn the answer to the question as to can she force a link to be open. She keeps it open, and before I can protest it’s too late as I plunge into Asher…

... Burning with pleasure from Bella. **BELLA!** Never have I known such touch, such intensity! I howl as I spill myself within her.

... Envy… how I envy this Jean-Claude. Such beauty, such grace. I fear he will replace me in the graces of Bella. I maneuver against him in her court. Yet… over time… I…

... The first time making love to Jean-Claude. The passion, the pleasure, the contentment of lying in each others arms. Not the howling firestorm of pleasure from Bella… but more… love is returned. Bella does not… love… she is only loved. I learn that… there are some hungers Bella can never feed.

... Julianna. She is sugar to Jean-Claude’s spice. We are so happy together. But it is Julianna that is the true glue of our menage a troios. I am happy. In our self delight we leave Bella and explore the world. Twenty years go by as if in a dream. Jean-Claude departs but briefly to visit his dying mother.

... **BURNING! SHE’S BURNING! THEIR BURNING HER ALIVE! JULIANNA! MY**
JULIANNA! SHE CRIES, SHE SCREAMS, AND HER WORDS ARE A CRY FOR JEAN-CLAUDE! SHE DIES WITH HIS NAME ON HER LIPS! MY SERVENT DIES... BUT I SURVIVE...

...

...

I thought I knew pain. I thought the loss of Julianna was the ultimate. The holy brothers teach me just how wrong I was. They strive to burn the devil from me with holy water. Day after day they slowly destroy me. My right side is a wet bleeding burn of ruined flesh. And then, only then, does he finally deign to arrive. To save me he claims... as if this wet red ruin of flesh can be saved.

...

...

Years... I don't know how many... before I am sufficiently healed, if you can call this scared form healed, to walk and hunt again. In his guilt he bargained with the council to save me... as if this is salvation. He only did it to assuage his guilt. I curse him every time we meet. Bare my form, my pain to him. Force him to turn away from the results of his handiwork. He leaves after an eternity, or so it feels.

...

...

Alone.

Reviled in disgust.

Not even worthy of being hated... just... distained.

I learn to fly... but it is poor recompense for what has befallen me.

I nurse my hate, for it is all I have left.

Hatred of one who claimed to have loved me.

And cost me everything I held dear.

...

...

Denied one form of pleasure I learn other means of enjoyment

I learn to take pleasure in causing pain.
And sometimes from pain but… I much prefer to give then receive.

Broken.

Mangled.

I learn to be the monster that I am viewed as being

…

…

A chance!

A chance to harm him at last!

I shall take from him what was taken from me!

He shall lose his servant as I lost mine!

Shall I simply kill her? Drain her? Or should I cause her to burn!

As my beloved Julianna burned.

My hate warms my heart.

…

…

I… can’t.

For so long I wished to harm, to hurt him. And now…

I can’t.

Not because I am unable…

I… she… Jean-Claude…

I so wish for the pain to end…

This is not life… this is hell…

And to my horror and delight… she leads me out of it.

Anita

Are we… her… Jean-Claude…. I

Am I able to love again?

…
I love her, yet…

She is the center, not I.

She controls us, not Jean-Claude.

We are only allowed to do as she accepts.

Ever more lovers she gets to take.

While the rest of us must wait our turn.

I love her…

She loves me.

And yet part of me hates her.

…

Sometimes… I lay here…

I wonder have I gone mad at last…

Is this all just delusion?

I hope not.

Sometimes… I remember my mother

I’m so small… but safe in her arms

She makes the hurts go away

I wish I knew…

I wish I knew how

…

The storm of memories ebbs, and I see tears on everybody’s face, looks like everybody got spillage as well. Tears from everybody but her. Damn she’s a cold one.

Asher releases his donor and everybody was silent as she examined him, his equations pulsing with power. It was Richard of all people who finally asked, in a small voice.
“Can you heal him?”

A growl from her and the shadows faded away, along with the equations.

“Yes, but the details are unpleasant.”

She then explained and yea… unpleasant did not begin to describe it.

Part 17b: Test healing

Illyana went into nonchalant lecture mode.

“Vampires are dead. Yea I know… not exactly a big revelation. Dead and animated by magic. Able to heal, although repair might be a better word, from horrendous damage. But not from holy artifacts like a silver cross or holy water. That’s because the magic has the definition of what they are. Sometimes that can be slightly modified in that those of Bella’s line, or those influenced by those of Bella’s line have been known to increases in attractiveness. Not to mention that most vampires increase in power as they age; again modifications to their magical definition.”

Ok… she appeared to rather know her stuff. And… I bet part of it is the links she has to Jean-Claude and Asher. She continued.

“Asher’s definition as it were is massively damaged. He should have died. But instead the council poured power and expertise into him to stabilize him. And as he slowly recovered he was able to stabilize the damaged magic. That damage is represented by the warped and damaged rules that Anita was able to see as I examined Asher. Damage that plastic surgery cannot correct as Asher’s form is fixed. The very thing that saved him now forces his damaged flesh to remain as it is. But… if one sufficiently skilled in the arts arcane were to cut away the corrupted magical flesh while at the same time forcing power into Asher to force heal, as the Traveler did when he first visited you, then I believe that his scars can be significantly reduced.”

When the Traveler had first come here (Author note: as told in the story Burnt Offerings by Laurell K. Hamilton). A female vampire of Jean-Claude’s, by the name Liv, had betrayed us. The traveler had shared power with Liv allowing her to repair damage in a matter of minutes (Jean-Claude had
ripped her throat out with his hands in rebuke for her betrayal). And yea… in the end she learned that selling us out was a terminally bad decision.

Was it going to hurt? She kept using the word massively far too much.

Could it happened tonight? No, but a small trial healing could be attempted.

Could any of us do it? No, rather needed to be able to see and understand the rules and… I think the links mattered as well.

Would she? Yes, but she looked really grumpy about it.

What was the price? Which was why she was grumpy, the question had offended her. Hey… it was a fair question, I mean demon and hell lord? Right? Well… apparently not right. Wonder if this is how guys feel when they’ve pissed off a woman and everything you say keeps making it worse…

And that’s how Asher came to be sitting at the table with his scared his right hand on the table. The other two vampires were holding him down by the shoulders while Richard and Micah held down his right arm and hand.

Illyana was on the other side of the table, in her female demon form; tail and all. She holding a small knife. I was behind her, “look and learn Miss Blake” had been her comment. She stared at Asher and again I saw the glyphs and circles surrounding Asher, and this time I saw some of hers as well.

The complexity of her equations was staggering. And so many of the circles were either partially broken, or had been repaired by having different colored pieces grafted into place. And many of the repairs, they looked… fresh? Like they were still shinny or something.

Just what had been done to her? The apparent damage to her equations dwarfed Asher’s like a redwood tree dwarfs a rose bush.

She gripped Asher’s right hand with her left hand and then used the knife in her right hand. It went quick, she used the knife like she was whittling wood, stripping the flesh from Asher’s pinkie like she was stripping the flesh from a chicken bone, all the while there was silver fire burning in her
left hand, which spread and covering Asher’s right hand.

He screamed. Gods how he screamed, and only the strength of the other vampires and the weres kept him in place. I could see exactly what she was doing as she cut away his flesh and with it a very small part of his equations. And… I think… rewrote them with her silver fire.

Flesh grew on the pinkie bones as we watch, grew and while not perfect, was almost as good as the left hand. It was done and they released Asher who was panting from the ordeal, and then leaned over and threw up (and yes a vampire vomiting blood is so gross).

Ok, that sucked at many levels. Ordinarily having the vampire flesh mangled like that should not have hurt Asher that much, but she’d been cutting far deeper then just flesh. There was hope, but… the path of pain that awaited Asher was horrifying.

That is, if he choose to walk that path…

But not tonight.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

As I’ve said before, Mother of Darkness takes more time to write, and these are difficult chapters. Plus, as I said in the last chapter (meaning I wish I could publish write/publish chapters faster). I really disliked the Crimson Death book (the last Anita Blake book published), and that book has definitely influenced this chapter. LordGrise did a major rewrite of part 18b (as always great thanks be to him. He also functions as the Anita character police).

Part 18a: A Touch of Ireland

“Next contestant.” Was Illyana’s flippant remark, but she looked a bit shaken now that Asher’s ordeal was done. I don’t think it was the blood or the inflicting of pain, hells, she’d looked completely clinical and detached as she’d done it. I somehow got the impression that she could wade through a river of blood and death and pay it no mind.

No it was something different, she… she was rubbing her right pinkie like… it bothered her.

Everybody milled about, took a few minutes as Asher needed a some recovery time from the ordeal. I took the time to ask, on the links, why she’d force the links to remain open when I tried to close them (and I was rather unhappy that she’d been able to do that.) And I included everybody in the question. Turned out everybody had tied to close their links and had found that they likewise failed.

(Why did you force the links to remain open?) I sent with irritation.

She replied with no hint of apology (Had to, the links aid me in understanding certain things. Closing down the link hinders that understanding. And that hinders my ability to influence what might result. Please don’t try to close the links again. I’ll let the links subside once all of you are done doing what you need to do.)

(The intimacy of the memories is damn unsettling). Sent Richard. (Private thoughts and memories should remain private).
Yeah, agreed with that. Plus I’d bet he didn’t like that sex scene with Jean-Claude.

(The links make that impossible Richard.) Replied Jean-Claude. (Although I wonder who or what prompts the memories.)

Suspicious glances at Illyana who defensively replied. (Don’t look at me. I really don’t want to know what goes on in your minds. Hate having folks in my mind as well.)

Noticed that her answer was a bit of redirection. I think she knew exactly what caused the memory flow but wasn’t talking. Okay, her please was nice but… the fact that she could force the links to remain open demonstrated yet again that she was at the center of the links, and the strongest. Damn, I hated that. But… she did say please so… Need to talk about this later. General agreement from the others in that we needed to try to set some ground rules. Rather annoyed that Illyana make no comment upon the statement of setting ground rules, which somehow made me think about a committee of mice arguing about the cat. But back to business.

Now it was Damian’s turn. Just as with Asher, she repeatedly walked around Damian. And again I saw what she said were the rules that defined him. Interestingly, he had fewer glyphs and circles then Asher. I’d be willing to bet donuts that that was an indication of relative power. The stronger the individual the more… things defining them.

She commented as she walked around him. “I see odd… variations. The one who made you was vampire… but she wasn’t ever human, was she?”

Damian quietly responded. “She who must not be named created me. It was said that she was of the Fey.”

"Unseelie, to be a bit more precise...” was Illyana’s offhand remark, wonder how on earth she determined that?

Yikes… Fay and Unseelie at that. Let’s see… I recall from my comparative mystic creatures class in collage that the categorization of fairies based on court is whether or not a fairy is supposedly light or dark. The Seelie court are known to sometimes seek help from humans, and to aid them. They warn those who have accidentally offended them, and to return human kindness with favors of their own. Things are not all roses and honey however, a fairy belonging to the Seelie court will avenge insults and are know to be prone to mischief. Other names for the Seelie court are ‘The Shining Throne’ or ‘The Golden Ones’ and ‘The Summer Court’. The converse is the Unseelie Court, consisting of the darkly-inclined fairies. Unlike the Seelie Court, no offense is necessary to bring down their assaults. However, just as the beings of the Seelie Court who are not always
benevolent, neither are the fairies of the Unseelie Court always malevolent. Most Unseelies can become fond of a particular human if they are viewed as respectful, and would choose to make them something of a pet... well shit. Shit for Damian and shit for us as Unseelie really describes Magik in many ways. Oh, and of course one of the worse Fay insults is to mistakenly say that a Fay came from a certain court when they were from another court. I felt her irritation at my Unseelie comparison of her. But if the shoe fits...

Illyana gestured for Kelly to approach Damian. Damian inquired as to where she would like him 'to taste you', which I thought a very nice way to approach the subject; she went for the traditional neck bite. Likely wanted to make a statement to everybody, and in particular the Werelions, as such a prominent bite location was harder to hide (I tended to wear scarves and high necked sweaters when I have such bites.)

Illyana appeared to be focusing on one set of odd symbols that swirled around Damian, they looked... Celtic? She somewhat explained to me as she got ready.

"Leftover from his creator. Looks like some sort of magical back door... This is not ordinary vampire magic, this is much more subtle and deep, and definitely the work of a skilled practitioner."

Her right hand lightly grasped the core Celtic looking symbol, preventing it from moving. "And with this out of play, the rest should be meaningless and dissolve away." Then she nodded her head at Damian. Damian bit Kelly and drew deeply upon her blood. Kelly gave a faint moan of both pleasure and pain as Damian's rules flickered and pulsed... and then he suddenly projected what looked like a Viking shadow, and just as with Asher, we got a wash of unwanted memories...

... Standing on the prow of a Viking raiding ship, a clear but windy day. The shores the green isle are before me. Easy picking it is said to be on this island. I return to my seat and grip my oar with eager anticipation and resume rowing ever the harder.

...

Then a feeling of utter despair and fear.

...

Twas our doom! She! She! ... She who must not be named! She took us... killed most of us... made but a few of us that caught her fancy hers! Hers in all ways! I learn that she is the center of all and punishes all who challenge that fact. She is dark ecstasy built of pain and fear. Her will is all that
matters. Damned we are. Damned by She who must not be named.

...

...

PERRIN! My friend! He burns! The sun turns him to ashes and she but laughs in hateful delight! He walked screaming into the light of day and is no more! He has no choice! Her will is all... all... ALL! We are nothing, less then toys... I tremble in fear, and do all that she demands. All that she who must not be named requires of me.

...

Then a feeling of loss and emptiness. The bitter reward of surviving when others have not.

...

Free? Or cast out? She... she who must not be named has sent me forth. I... I don’t know what to do. Am I free? Or... just a discarded rag? This one, Jean-Claude has won my freedom. But what is freedom...

...

Trapped again. But now to a necromancer! I... must obey her. I... love her? Or is it just the power she has over me? I fear ... is she going to be like she who must not be named. Part of me... wants that?

...

And then the time I fled what I was, when I shutdown everything so hard. Closed all the links as hard as I could and refused to associate with anyone. And only later did I learn the harm that caused Damian.

....

I... I’m slipping away. She’s gone... My master... Anita. She’s... closed me out? I... I fade... I...

I...

am gone...

...
Bounded even tighter to her. And yet... she is... she is good, or tries to be. So not like she who must not be named. I wish... I wish I was more to her.

A new darkness! So... blazing. She takes us, all of us... or is it us who takes her? I... I keep remembering it different ways.

A compulsion, a calling.

Blood.

She's calling.

SHE’S calling!

Must not...

Must not...

Must not... no... she who must not be named... must not...

Not...

Not... No... don’t

I...

I must

A soft whisper spoken by Damian, the name “Morvoren”, just as Illyana twisted, and pulled forth the Celtic symbol. I felt a lurch, and noticed Nathaniel start as well, while at the same time Damian’s shadow drew a sword and appeared to shout about something.

And that’s when things went to hell for the second time that night as Illyana screamed and the links from her slammed shut as Damian hurled Kelly away.
Illyana screamed and collapsed to her knees while what appeared to be a strobing white light went off in her hand, casting strange and distorted shadows on the walls. At the same time both Damian and his shadow froze while a white mist poured out of his very pores and above him took the shape of an inhumanly beautiful ash blonde female, geared as if for a war that had been over for two thousand years or more. She laughed malevolently, flashing long, long fangs while I drew my pistol and a knife and everybody backed up a few steps. My blood ran cold as I realized that Morvoren, the Master of Ireland, somehow stood among us.

“Delightful! Mine now! Mine! And the power! Such sweet power! Ah, dear Damian, what a magnificent choice sending you out into the world has turned to be!”

Morvoren was obviously not human; no human woman had ever had features that beautifully fine and utterly perfect. Her eyes were anime large in her face, and the irises were in three concentric colors: gold, red, and a vibrant glowing purple. Her gaze was terrifying and penetrating as I could feel its dark wings beating frantically upon my mind, stirring all my old terrors. I could understand why she was She Who Must Not Be Named; to draw her attention was to be subjected to her power. She likely had to struggle to keep it in check...

Morvoren supposedly had been offered Mr. Oliver's vacant seat on the Vampire Council, and had refused it; seeing her, I could believe the story. I wondered if she even considered that it was far more likely that the ancient ban against vampires, that Ireland boasted of, had more to do with her survival following that colossal insult than her personal power did; somehow I doubted it. I mean, in terms of personal arrogance, she was right up there with Obsidian Butterfly (A female vampire I know in Arizona who was more than a little nuts). It takes a special kind of madness to believe oneself a Goddess...

The strobing light from Illyana’s fist kept going off and the resulting flashes of light threw random shadows on the walls, shadows that were shifting on each flash into mythical looking figures. Big shadows of giants, trolls, and warriors. Smaller shadows of what looked like the Fey. And all those shadows were linked by dark lines to Illyana, as if she was casting the shadows, or being used to cast the shadows. Thank God she’d slammed the links shut as soon as things went sideways; that was likely why Morvoren wasn’t in our heads as well. But that also meant she was alone in her struggle, and if she failed… shit.

“MINE!” Morvoren continued to gloat. “A new council shall arise; but now bound to me. It shall in part be composed of you, my unwilling slaves and this… thing, but it shall be my will!”
She floated down the ground, then bitchslapped Illyana, and as Illyana fell, I caught her. The instant I did, it all started to go wrong for the Bitch Queen of Ireland. I have only two abilities that are mine as birthright: my Necromancy, which it seems everyone knows about... And my other ability, that even I haven't a name for: Any ability or power used in my presence, and especially if used against me, I have the chance to learn, subsume, make it my own.

Illyana was linked to me; as close to me as my own heart. As soon as our flesh touched, I instinctively knew what Morvoren was doing. And were Illyana was strangling her power draw so as to minimize what Morvoren was doing... I could let myself shine.

Morvoren's arrogance was worse than Obsidian Butterfly's, I realized; Obsidian Butterfly had at least drawn me to her citadel to face me on her terms and on her ground. Morvoren had invaded our city, our citadel, all by herself, in the sure and certain belief that she would inevitably triumph.

As quickly as I knew this, all my loved ones knew what I intended. I looked to the wall, even as I drew power, and we all suddenly grew shadows. Mine was the devil girl, red of eye and eager of hand, armed with pistol and blade as I often was. My hand blazed cool blue, the color of Cherenkov radiation, and in its pale blue light, I saw the Shadowlands that Morvoren ruled. My shadow stretched forth her hand, and I reached for her. And suddenly we where simultaneously in the Speakeasy Caverns, and yet facing Morvoren on that darkling plain of the Shadowlands.

And we weren't alone. All those shadows and wraiths we had seen dancing in the speakeasy... were with us. Showgirls with revolvers. Guttersnipe punks with their switchblades. And all the made men of the yesteryears with their .45s and their Tommy guns...

Then what I assumed to be Morvoren’s thoughts invaded our minds, and Illyana's screams stilled.

... 

* Burning wicker man shaped figure filled with screaming men... how delightful the sounds of their screams... the smell of their burning flesh. A fitting sacrifice, a culling of those from the losing side. 

... 

... 

* The island is strong... these wolves in human form... these vampires... are kept at bay. Most who come do not awaken again from their day sleep. And those who do... fear... I am... intrigued by
their abilities…

…

…

They dared! The others… the Fay… they strive against me! Say my time has passed! I will not Fade! I find another way to resist… and the Fay take flight from me. I have wedded myself to this curse of blood taking. A union of Fay, wild magic, and blood. I grow stronger and all fear me!

…

…

This island grows… small. I wish for more… but as one who rules. Then… I feel my long discarded Damian entrapped in wild magic! Wild Magic that is not on the shores of the green isle. I set my trap and wait… wait for it to spring as it must…

…

All the while the bitch continued to gloat. “Oh so conveniently linked! Linked to her who is linked to my Damian who is linked to me! I felt the wild magic burn the night past, and I prepared! You will all be…”

That’s when we attacked her. Apparently a shadow firing a gun had an impact as she abruptly ceased to gloat and staggered back, looked surprised. Then it was grand combat as our shadows fought her as they shot, clawed, bit, and struck at her and her Unseelie horde. They fought back with swords and clubs and as they struck at our shadows we felt the impact as wounds and cuts afflicted us.

In hindsight it was odd seeing a shadow thrown, or being backhanded into a wall. Even odder to see blood flowing from wounds on a specter. All the while the strobing light kept going off in Illyana’s hand as she screamed, then she began to utter imprecations and incantations while continuing to writhe upon the floor.

Nathaniel, Asher, and I took up guard positions around Illyana and fought with any shadow that approached. Nathaniel slashed with his claws while Asher struck with his fists; the result of either were bits of shadow sent flying as they bled liquid darkness.

I noticed Jean-Claude and Richard fighting back to back. I broke rank as I dodged under a giant of a shadow and stuck my knife in its leg while Micah jumped upon the back of the giant shadow and clawed out its throat. It stumbled back before fading away…
Remus and Jason stood guard over Kelly as she had apparently struck the floor and was disoriented, and still in her human form.

The battle raged around us, and Morvoren’s forces were taking a hideous pounding. Having hordes of monsters on tap is all very impressive... As long as the other side doesn't have guns, or magic of its own. Ours did, and about a third of them were full auto sub-machine guns. I looked away from that ongoing slaughter, seeking my people, living and otherwise.

In the cavern, Morvoren was a mere five feet away. On the plains, Damian was the attacker she could not rid herself of, as he slashed and tore at her, fighting to win his freedom. A wave of smaller shadows surrounded Nathaniel and Asher as now Micah and I fought back to back. Damian was encircled as well, but he was magnificent, destroying anything that came within reach of his blade, and hacking at Morvoren in between attacks upon him.

And then he won free. In the Shadowlands, he severed the last foul, sticky binding, standing in stark contrast to the clearly weakening Morvoren. In the cavern she promptly started fading as she turned to scream at his betrayal.

And that’s when Illyana rose up behind her, with a snarling look of hate and darkness just dripping off of her, her right hand still strobing. She grabbed the specter with her left hand (Apparently she can grab ghosts was my later abstract observation, and oddly, I felt a pang of jealously because… well… I’m the necromancer, not her, so need to learn that trick) while screaming in rage.

“You’re not going anywhere, Bitch! Time to die!”

That’s when Damian, in the flesh, struck Morvoren. He’d severed her control of him, and now was somehow armed with a sword made of pure shadow. A sword that he used to hack off Morvoren’s left arm in a spew of ghostly gore

Fire burned in Illyana’s left hand, and Morvoren went up like a torch, while screaming like a banshee. The strobing from Illyana’s right hand abruptly ended. ”You are just too stupid to live...” was Illyana's snarled comment, and then she was holding that burning sword of hers. One of her transport circles abruptly flared into existence, and Morvoren's bloody physical form fell thru and merged with her astral form, or psychic form, or whatever you want to call it. Illyana instantly impaled her, nailing her to the stone floor with her burning sword. A containment circle of power promptly blazed into existence as Magik made some quick mystic gestures. Inside it, Morvoren writhed and screamed and burned.
Gods how she burned. Like a magnesium fire, burning so bright you had to shield your eyes.

I let the power slip from me, and all the shadows that had fought for us faded away. The burning glare faded as well and there was just red glowing coals and ash within the circle. As my devil girl shadow departed she grinned and waved at me with raised sword, while saluting me with her tail, that’s when I noticed that my shadow had fangs as well, long fangs. Somehow that annoyed me in that even my shadow has an attitude…

Everybody looked ragged and cut up, but there were no injuries that were or vampiric regeneration were not tending to.

Illyana wiped blood off of her lips and then snarled again. “Somewhere in this dimension there is a dial marked drama and it’s set way too fucking high.”

First thing she’d said that we all agreed with.

We took a ten minute break to attend to our wounds and recover. Illyana explained to Damian, and the group, “Bitch with no name still had her hooks in you”. The containment circle flickered out after the last of the bitch finished, and another transport circle carried off the cinders. Illyana commented as the ashes vanished.

"Atlantic ocean, five thousand feet up. Should scatter her sufficiently..."

Jean-Claude dryly inquired while helping Richard bandage a long slash on Richard’s back… “Are we now at war with the Unseelie?”

Which prompted another snarl from Magik and I swear I saw her devil tail flicker into existence for a second as she wrenched her sword from the cave floor. “No... and if some Fay think that, then I’ll explain it to them until those who remain alive understand that we are not at war.”

Not… the best way to explain something. But we all got her point.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

So yeah, really didn’t like Crimson Death so… no longer possible in this version of the Anitaverse. And… I don’t tend to undo things at the end of my stories so… I suppose it’s by-by Morvoren, don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out.

I know, I know… a bit cruel but… dear God that was a bad book. I was thankful that I checked it out from the library rather then buying it.

As always, major thanks to LordGrise.

Hmmmm, I suppose I should have Anita explain more about Master Vampires for those who are not major Anita Blake readers.

Part 19a: A brief lecture interlude (just what the heck are master vampires?)

Picture Anita, wearing glasses, in front of a black board wearing a white smock that shows her legs and a more then just a hint of cleavage (think sexy professor motif) while holding a pointer that she waves about as she speaks while sitting on a desk next to a blackboard.

Master Vampires are a higher class of vampires that have more expansive powers combined with fewer limitations. Master vampires are usually senior vampires or vampire elders with greater knowledge, authority, and experience than most of their kind, although I have occasionally met Master Vampires who are quite young, as vampires go anyway.

And now a few brief words about Soudre de Sangues. Every Soudre de Sang is a Master Vampire so powerful that those vampires they personally create normally have the same signature ability that the sire has. For example, most of Belle Morte's line have access to variations of the Ardeur; thus, vampires she sires are recognizably hers. On the yuck scale, all vampires of Morte D’Amour’s line are rotting vampires.

Becoming a Master Vampire is a process unique to each particular vampire. Most vampires will never attain that status; if they do, it usually takes centuries to develop. Some vampires will never become Master Vampires no matter how old they are.

Some Master Vampires have the ability to control the power development of vampires under their control (either via direct descent or blood-oath). Some Master Vampires can share, enhance growth, and/or retard development of power. For example, Nikolaos (Jean-Claude’s former
master) prevented Jean-Claude from growing in power when she was Master of St. Louis and he was blood-oathed to her. Likewise a Soudre de Sangue may retard the development of Master Vampire status in his or her followers. Nikolaos was likely very close to achieving the status of Soudre de Sangue.

Enhanced powers include:

The ability to Call Animals: Some Master Vampires have one or more animals to call. Mr. Oliver had the ability to call snakes, Belle Morte can call felines, and the Master of Beasts can call nearly every animal. This ability also allows them to summon and command lycanthropes of their type, but a sufficiently powerful lycanthrope can interfere with this call. For example, Nikolaos had the ability to call rats and wererats but Rafael temporarily blocked her call, preventing her from calling the wererats of his Rodere against their will.

Rise Early: Some Master Vampires, such as Nikolaos, Mr. Oliver, and Warrick, were able to wake, move, and use their powers during daylight, but must remain protected from direct sunlight. Aubrey, although not a Master Vampire, was capable of at least reflexive motion during daylight if threatened (that was when Edward and I killed him in his coffin by injecting silver nitrate into him, he sat up and was choking Edward to death before I took care of it). Damian is able to move and survive in the sun, and now supposedly Jean-Claude and Asher are as well.

Superhuman Strength: Master Vampires possess superior strength to a vampire of comparable age and may be stronger than vampires centuries older than them. It is very intimidating to see what some of them can do.

Empathic Voice Manipulation: Jean-Claude has the ability to form an emotional or hypnotic connection with his voice. Jean-Claude’s voice is almost a physical sensation at times when I hear it, like silk against skin or fur caressing your skin. Asher also has this power, but Jean-Claude is able to portray joy and pleasure better, while Asher is able to portray sadness and bitterness better. I’m unclear whether this difference is inherent in the power, or simply due to the individual vampire’s personality as Asher just loves moping and being a drama queen as he so hates not being the center of attention.

Human Servant Creation: Human Servants are permanently bound to a Master Vampire by a magic called marks. There are four types of mark needed, and when the servant is bound by the fourth (final) mark, he/she becomes immortal. The Human Servant can only die by violence or when the vampire they are bound to dies. Most Human Servants die if the Vampire they are bound to dies. I survived when I killed the bastard who enslaved me, but afterwards I was hospitalized and they had to restart my heart several times. Also, if the Human Servant is killed, either by blade or bullet (they can’t be poisoned or catch a disease), sometimes the Vampire they are tied to dies as well.
Some vampires, if they also have an animal to call, have used this ability to bond with an appropriate Lycanthrope as well as a human.

Not sure where we all stand on the whole marks thing with Illyana, and I’m unsure if there actually is a distinction as she keeps saying familiar rather then servant; which makes me think it’s the full Monty as it were, all four marks at once, which would mean… um… no quite sure in this context.

**Triumvirate:** When a Vampire binds a human servant and a lycanthrope who is also their animal to call, the three may form a triangular relationship called a triumvirate. This relationship forms a virtual circle that magnifies and shares the abilities of all participants. I accidentally created a second triumvirate with my servants Nathaniel and Damian; likely due to my being a necromancer. In the case of a triumvirate, the one who binds the animal servant and the other servant, whether vampire or human, uses their energy to keep the others alive and are able to have mind-to-mind communications. In my case, if I don’t eat, or feed, I will begin to feed off of Damian and then Nathaniel until I feed my hungers (the energy loss can kill them by the way so… not as good a perk as it sounds). Really need to find out how that relates to her and us. Really really hope that does not apply, meaning her feeding upon us.

**Resist Silver:** Some vampires, most notably rotting vampires, are not hurt as badly by silver. Some are not affected at all (which really sucks when you’re busy shooting fifty bucks of ammo at something only to find it means nothing). It depends on how much power the vampire has and how old the vampire is, though age rarely has that effect. If immune to silver, I recommend flamethrowers; and no I’m not joking.

**Summon Blood:** This ability allows a Vampire to cut or skin an opponent, but only if that opponent has a magical aura. Serephina (another master vampire I’ve killed) said she accomplished this by using a vampire's own 'aura of power' against itself, and that humans normally lack such an aura and therefore cannot be harmed this way. Magical entities and practitioners apparently have such an aura of power, which enabled Serephina, to cut those humans from a distance just as she does vampires. Jean-Claude admits to being unable to do this, though he does hold the knowledge of how it is done. I have also gained this vampiric ability to cut a vampire's aura, although I rarely use it. Crap… if she’s gained it, or can figure out how that’s done then she could shred a vampire at a glance with her level of power; best not to mention that for now. Um… crap. Bet that if she didn’t know before then she knows now.

A dark thought intrudes upon Anita’s brain. *(Indeed I do, now. Thank you, Anita...)*

Ahh, fiddles… um… back to the lecture.
Drain Power: A Master is capable of drawing all of the power from vampires that they have personally sired or who have sworn to him or her, reducing them to a weakened, near-skeletal state. Some vampires can drain power from any vampire and kill them that way.

Call Shadows: Some master vampires can call shadows, cloaking an area in darkness.

Pyrokinesis: Some vampires have a minor level of pyrokinesis (the ability to create and control fire with the mind), but major pyrokinesis is almost unheard of among vampires because flame is supposedly the mystical element of purity, which I think is total bull because demons don’t have any issues with fire.

Generalities: Vampires are rarely solitary creatures, although the most powerful ones appear to have a greater tendency towards being a recluse. Vampires congregate in packs, and in larger groupings that in cities are called Kisses. One must keep in mind that a Master of a City does not actually have to have a city; the term 'city' denotes a territory. Rural cities are larger in area due to smaller populations of humans whereas city Cities tend to be smaller in area, but contain more vampires. Usually all vampires in a City are blood oathed to the Master of the City. Roving bands of vampires are blood oathed to the leader of the band (who often is the creator of most or all of the band).

Most Masters of a City remain unknown. Jean-Claude is the most “out” of the Masters of a City; in that he is a celebrity, something the Vampire Council tolerates as this is somewhat of an experiment for them.

Well back to the story…

Part 19b: Time out

As we all took a break I took a close look at Damian. He and Kelly were standing by each other while he tenderly examined a bloody cut on her head. I looked with my necromancer abilities, my master relationship over him, and… and I tried to look at him as Illyana was able to look.

Damian now felt very different. In most cases I’ve always been a good judge of vampire power and age, but Damian... he had felt only a century or two old, whereas he was over one thousand years old. And a vampire that old that feels so weak never grows strong enough to become a master.
vampire.

But now I felt and saw that there had been major changes. I tried to interpret what I observed and felt as I privately sent to Illyana: (Lion to call?)

She replied from the chair she was sitting on holding a slightly bloody napkin to a split lip, confirmed both my question and the other thing I saw, and everybody heard her statement. “Lion is now yours to call, Damian.” Which meant that he was also now a master vampire. Well golly gee. Guess the Bitch of Ireland had been suppressing him all along. I wondered about Lion, though... That wasn't Irish at all. Or Viking.

Illyana got up and went over to Damian, and after some further examination it turned out that Damian was also able to summon his shadow’s sword at will. It looked like a Viking sword, and none of us wanted to touch it, even before Illyana exclaimed “No touching!” as she looked at it. According to her it was like her soul sword in that that was an embodiment of rage and hate, Damian’s hate in this case; made manifest by his sudden jump in power and the little thing with shadows that kept doing odd things around her, that somehow had resulted in him gaining this sword.

It was wickedly sharp and, according to her, it was highly dangerous to any undead. She couldn't determine just what it might do to a were, but there was a noticeable lack of volunteers for finding out; their instincts were that it was highly dangerous to them as well. So… a sword that is dangerous to vampires, zombies, and ghouls. Kind of wondered where necromancers and humans fit in that index? Again, a lack of volunteers for finding out.

I did find it rather amusing, seeing Asher looking enviously upon the shadow blade. I don’t think Asher had ever envied Damian about anything before. And of course there was some masculine ribbing about how they thought Damian’s sword was longer then Asher’s, which of course elicited the declaration that that there is more to swordsmanship then just the length of the blade, that skill in its use accounted for more.

Men…

“So she’s banished? Or…” Inquired Nathaniel asking about Morvoren. Apparently he was not quite sure if what had happened meant that she had been written out to use a TV series term.

“She’s dead.” Groused Illyana who was still holding that napkin to her split lip. “Imbecilious stupidious is now fish food. Her aura was completely destroyed; scattering her ashes was just a formality. All that she was is now gone.”
She then asked the group a question. “*Just how often do things like this happen to you guys?*”

We exchanged glances, then I spoke for the group. “*Too often.*”

I suppose we took a corporate ten minute time out (meaning you break from a meeting for ten minutes but it takes twenty before you start the meeting again). We really did need a longer break after Morvoren.

Richard and Micah ended up hanging out together and going over details about the upcoming were parties. It was good to see that they could get along about some things. Basic gist was they were both wondering if the other wished to attend their gatherings. Downright polite and courteous of them. Both declined as they each felt that each were group should have their own private moment with her. Rather funny seeing their shadows playing rock-paper-scissors while they were talking...

I had to agree, though. The wereleopards are a small group and rather relaxed about most things; after all we can all fit in my living room. Whereas the werewolves were a massive group of almost eight hundred and needed a meeting hall sized space, in this case they were going to be at their traditional forest meeting place called the Thronos Rokke which was also the name of the clan (place of the throne rock) which was in the woods outside of St. Louis; the wolves would meet there every full moon to gather and hunt.

After Illyana was done, Damian and Kelly went off in a corner to quietly talk. Gods above and Below, I so wanted to listen in... guess even I like girly gossip from time to time. Every minute or so their shadows would suddenly grow darker and start making out for a few seconds, then the shadows would go back to just being faint shadows.

Remus and Nathaniel started conversing while Nathaniel combed his hair; hair down to your knees needs a lot of combing and upkeep. They were talking about the club scene and Remus’s concern for his pack, and his pack leader Narcissus. Not sure if that was supposed to be a hint, but the rest of us ignored it so... if it was a hint it failed. Nathaniel’s shadow flickered into motion at one point and stared to also comb Nathaniel’s hair as well, but only for a few seconds.

Asher, Jean-Claude, and I made up our own little talking clique as we conversed over what had happened; Illyana just grabbed some cookies and a coke and did a fly on the wallpaper routine until Jason went over to chat with her.

*(What is he doing!?)* I sent to Asher and Jean-Claude.
They briefly observed the interaction and then Asher commented. *(Apparently showing more insight then the rest of us.)*

*(Oui)* Sent Jean-Claude after a long look. *(We are… too close to see the obvious. Too… connected.)*

*(What do you mean?)*

*(What do you see ma petite?)*

*(Jason talking with somebody who could kill him in an instant if he annoys her.)*

*(No… ma petite, that is might have been, but not what is. Look closer.)*

I grumbled to myself about male testosterone mansplaining bullshit and then tried to put my assumptions and knowledge aside and look again.

*(I see… Jason talking to an attractive young woman who is taller than him and who is… is that… blushing?)*

Asher had a grin in his thoughts. *(He teases her. He has explained where he works and is offering her a… free pass.)*

*(But she’s not even attracted to…) I froze at my thought. How the heck do I know what she’s attracted to?)*

*(The young wolf is attractive, teasing, and smaller then her. Most… insightful of him.)* Was Jean-Claude’s pleased thought.

*(He’s not any kind of threat to her.)* Was my sudden insight.

*(Yes… and what else ma petite?)*
(She’s… treating him like a person, not a thing.)

(Yes… mostly the old and powerful do not truly think of those less powerful then them as people. They are just creatures to be used if desired. Her reaction is most… promising. I suspect this is a continuation of her behavior when she hired you, but enhanced.)

Asher added. (I think he reminds her of somebody… and she is surprised to receive… attentions.)

(But…) I sent. I mean… she had to always been the center of attention looking like that. I mean, blond and perfect? Of course she had to have been Miss Popular.

Jean-Claude mused. (Her… descriptions of her compatriots. The group called the New Mutants, such a strange name, does not paint such a picture.)

I returned to a prior thought. (I felt that she was not… into men. But now…) 

Jason pointed to Nathaniel who was in profile from her perspective. Whatever he said made her eyebrows rise. You could so tell that Nathaniel had noticed her looking at him and he started to casually flex as he brushed his hair with long slow strokes. Both of them were exotic dancers, or strippers if you were not in polite company, and knew just how to demonstrate their physical forms with that grace that mostly only weres and vampires can archive.

Jean-Claude was polite in his comment. (It is always good manners to appreciate beauty, it is only just and proper that she notices the feast that is before her.)

And again… men. Here’s a hint fellow gals, many a man likes to preen in that they like being noticed by a woman. I just get to hang out with the far end of the bell curve of male attraction.

Asher made the more direct comment as Jean-Claude was too polite. (She is paired with you Anita. Likely many kinds of things are rubbing off.)

Yea… rather concerned about that, and just how… two-way that exchange might be.
I replied. *(Weird… hell lord one moment, power so vast in that Limbo place of hers that we can’t even begin to comprehend it, then embarrassed nineteen year old woman the next?)*

I had some concerns because *(Jason’s a flirt. If she takes it for something that it’s not then she could be offended.)* Crap, needed to have a brief talk with Jason to make sure that he’s not opening a big can of trouble on himself.

*(Perhaps he wishes to take another one for the team.)* Quipped Asher which caused me to slightly blush.

Until after the ardeur, the thought of Jason as a sexual entity not on my radar, was how he put it. Then he’d been an emergency ardeur feeding where he actually joked about taking one for the team. After then he was most definitely on my radar, much to his delight and my embarrassment at times.

Brief side note, I don’t feed the ardeur every time I orgasm, but I will orgasm when I feed, and this will cause all but the strongest of my partners to orgasm as well. Suddenly I felt… not… happy? Not sure if I was suddenly jealous or concerned or… It’s not like Jason’s one of my boyfriends, he’s just… my friend; and I don’t want my friend to get hurt.

Jean-Claude observed *(I suspect her emotions towards our Jason may be quite complicated. Jason is dear to you Anita, likewise he is to me as my pomme de sang. He and Nathaniel are very close as well. To better see her true reactions to most people, I suspect we will need to examine her interactions with those who lack emotional context to us, positive or negative.)*

Yeah… that was a good point.

Asher then made both a male statement, and a rather insightful observation. *(I do not think she has had much… practice at social interactions, and other things.)*

I countered. *(She certainly showed enough skill back at the meet and greet.)*

Jean-Claude disagreed. *(Group dynamics and politics are one thing. Personal interactions are another.)*

Rather a good observation.
Asher raised a question that was… disturbing. *(If she can heal me, can she cure Lycanthropy? That is a question that will occur to our Richard, if it has not already.)*

Yea… A chance to not be one of the monsters. But that would mean losing the pack, and us.

*(Perhaps…)* Answered Jean-Claude *(but… these rules… one wonders if one is locked in as her familiar, and as my servant.)*

I then just listened to Asher and Jean-Claude discussed politics as Aster observed…

*(Either way Jean-Claude, your court dynamics have shifted. Intrigue will fill the air for a time. She showed social submission to the laws of both the Pard and Lukoi, not to mention showing the Rodere respect. And by offering her throat to Anita, that will have people talking for a year at least as it shows submission to you and Anita as well. Few will understand as to the why as to her actions.)*

Yeah… I rather liked that. I take all kinds of crap from folks who think that I’m some kind of pushover because I’m Jean-Claude’s servant. And the bowing to the Rodere was a nice touch, even though it violated most were and vampire social norms.

*(Which instantly caused stupidity in some.)* Observed Jean-Claude. *(Haven came to the wrong conclusion and thought her weak. He expressed his power only to find forbearance is not weakness.)*

*(It was time that that arrogant kitty got a spanking. He thinks too highly of himself… Such a common flaw of most lions.)* Mentally sniffed Asher. *(So pleasant to see all of them with their tails between their legs. That Japanese werelion is the largest such creature I have ever behold; one wonders at just how large his actual beast is. But most annoying was the disrespect from Narcissus, to not come, to send only one representative, and then to make such an offer without consulting m… us was both rude and impertinent, not to mention harmful to my own, and your, interests.)*

*(You played it well my friend, reluctant assistance; the hyenas have lost face with the other were over this, not to mention with her, and are now in your debt.)*

*(The Rodere were much better at their maneuvering… a non gift that was accepted. One wonders*
what non gift she might give in return. And one wonders how soon before she receives similar attentions from others.)

(I suspect her very acceptance of the offer was gift enough. She is of Pard, Lukoi, and vampire clans, but she trains with the Rodere? Who will wish to offer the Rodere, or Rafael, offense when a Dragon might get involved? It was well played. I suspect we will see additional attentions from the Rodere.)

(And Kelly?)

Jean-Claude did one of those Gallic shrugs that the French do so well. (The lions are divided internally. Strong, oui, but Haven rules them with far too harsh a hand. Yet now Kelly is dear to Damian, a newly made Master Vampire with lion as his animal to call. How… totally non coincidental I would observe. Haven may rule the Pride but… now I think Kelly just became a pomme de sang in true fact. He will have to be cautious, and to offer Damian offense would be to offer us, and Magik, offense. Which would be strike two, and likely three, as ma petite is want to say, all at once.)

Politics can be such a bitch. Offend the bonded servant and you may be offering offense to the master as well, and in vampire and were society, ignoring an insult is always but always taken as a sign of weakness.

(One wonders what the other vampire Masters of Cities of America will do?)

(The Council is coming here, they will stay away if they can.)

(Nonsense. Expect offers, my friend… expect offers from both them and other were clans. Auggie will contact you soon, as well as Samuel. Likewise the Master of Las Vegas, although he will do it for other reasons.)

(Yes… he will likely wish to put the little disagreement over Anita taking Tigers from him in the strong past tense.)

(And the Tigers have no presence here. They will be concerned as they already find Anita most… disconcerting. I predict a delegation will extend a request for an invitation so as to get a close look at her. Likely from multiple clans. And they may include one or more Little Queens who are willing to get… close.)
I also have the weretiger lycanthrope virus even though I don’t shift, several different kinds as it turns out that there are white, blue, golden, red, plain, black, and all very clannish in that they don’t really associate with other were groups.

Asher then raised a question of… (Malcolm?)

Malcolm was the head of the vampire Church of Eternal Life, a fast growing denomination. A church that absolutely could give you eternal life. All you had to do was become a vampire.

A flash of irritation from Jean-Claude. (He has been wont to call ma petite a whore and a practitioner of black magic. I felt it best he not attend tonight’s meet and greet.)

(Then this Magik will certainly have him running screaming from her presence.) Was Asher’s darkly humorous reply. (I ask that you allow me to be in attendance when they are introduced, I would hate to miss his expression.)

(Yes… but they do need to meet… privately. I shall make inquires as to convenient times for her and for him.)

I just had to inject. (Tell him to not call her a demonic whore. I think she currently has a very low tolerance threshold for such insults. Plus I want to be there as well. Let’s see how he reacts to seeing real black magic.) Yeah, the insults from him still bugged me.

(I shall ma petite. The fact that he once used such terms to refer to you, and us all, still rankles me. He has never been repaid for his public insolence, his words have a price that others have paid, one supposes that now he will need to eat what he has served.)

Ahh politics… gods how I hate it.

Well… enough dilly dallying. We walked over to Illyana and Jason; and we heard the tail end of their conversation as she said.

“… I somehow don’t think I’d be allowed into the establishment, underage I suspect.”
Which prompted a minor laugh from Jason. “Like anybody would card you. One glare and that’s it.”

Jason made a good point. And why did I all of a sudden keep picturing Jason with dark skin? He was about as fair skinned as you could get.

We called everybody over, and then it was Jean-Claude’s turn.

**Part 19c: Master of St. Louis**

She grumbled as she stared at Jean-Claude, then asked. “Any dark secrets nobody knows about that involve secret powerful enemies who will take this opportunity to attack only to then be utterly destroyed?”

Ok, she was in a mood, can’t blame her. Tonight was definitely shaping up to be beyond interesting and dangerous at the same time. Two major baddies and we were far from being done.

“None that have not already paid a visit or are already part of the Council’s various courts.” Replied Jean-Claude with a laugh that felt like a stroke of silk on my skin.

I noticed that she appeared to also react to his voice as she again slightly blushed. Yeah... Jean-Claude’s voice sometimes feels like he’s caressing your naked body, and I don’t mean your elbow.

“Don’t do that.” She chastised him.

Jean-Claude gave a graceful minor bow. “Apologies, I attempted nothing, it is just part of what I am.”

She gave a little shiver. Yeah, I understood that shiver, sometimes his voice is like liquid caresses.

She then declared to the roof. “For the record. I’m grumpy, hungry, and getting a headache. The
next entity that attacks tonight dies in the most painful way I can come up with. And then I will consume them.”

Sounded like a joke but... no. That was no joke, and the rest of us were in definite agreement with her.

Again she did walked about the subject of scrutiny, and again I saw equations inscribed within circles, glyphs, and other glowing writing surrounding Jean-Claude, more so then Asher. She continued to stare and tiny stars came in to existence, like a small cloud with Jean-Claude at the center. Some were brighter then others, and the stars were all kinds of colors. They all circled Jean-Claude, some in tight orbits, others in long elliptical, others just hovering at the edges. I decided these must represent the vampires blood oathed to Jean-Claude. There were also two bright stars that orbited close by Jean-Claude, no real need to guess what those represented.

She kept walking around Jean-Claude, carefully examining him, and as she did this I tried to see more, attempted to use her vision to show me... herself. It appeared to work as I saw... parts of her I suppose. Jean-Claude's rules were dwarfed by hers. Her’s were vast, complicated, and she had her own cloud of stars with seven bright stars circling very close and... her rules... looked... damaged? As if major chunks were missing and had been repaired, like holes in a wall you’ve spackled over, lots of different types of spackle to stretch the analogy. And yet there were cracks in some of the circles, half erased glyphs, and some of her rings of glyphs looked broken, missing parts, and I got the sense that some things that should have been there were just completely missing. I think she sensed my peeking, and suddenly it was just Jean-Claude's rules that I could see again.

Just like with the other vampires she had Asher and Damian positioned on either side of Jean-Claude as he prepared to take blood from Jason. Richard inquired with a tone of resignation... “I assume we’ll be experiencing more memories?”

“Yes.” Was her absent minded reply. The assurance of it made me, and I’m sure the rest of the guys, conclude that she was doing it somehow. Before I had a chance to complain about that, the links flared fully open again as Jean-Claude took blood from Jason.

As with the others, a pulse of power went though his equations and several new symbols blossomed into existence while simultaneously his shadow manifested again. And yet again more memories...

... 

It’s cold... she brings the warmth.
I hunger… she feeds me.

I cry… she comforts me.

Mamma…

...

...

We are poor… and Mamma sells me to the Montdidiers.

They are a great family.

I am to be a friend to their son, Diodore.

Where once I lived on dirt floors, now I walk upon wood.

I dress as Diodore dresses.

I eat as Diodore eats, apart from formal family meals.

I am educated as Diodore is.

I learn proper manners, as Diodore learns.

But I am not Diodore.

I am his whipping boy. When he is to be punished, it is my back that receives the switch.

The blows.

The pain.

The scars.

The reminder of what I am… of what I was…

Only later, do I truly understand the sacrifice Mamma made for me.

How she gave me up not for just money, but for the chance to be not as I was born.

I hated her for that… and… later… how I loved her for it.

But still there is the hate for the loss of my Mamma.

...

...

I grow to be a man.

I take a wife, we are happy for a brief time.
She dies in birthing our child, who dies as well.

I grieve...

...

...

Lessette has made me a monster.

A drinker of blood.

But worse… I burn… burn with desire for others!

To feed upon more then just blood.

I need to feed upon more then just blood or I shall go mad!

They… enjoy tormenting me.

Preventing my feeding of this thing called the Ardeur…

I meet Julian, a Master of the City.

He brings me those to feed upon… the diseased, the maimed, the horrid.

Yet I must feed, or go mad…

I feed… and something slowly dies within me.

How I hate this life.

...

...

Bella...

She has brought me to her court.

I am fair, and have blue eyes that she desires, I complete some collection she has created from the palest of blue to the deepest, which is I.

I am still but a thing, a possession… but…

This cage is most pleasant compared to my prior torments.

I meet one named Aster, I dislike his dark glances of envy…

He is fair of form but… is forever jealous of others.

Of me.
I worship Bella, as she has shown me how to control this Ardeur.

How to ride it, rather then it ride me.

...

...

Lovers...

Aster and I are lovers...

Who could ever have imagined such a thing.

And united with Julianna...

I again know true love for a while.

...

...

Disaster!

Loss!

Mamma has died... and my family has driven me forth in hate as to my form when I came to visit her upon the news of her declaim and impending death.

Then... I learn that the Church has Aster and Julianna!

I ride like the wind, three horses die beneath me only to find...

Julianna is to burned at the dawn and I must hide from the SUN that rises.

Rises NOW!

God how I hate the SUN! I must hide from it or I shall perish!

Sleep the day away in the earth.

Only to find Julianna... gone...

Aster horrible maimed and dying.

I slew all those I found...

And somehow get Aster back to Bella, and the council.

...
He lives…

He blames me…

He hates me…

It is just… for do I not hate myself?

If only… that is what torments me… if only.

Two years I live in a box, no blood, no Ardeur feeding.

I turn into a mummy… numb to all but the pain of my hunger, and the silver that binds me to the coffin I lay within.

Then… Bella brings me back.

To be a plaything for the council.

To serve as they will…

To once again be degraded… a thing for the amusement of others.

But… He lives!

I tell myself it was worth it.

But I leave once my hundred years of service are done.

He hates me… he will always hate me.

Augustine helps me to find safe passage to the new world.

…

…

Are all of us monsters?

Must we be?

Is it our curse? Or do we inflict it upon each other?

This Nikolaos, my Master… is a foul thing.

I bide my time and…

I am finally free.

And I find Anita…

…
She vexes me!
She frustrates me!
She mocks me!
She flees from me!
And...

What am I to do?
I... put away all that I am for her...
I woo her as if I were once again a mortal.
I win in the end, but not by my hand, but by Richards deeds...

... 

Aster returns...
We find... a kind of peace...
She helps us find it.
She is the reason we can finally speak to each other.
We love her...

...

And then it was over. We shook ourselves from the wash of memories, and noticed that now Jean-Claude had a shadow that was black as night, but wearing a high colored cloak.

“That’s going to have its uses.” Illyana commented as she stared at the shadow and at Jean-Claude’s rotating rules.

She explained to us that apparently Jean-Claude could now manifest and control his shadow if he so willed. A talent he demonstrated by standing still and having his shadow walk about the room. Apparently he could see and hear with his shadow as well. The downside being he had to stand still and do nothing while concentrating on his shadow, and the shadow could only move as fast he had could walk or run.
Ok, that has interesting implications, Richard had chuckled over something as Illyana had explained.

Then Illyana suddenly got a mischievous glint in her eye and grasped one of Jean-Claude’s symbols and squeezed hard with a burst of power. The glyph changed slightly, and so did Jean-Claude’s shadow; it now was in the shape of a bat.

A bat… I mean… what on earth prompted that?

“A bat? How… cliché.” I attempted to chastise her. I mean really… so Bela Lugosi. What’s next, talking about the music from the children of the night?

My rebuke apparently meant nothing to her as she just smiled in amusement, and Richard suspiciously kept chuckling. But… she’d just changed his rules. And our suspicions were now confirmed. She was trying to not only guide what was happening, but to shape it as well, and apparently she could to some extent.

And Richard had seen that she could truly do it.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Been awhile as I’ve been focusing on Top Gear X and Pride, Prejudice, Illyana, and Zombies (both of those stories are approaching their conclusions). When I first started this work I had no idea just how serious it would become (at least I think it’s serious).

The character of Richard Zeeman, one of the main Anita Blake storyline characters, has always been interesting. He accidentally became a werewolf because he took an experimental vaccine against lycanthropy only to become the very thing he feared so much. Supposedly his resistance to his own supernatural nature parallels Anita's resistance to hers in the early novels. If Jean-Claude and Asher represent the side of Anita that fully accepts her darker nature, then Richard represents the side that cannot accept it.

A reminder that a component of this kind of writing is making sure that Illyana does not become a Mary Sue type of character (google it if you don’t understand the reference). Can’t have her being an all powerful, flawless creatures having no stories to tell (as I’ve said before, Godzilla vs. bambi is a short film).

Part 20a: Richard part 1

Okay… I thought. Three down and four to go. I supposed it was time for the Weres and I.

Illyana announced that the next session would take place outside at a location that she’d already selected and that the presence of the others (Jason, Remus, and Kelly) were not needed or desired. All of whom had the intelligence to not protest, although Kelly and Damian were really touchie feelie so that took a bit of a time as there was a long goodbye between the two of them. It was so obvious that they were now an item; which made me feel rather happy for Damian as he really tends to get the least attention from me.

While Kelly and Damian were saying goodbye, Nathaniel asked a question of her. “What was the strangest place you’ve ever been to?” I suppose he was thinking Wonderland. Turns out that girl must have been to all kinds of odd places.

She got a slight frowny squinty face for a few seconds as she thought, then replied. “The bearded dimension. Looked just like my old home dimension, people and all, but everybody had beards.”

“All the men had beards?” Was Nathaniel’s reply.
“No, everybody had beards, men, women, babies, pets, animals, aliens, space critters, trees, everything.”

“That’s… weird.” Was his unsurprisingly hesitant reply.

“Yeah… hated me there as well, demon is one thing but beardless? That’s crossing one line two many.”

Okay, not sure if she’s pulling our legs. Somehow I think she’s telling the truth, which is even stranger.

Kelly finally departed, but before we teleported Richard asked a question, or to be more precise, the question. He asked politely, was calm, and the question was spoken quietly, but we all heard.

“Can you? This must be how Aster felt when you ignored him mentally. Can you?”

An expression of resigned perseverance crossed her face. “I did not answer because Ms. Blake has set the social rules. Such private conversations are a source of annoyance to her and her annoyance trumps yours.”

Well that’s good to know that my rules are still in force, but I was beginning to wonder just why? Yeah… we all got our insecurities and all that blonde hotness is just one of mine. I know my men keep telling me that I’m the center of their lives but… the past always lingers.

Illyana continued. “The short answer is no. You are one of my familiars. I cannot change such a fundamental aspect of you.”

I internally braced myself, but Richard surprised me as he remained calm. “And healing Asher was not? Changing Jean-Claude’s shadow to a bat because I thought that it would be funny was not?”

“No. Such things are cosmetic, not intrinsic. I could change your fur color, but not your animal.”
A half smiling sad look from Richard. “I thought as such. Don’t... know what I’d do anymore if you actually had the ability. Guess I’m getting too comfortable being a monster.”

Illyana had a look of slight puzzlement as she replied. “And you think not being a were would make you less of a monster?”

And now Richard lost the sad look and the all too familiar look of growing anger replaced it. Looks like I’m not the only one who knows how to say the wrong thing.

“Yes.” Was his half growled answer.

“But everybody is a monster.” Was her reply. “You all are. You always were. Everybody is. Unlike me your intrinsic nature does not make you evil, you get a choice. You get to choose whether you behave as one or not.”

Arguments that we had all made to Richard. Arguments that he had always rejected. Arguments that he still didn’t look very receptive to.

“And your point.” Was his sarcastic reply. “Going to out monster us? Show just how evil you are? How Anita is just a happy homemaker compared to you?”

Yep, angry Richard had the mike yet again. At least he was yelling at her and not me.

“No.” Was her terse reply.

There was a flash of light and we were all now in the woods under the night sky.

**Part 20b: Richard part 2**

The night air was chilly. Scattered tall trees loamed over us and the overall scent was of a pine forest. Felt like we were at a much higher elevation. Definitely not Thonnos Rokke lands.
Dark sky, night sounds, and not a hint of human inhabitation.

“Just as the Vampires needed to take blood, the three of you need to kill and partake of flash and blood.” Illyana announced with a cold tone, rather obvious that Richard’s little outburst had annoyed her. “I will examine you before the kill, and then provide a deer for each of you; please slay it quickly. I will be examining you again afterwards, likely while you are eating.”

“Because we’re just monsters right?” Answered Richard. “Beasts. Just fit to kill.”

“You’re weres. This is what you do every full moon.” Was her reply. “What is the big deal?”

Richard kicked off his shoes and began to take his shirt off. “That’s by choice, this isn’t. Just monster on command I suppose.”

“By choice, your hairy.… The moon rules you, on those nights, you need to turn, you need to feed. If we leave it until then, and if there are any problems, I assure you that they will manifest in the worst possible fashion. I need this to be done while I am able to observe and can attempt to mitigate any potential harm. This needs to be done while I’m calm and in control. You need to do this now because I’m currently calm and in control. Don’t make this more difficult then it needs to be.”

Shirt gone, he began to remove his pants. He was not wearing underwear; most weres don’t as getting out of your clothing when you need to shift can be a pain so less is tends to be the norm.

“Because you care?” He folded his clothes neatly, the air temperature not bothering him anymore than his nudity. Weres have very little nudity issues, although… I got the sense that he was throwing it in her face. Exposing himself as a kind of statement.

Illyana sounded exasperated rather then concerned. “Because you are tied to me and harm to you is harm to me. I’m attempting to prevent you from being harmed.” She began to circle him, and he began turning in place, ensuring his front was toward her. Just he his back was turned to us he started idly scratching his balls. Oh gods… I thought. Richard… not now…

The symbols and glyphs and whatnot I was expecting to start appearing didn't. Instead Illyana stopped and stared at Richard's face. "What are you doing?"
“You’re the one who decided that I need to kill something.” Richard said with an angry grin. "There’s another way to raise power; you’ve already done it once with us."

I felt like I’d been punched in the stomach. What had happened with Illyana, to us, had been anything but willing, and had had nothing to do with raising power. To say nothing of the fact that raising power wasn’t what Illyana was attempting to do. Why was Richard suddenly being so crude and cruel. The gasps and sighs of the others told me they were all equally dismayed. I hate to say it, but Richard just always finds a way to do the wrong thing.

He was pissed, and now so was I. “Damn it Richard? What's gotten into you?”

“Illlana, to us, had been anything but willing, and had had nothing to do with raising power. To say nothing of the fact that raising power wasn’t what Illyana was attempting to do. Why was Richard suddenly being so crude and cruel. The gasps and sighs of the others told me they were all equally dismayed. I hate to say it, but Richard just always finds a way to do the wrong thing.

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He was pissed, and now so was I. “Damn it Richard? What's gotten into you?”

“The waves of power Richard had started projecting simply… stopped, as what Illyana said sank in. Deeply.

I then had a moment of epiphany. “Richard, you don’t want me to see you kill and feed... do you.” Was my soft question as my anger faded.

His voice was that tired, defeated monotone that I associated with his clinical depression coming on. Not good. “No. That’s when I lost you. When you saw me… the pack… feed.”

Richard was correct. I thought I could handle it. I said I could handle it. Said that I could accept his true nature. Felt that I could. I told Richard to embrace his beast and that I would be there for him. I had been so certain.

Then he sifted into his half wolf from right on top of me and I learned differently.
I was wrong.

I couldn’t accept it.

I couldn’t accept his beast.

Richard had just killed Marcus in a fight to the death for control of the Lukoi, that’s when he became Ulfric of the Throonos Rokke clan. They… the werewolves have a ritual for dead werewolves. It involves incorporating the dead and slain into their mystical mind as it were, their racial memory.

They… They eat their dead, the only weres that do.

Richard, in his wolf man form, ripped the still quivering heart from Marcus and had eaten it right in front of me. And the rest of the Lukoi had started to consume the remainder of the body. And they wanted me to feed as well if I were willing to embrace all that his beast was. To be one with their pack. To share his beast. To hunt with them, kill with them, feed with them.

I was so revolted.

Disgusted.

Terrified.

I… I felt like I was just food.

Prey.

And they loved my fear, it was like an appetizer to them. Big bad Executioner was terrified of them and they loved it. I was just a human back then. Just a necromancer. Not one of the monsters… not yet. And a human being who commits cannibalism and then dies is one breath of power away from becoming a revenant, an uncontrolled flesh-eating zombie. God alone knew what a reanimated necromancer werewolf might be.

I did the only thing I could.
I fled.

They all shifted to full wolf form and hunted after the feeding.

The feel of Richard’s power had been so seductive, right up to the point they ate Marcus.

I… I had recoiled. I couldn’t face it. People don’t eat people, but… weres do. Richard did. Richard had done so before. Only dead wolves of the Throonos Rokke clan but… I just couldn’t take it.

It was a testament to Richard's strength of will and control over the pack that they had not taken up my unintended challenge, hunted me down, and eaten me as well. That night had been the night I slept with Jean-Claude. Richard had been my fiancée, and I abandoned him because I just couldn’t cope. The one two punch of my rejection of Richard, and concomitant acceptance of Jean-Claude, had devastated Richard and driven him to a host of self-destructive if not frankly suicidal actions. It had taken him a very long time to admit and accept that, monster and all, he wanted to live.

“I’m sorry Richard, I’ve apologized before. I wish I could take it back. But I can’t.”

A soft reply, almost a plea. “Why is it ok for Micah, but not me?”

Micah answered Richard’s question in a neutral but non-judging tone. “Because of your behaviors at the time, Richard. You refused to accept her Ardeur, you drove everyone away. That, and because after she became infected with the lycanthrope virus and the ardeur, she needed us as much as we needed her, even though she’s unable to change form. She’s more accepting now because she has her own Hungers… the Ardeur, and the hungers of her beasts.”

I spoke for myself. “I understand now.”

Yeah… I understand the monsters so much better now that I was one. Lucky me.

Richard asked a question, to me I suppose. “Yet taking blood ok.” Reference to the vampires I guess.

For a long time I’d refused to share blood with any vampire, not even Jean-Claude. I found it
monstrous. But… not anymore. Again another part of me that had change, or been worn away.

I gave him an equally neutral reply. “Yes, it is, Richard it’s… it just is. My necromancy means the undead can never horrify me the way you did that night, because I instinctively understand them. Lycanthropy... I just wasn’t prepared for what a were truly is. I… was wrong to ask what I asked of you. We should have... taken that easier... Slower. I was very very wrong.”

Richard just hung his head in pain. “Micah, you have what I so want. When she needed me the most, when I had a chance to get her back, I rejected her just as she had me. I found the ardeur to be just as monstrous as she found the pack to be. I rejected her, and drove her away, and so I lost her for a second time. Lost her to you Micah. Because you could do what I wouldn’t… couldn’t.”

A sniffl. “And Anita... I should never have rejected you for the ardeur, for what it drove you to... I had no right to judge you, Anita. I am so sorry...”

Richard's answer broke something open in my soul, an abscess of hurt I hadn't dared to go near for a long time. It wasn't angry, just wretched and sad at what we had lost, at what we kept doing to each other. What we always do to each other.

I suppose Richard and I then had a good cry as we then hugged. A hug that was slowly joined by everybody present, apart from Illyana that is. It felt good. Things could never be as they once were, as they might have been. As we both had so wanted. But this was good. And maybe, just maybe, we could finally find a way to stop hurting each other.

The group hug lingered, then a cough from her.

“Ahem.”

Bitch.

I knew what she was trying to say. But still… bitch.

Part 20c: Richard part 3
Richard simply stood there as Illyana once again began to pace around him. Glyphs and symbols flowed into visibility as she did, following their orbits around him, along with a veritable cloud of lights that I belatedly realized was each its own set of miniaturized orbital structures that defined another person, one of the pack I assumed. There were two far more complex orbital systems that orbited the totality of him, and one looked familiar; as I studied it, I realized it was Jean Claude. That likely meant the other set was me... but even as I realized that, my attention was ineluctably drawn back to the patterns that comprised Richard. None of the symbols were the same as those I'd seen before; it was as if these were of a different font, far more cheerfully colorful and mutable. The thought drifted across my consciousness; of course, because Richard is alive but there was so much more to him. An entire secondary set of orbits were present, colors incongruously pale and pastel, although the sigils were somehow more violent. His were, his beast it occurred to me, those rules were pale because they were in abeyance and not active. But there was a third set that rode the second, somehow; ghostly, almost utterly devoid of color, difficult to focus on... and infinitely more frightening. I had seen that font before... in the sigils surrounding Illyana herself. They smoked, and some appeared to somehow be either on fire or of fire... but no fire that belonged in nature. Their totality of meaning, I had no idea... but… they felt… empty, yet filled with burning power.

The lightshow ended, and Illyana stepped back, gesturing to Richard to keep him from following.

"Alright, Mr. Zeeman. I have an idea of what's likely to occur. I will now summon a deer; please make your kill as quickly as you can. Ms. Blake this will be bloody and likely upsetting so you might want to look away."

Part of me wanted to, but… the rest of me felt I needed to watch. Had to watch. Sorry… was more then just a word. It should have a price.

Richard nodded, tensed, and a few yards away from him a portal flared and dropped a male deer into the clearing. It landed, head darting as it tried to get its bearings, preparing to run.

And Richard, still in human form, pounced upon it, grabbing its antlers close to its head and twisting viciously even as he rode the body to the forest floor. A muffled but clearly audible crack signified the deer’s death. And Richard, still riding the deer's death throes, darkened somehow, as if he was suddenly browning in some invisible oven. In my mind's eye, those ghostly lines of runic script erupted into actuality, blazing themselves with sudden intensity, changing him...

And an enormous eruption of flames erupted from Richard's body, his entire form combusting. My scream of mingled rage and horror was dwarfed by the raving bellow of agony that impossibly morphed into the most haunting wolf-howl I had ever heard, as much felt in the soul as in the ears.
A coal-black wolf the size of a small horse stood over the still smoking ribs of the deer’s blackened skeleton, all of the flesh had been consumed in the blaze of hellfire. Reddish smoldering highlights danced over the coarse fur as he, absolutely and impressively male, looked around, flaming eyes surveying us all. Its mouth opened, gleaming iron grey fangs framing its lolling purple-grey tongue, and a flaming glow showed in the back of his throat like a banked fire. Claws the color of blood-rusted metal crushed immolated bone as it approached, and a pleased rumble sounded as it then sat before us.

"Outstanding...!" reverberated thru my head. It sounded like Richard, a Richard stripped of all self-doubt and all restraints. Rage given form. Somehow I was no longer horrified. Scared yes, only a fool would not gaze upon such and feel no apprehension, but no... horror.

He was a hell hound. I had never seen one, but I knew what I was seeing. He shifted back to his human form and for a moment his eyes still glowed with a red light. He again looked uncertain, not meeting my gaze.

The long moment of conversational silence ended as Illyana commented. “Rather impressive Mr. Zeeman, congratulation on a third were form. Fire proof as well. As I said before, just makes a kind of sense.”

I then did what I had once been unable to do. What I suppose the old human me could never have done. I walked over and gave Richard a tight hug of acceptance. And as I hugged Richard I felt a sense of envy on the links from her. Envy and confusion.

Envy of our humanity. And confusion about it.

Part 20d: Thoughts

As I hugged Richard I sent her a private message.

(Why no memories this time?)

-
She sent back. *(Because Richard so wished that to not happen. He was terrified of it. That you’d find yet another reason for rejecting him. Sharing equates to rejection I suppose. I can relate. His… desire motivates me to put forth the effort to block memory spillover on all you. That and I’m getting better at this.)*

My tone sharpened, and I got a bit nasty. Still upset at seeing Richard on fire. *(Better at sinking your hooks into us?)*

Tones of anger right back at me from her. *(Rather the reverse Ms. Blake. This is me giving up on locking you and yours out. You are my familiars, bits of your soul now resonates within the void of my soul absence. Altering what I was into what I now am. A me that is not her and never can be.)*

Then there was pity in her tone, that and rebuke. Pity always makes me angry, of course, anger is partially my default state. She continued.

*(I don’t know who was more stupid. You Ms. Blake or Mr. Zeeman. Of course you would reject him, how could you not? The monster always gets rejected.)*

*(Don’t you start lecturing me…) I began hotly. (You weren’t there, you can’t possible understand…)*

She interrupted me with a mental growl that sounded like a wolf. *(But I was there as I dealt with the flood of what he is. And I see the shear stupidity of his hope. And your blind arrogance about things you knew nothing of. Promises you could not, would not keep. Shards, no wonder she always tried to hid what she was… always rejected whenever the truth was shown…)*

A pause, then she continued. *(Except Kitty… Kitty never rejected her or ran or…)*

She went silent and turned away, leaving me fuming, and yet feeling guilty. Great, rebuked by a demon. What’s next?
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Opps, forget to give credit to LordGrise on the last chapter, he did a major rewrite of the Richard transformation scene (three cheers for LordGrise, Anitaverse police and contributor!) Plus, he had major influence in this chapter is significant as he was the one urging that a softer tone needs to be taken by all involved.

A critical Anita Blake story element is her almost bottomless rage and anger. The death of her mother, the behaviors of her father as he grieved, and his remarrying. Anita’s perceived rejections (real and imagined) of her step mother. Her zombie rising powers manifesting, causing all kinds of family issues. A fiancée who abandoned her because of his raciest parents once they learned that her mother was Hispanic. All these components helped shape and form the Anita Blake of fiction. Anita Blake is a hurricane of rage, but Illyana is easily her match in the rage category; one of the few who can. I am so looking forward to the part of this story when Anita truly taps into Illyana’s rage.

I lifted some words from the anitablake wiki on lycanthropes for this chapter (one should always give credit, oh, their web site is great). Mostly for none Anita Blake readers of this story.

Part 21a: Here kitty kitty…

Gods, the hug with Richard was good. Two back to back hugs with no shouting between us. And… well… he was naked both times. Mmmm I like all my men but Richard is the most buff, so yummy, so… Richard.

And unlike the last group hug this one was just Richard and I. Tight against his warm body, the contrast with the cold air delightful. Tenderness, not possessive, not demanding, just… loving. Just made me want to…

Make love. Or more crudely, screw his brains out.

And I could feel that Richard felt the same way, both emotionally, and with what was poking me as little Richard became much less little.

Thankfully no verbal interruptions from Illyana as she was busy discussing things with the Micah and Nathaniel and apparently resolutely ignoring Richard and I. Nathaniel was asking if he and
Micah could do the ritual at the same time; which was apparently a big no no according to Illyana. Too much to for her to keep track of as she supposedly only had a few moments to prevent any bad mojo from happening.

The vampires were still, likely just observing and talking silently to each other.

(Gods, she can be such a bitch.) I mentally groused to Richard. I was still pissed off about her comments about how stupid I’d been about Richard’s lycanthropy. Comments that hit home, comments that reflected what I already knew. The truth hurts, or so the saying goes; and yeah… it does.

(She must be a graduate of the same school you attended.) Mused back Richard.

(Huuu? In what way?) Was my reaction.

A sense of ut-oh from Richard and a slight tensing. Can’t blame him, we both can just somehow find a way to say the wrong thing at the wrong time and considering our track record his sudden tensing made sense. Plus he’s a guy and men just are men at times when it comes to talking to a woman.

I sent some assurances. (It’s ok, you didn’t say anything wrong, but… in what way?)

I felt Richard chew on it as it were then carefully pick his words. (She keeps pushing people away. Just like you used to and still do from time to time. Plus, she has the same vibe you had back then, that concern about having relationships; almost like how you…. That feeling of that she doesn’t deserve good things that you used to have. Plus… you know how you’re concerned that you might be a sociopath?)

Not just concerned, that part of me was there… but… I was less concerned now.

(Yeah…?)

(Maybe… what she is… is what you dodged.)
I thought upon that, upon how I’d used to be before… before love, before the men in my life. Men, not man, men. Just is when you’re a living sexual vampire and casual sex with strangers is not one of my kinks as it were. Sex is intimacy and regrettably feeding as well. It’s part of my nature, by beliefs, that sex is supposed mean more then just pleasure and feedings. Speaking of which, still not feeling any hunger from the *ardeur*, that has to be her doing, just like Belle Morte said.

I sent back. *(Because I have people in my life…)*

*(Yeah… She feels like Edward, only…)*

*(Only what?)*

*(Scarier. Edward likes to kill, we can all feel it. All the weres and vampires can feel it. Even though he’s baseline human his Alpha as it were tops most people. He can intimidate the heck out people out, same as you, and same as her.)*

There are killers and there are sociopaths and psychopaths. Thats why I am scarier then most weres and vampires, that sociopaths part of me. I’m nicknamed the Executioner, Edward is Death. And yeah, I get the same feeling from her that Richard was describing. That she was a member of the same club.

*(Seventeen going on a thousand.*) Was my reply.

A bit of self musing about Edward. Yeah, really need to try to keep Edward out of this, he did incinerate her after all. I know I’d be pissed about something like that, no telling what she might do.

I finally, reluctantly, untangled myself from Richard’s hug. I gave him a brief “*Later, if we’re both still in the mood*” whisper and watched him dress. Gods… naked Richard just makes me lose IQ points, and he knows it. He dressed slowly, flexing and showing off his body to me. Mmmmmmm.

He finally finished and we rejoined the group. Nathaniel was already naked and ready for his turn. If Richard is the buff weight lifter, then Nathaniel is the tightly muscled swimmer’s body, with that beautiful hair that does down all the way to his knees. Sometimes, in bed, I just love to cover myself with his hair. Which sounds sensuous, and it is; but one must take care not to pull on the roots; not that he minds the pain, but the long hair is so much a component of his stripper act and accidentally ripping out chunks would be bad.
He’s my wife as it were, does most of the house work and makes our house a home. He’s also very romantic, but in the being woo’d kind of way. I’m pleased with his growing self confidence even if that does cause me some consternation at the things he requests (a submissive sexual masochist has needs that differ from my other men).

I muse a bit more as Illyana and Nathanial got ready. I… we… know so little of his childhood. His mother had died when he was young and his step father had turned very abusive when drunk. His older brother, Nicky, had been beaten to death by their step father when Nathaniel was seven. That’s when he ran away to live on the streets. Shards, a trickle of my internal rage awoke, he was a child prostitute by age ten.

Illyana started to walk around Nathaniel. As with Richard the glyphs and symbols flowed into existence around him; but much fewer then anybody to date. There were the two stars, one that looked the same as the one that had circled Richard so that must be me, the second could only be Damian. This was also a fuzzy haze about him, with one bright star in that haze; that… must the Pard and Micah. There were the rings and glyphs, the patterns that define him, his beast, and… her. Like with Richard there are those smoky rings and glyphs of blackness and fire.

Nathaniel has blocked out most of his early childhood in order to survive, but he has shared a little of it with me, with us. At some point in his late teens, Nathaniel was found by Gabriel (the former and now dead Nimir-Raj of the Pard). By that point, Nathaniel according to his own words, was a drug addicted prostitute, and was so submissive and masochistic that he was literally incapable of saying no to any torture proposed to him. Strange, I loathed Gabriel, that sadistic evil bastard, yet even vile people do some good. Gabriel turned helped Nathaniel stop taking drugs after he’d turned him into a Were, and did his duty in making sure his new cats didn’t kill anyone before they learned control of their beast, but he was unable or unwilling to address Nathaniel’s other problems and simply pimped Nathaniel, only restraining customers from taking too much advantage of him. Nathaniel had played a role in Raina Wallis’s porn movies (the now dead former Lupa of the werewolves), raping and hurting the werewolves, back when Gabriel was Nimir-Raj (Gabriel and Raina were two of the most foul people I’ve ever met).

Yet, despite being a sexual sadist and a lot of bad things, Gabriel had taken better care of Nathaniel than anyone had in a very long time, and even got Jean-Claude to help in teaching Nathaniel social graces. Gabriel had gotten Nathaniel to audition for the job at Guilty Pleasures (back when Jean-Claude had not been the head vampire), Nathaniel had thought he was there to sleep with Jean-Claude.

Jean-Claude taught Nathaniel how to be elegantly sexy onstage, and then continued to teach him which fork to use and not to tuck a napkin in his shirt collar. Nathaniel had received even more etiquette lessons at Gabriel’s request, as one of Nathaniel’s former regulars was very rich and wanted to take him to fancy places without anyone learning that he was a hooker or a stripper (yes he still strips, and no he no longer hooks, and yeah I get really pissed off at people who thinks he
I’d killed Gabriel and Raina when they tried to have me star in my own personal snuff film where Gabriel attempted to rape and kill me (and I suspect eat my corpse as well). Which had resulted in my later becoming the owner of the Pard as the remaining wereleopards were just too weak to protect themselves, and to say that many of the werewolves had a bone to pick with the wereleopards would be an understatement, even if they had only done the things they’d done because Gabriel had made them. The two groups got along ok now, but there was always a sub current of tension from more then a few of the wolves.

Illyana stepped back and with a flash of light there was a deer. Unlike Richard who’d gone after the deer in human form, Nathaniel turned into his half human have leopard form and pounced on the deer. Again a snapped neck, likely they were all trying to kill the deer as fast a possible for my sake.

A bloody muzzle, tearing bites. And a silent thanks that Illyana was better at blocking memory flow. Nathaniel’s life had the most horrors of abuse, both as a child and as an adult. Just the thought of what had been done to him made me want to put a bullet in the head of his abusers…

Abusers…

Oh crap, Illyana had been…

That’s when memories and feelings from Nathaniel bleed into us. That… and the sounds of a female child screaming as the distorted swirl of memories overwhelmed us.

Part 21b: Bad trip on memory lane

Pain!

Abuse!

Fear!

Suffering!
Part 21c: Nathaniel

The memories of suffering retreated, leaving a blurry orange burning glow from the tears in my eyes. Shit, something was wrong. I wiped my eyes with my left hand and grasped my 9mm with my right hand. Several of the trees were in flames, casting orange light and flickering shadows.

Illyana was once again in her Darkchilde form and standing in a circle of fire that contained a burning pentagram with her at the center. Nathaniel, in his human form was standing before, her outside of her circle. They were arguing.

Nathaniel had that soft tone of voice he uses when he argues about something he’s resolute about. “No Illyana, you can’t. This not right.”

“They have to pay.” Was her plaintive reply. Less of a declaration and more like a plea, like she was somehow constrained by Nathaniel.

Rather obvious who “they” were, and what Illyana had been in the process of doing. I quickly scanned about. Just us, and the others were now recovering as well. We were in no apparent danger so I decided to observe for now as I holstered my gun, like things were delicately balanced.
Nathaniel sounded like he was trying to talk her off of a ledge or something. “It’s not yours to do Illyana.”

“They… what they did… to m… to you… to”

“It’s in the past. I’m… working though it. I have people who care about me now… It’s okay. I don’t want you to do what you’re trying to do. It’s… bad. Bad for you… and bad for… us.”

Illyana mumbled, but we could all hear it. “I swore…that nobody ever… got to do that to me… again.”

And that’s a massive bull’s-eye on any theories about abuse.

Nathaniel kept soothing her, several of us took a step in their direction only to get a wave off by him.

“They can’t. They didn’t. Don’t… do this.”

He either finally convinced her, or somehow made her not do what she had been in the processes of doing. The fiery pentagon started to fade, and with that fading she transformed back to her human form and sank down to her knees. A flicker of flame and it was gone, and with it the flames in trees subsided to just a few burning spots and a few burning branches on the ground.

That’s when Nathaniel walked the few steps that separated them, dropped to his knees as well and gave her a hug. A hug that she tentatively returned, no tears that I could see from her, just the feeling of frustrated and suppressed rage.

Okay, the demon defiantly has demons was my thought.

Part 21d: Campfires and conversations
Richard stated the obvious. “I think we need another timeout.” A suggestion that we all agreed with.

We ended up sitting on the ground in a circle with a few burning branches in the middle, casting a warm golden glow over everybody; like we were all just camping. Richard had hesitantly poked at a burning branch with his hands, then had tentatively picked it, and a few others up, to form the fire; so the big yes on the fire proof.

Nathaniel was sitting next to her and I was on the other side of the circle. I suddenly got a weird craving for S’mores of all things, which is odd because I hate S’mores, but for some reason gram crackers with melted chocolate suddenly felt utterly tasty.

The suppressed rage coming off of her smelled delicious… no… Bad idea. So not taking a bite of that apple again.

As we all sat there I suddenly got a memory flash of a similar fire, but this time there was a purple dragon sitting next me and there were a bunch of adults and what looked like high school kids. And a very striking black woman with long white hair even thought she looked to be only in her late twenties or early thirties, with blue eyes of all things

I blinked and the image was gone. Just us around a fire.

I spoke a gentle “Can we… discuss what just happened?”

Gentle because upset people respond better that way. I was rather positive I know, had to be PTS (Post Traumatic Stress). Nathaniel’s experiences are likely were far too close to her own. But better if she talks, which true for police procedures as well as for physiology; but for different reasons.

Silence as the fire crackled, I could see the fames in her eyes, but they looked different then the fire’s flames, not just reflections. Then a sigh as she started talking and the non reflected flames died out.

“Nathaniel’s memories… resonated. I… guess I’m not getting the hang of this.”

Jean-Claude spoke. “Apologies Illyana… We should have warned you as to the history of our little cat.” Little cat a bit of a nickname for Nathaniel that only Jean-Claude uses, it’s not derogatory;
Nathaniel loves it.

“What did Nathaniel block you from doing?” Prompted Damian.

Nathaniel responded. “Cursing my abusers.”

Illyana followed up on Nathaniel’s answer. “It’s what I thought you all wanted. It… was what I wanted… really wanted.”

Richard posed the delicate question. “Cursing as in pain or hurt or cursing as in…”

And sudden shadow play behind her as various fire cast flickering shadows morphed into little humanoid shadows writhing in torment as they burned away. Lasted just a few seconds but the message was clear as to the intent.

“Why did you stop?” Inquired Asher. “You do not strike me as one who pauses when your mind is made up. Nathaniel forbid and you… obeyed? Or did he convince you?”

She stared into the fire as she answered, or didn’t answer to be more precise. “Both… neither… it’s complicated.”

“So explain it.” Was my reply. “Complicated does not mean you can’t explain it.”

The conversation petered out as we all waited. Illyana poked at the fire with a stick for a bit before finally answering. “I’ve never had a familiar, much less… seven. Your thoughts and feelings… I can’t always distinguish which are mine and which are yours.”

“The term familiar is more then a little derogatory.” Commented Micah.

“And the vampire term servant isn’t?” Was her reply.

Okay, that was a valid point. While many vampires cherish their servants, many also keep them in deep servitude, and many also abuse them. The vampire was the master of the relationship. And
Most servants are very involuntarily bounded into the relationship by the vampire.

A vampire bounds a servant with four marks. And until a servant has all four marks another, stronger, vampire can also mark a servant. And there are apparently ways to erase the marks, but only the Mother of Darkness knows how… and… now that I think of it; Illyana. Back when she’d first hired me, she had offered me the opportunity to erase the marks that I had with Richard and Jean-Claude if I so wished it.

First Mark: The vampire shares its life essence with the servant. The first mark grants the human servant greater endurance, healing, speed and resistance to vampire mental powers, and an almost complete immunity to their own vampire's mental powers. Jean-Claude has a scarred back from when he was a whipping boy in his youth, he uses his vampire powers to cloud that from people, but is unable to hid it from me. And yes the incredible beauty that is the rest of him is completely real and not vampire powers.

Second Mark: The second mark allows the vampire to draw power from the human servant, to experience food and drink consumed by the servant, and to enter the servant's dreams. Of high use if a vampire is unable to feed, energy is drawn from the servant and the servant gets the munchies (massive munchies, for both food and… well… for me feeding sexually as well; and yeah… that happened when Richard and Jean-Claude got badly hurt).

Third Mark: The third mark is made by the vampire drinking the servant's blood. It grants the servant full endurance and allows the vampire and servant to communicate mentally even when awake.

Fourth Mark: The fourth mark is made when the servant drinks the vampire's blood, cementing their bond. It conveys immortality to the servant, almost complete mental communication, and allows the servant to draw on the vampire's strength. I originally believed that this mark caused human servants to lose their souls, and I still lack the forth mark from Jean-Claude.

I’m not a vampire but I somehow bounded Nathaniel and Damien to me in a second triumvirate, and it happened all at once and no blood was exchanged. Don’t know if my triumvirate has all the benefits, but people are beginning to say I look well preserved for my age.

No idea how demon bounding works on a triumvirate, much less seven, but… apparently we all took her blood, and some flesh apparently by the were…gulp… me. That sounds really fourth mark’ish. And we appear to be drawing power from her… crap. But she didn’t drink our blood… I think. But she sure drank (a brief sexual image of her head between my legs…) … um… ok; let’s not go there.
“No.” Replied Jean-Claude about the servant comment. “It denotes who is the center of the power focus. Damien and Nathaniel are Anita’s servants to use the word. Just as Anita and Richard are mine. Neither Anita or I engage in the level of subordination that many do.”

Asher added a bit. “And for some, servant is a fancy word for slave.”

Yep. And not big on the idea of the whole “I too serve the master” thing that so many vampires like to say. An altitude that gets Jean-Claude quite a bit of flack from other powerful vampires (I’m unruly. Gee, who would have guessed). But they don’t have a necromancer as a servant, or bonded companion as some of us like to say (oh God, I sound politically correct all of a sudden. What’s next? Weres are lunarally challenged?)

Richard added. “But a witch’s familiar is always an animal, or so I’ve read.”

“I suppose…” Was her mumbled reply. “But I’m not a witch, and you are not animals.”

Asher asked again. “Why did you listen to Nathaniel?”

She gave us a glare, but it lacked impact. I supposed it’s hard to be the big bad with your familiars, crap now I’m using the word. Behind her, her shadow rubbed its forehead even though she didn’t move.

Then she spoke. “Because he wanted me to not… because he chose to not… do evil. To not be like…” She left the rest unsaid but the intent was plain. Not be like her.

“So you listened to him.” Stated Micah.

“So… yeah, I listened to him.” Was her grudging reply, like it hurt to say it. “Why is that so important?”

“Because it means we’re not slaves.” Was my answer.
“You’re not.” Was her reply. “But I fear that I am… unduly influenced by you.”

“Welcome to the club.” Was my reply.

Hmmm, I’m missing something… Nathaniel, that’s it. “What happened to you Nathaniel after you… um… fed?”

Nathaniel didn’t answer, instead he gave me a mischievous grin from across the fire as he stood up, stepped back a few steps and disrobed. He started to walk around our little circle and as he did he shifted to his full leopard form.

INFO Interlude

Time I guess for a few additional were facts. All lycanthropes have at least two forms - human and animal. Powerful lycanthropes can also assume a “hybrid” form that is bipedal with animal characteristics. Very powerful lycanthropes can even transform just a part of their body at will (for example, growing claws from their fingertips). Modern lycanthropes are much larger in animal form than their natural counterparts, but the size used to be identical to natural form in ancient strains that are still present in some rare lycanthropes who share the immortality of their vampire masters.

Changing between forms requires a great deal of energy. Most lycanthropes need to feed after changing to animal form (which was why I suppose Illyana, in part, had a deer ready). After returning to human form, lycanthropes usually collapse into a comatose state for several hours, the length of their recuperation depending on their power level. Very powerful lycanthropes do not need to feed immediately and won't collapse when changing back. Nathaniel was able to change more than most were’s of his power level because he was bounded to me and… bet you some fried dough, bounded to her now as well.

Back to info on weres. An upcoming transformation is preceded by a spike in body temperature. The transformation can be very painful, as bones and flesh reshape, although not fighting the transformation makes it easier. The transformation generates a hot, clear fluid that sometimes practically explodes around the transforming lycanthrope, usually leaving themselves clean and dry but covering everything else nearby. The goop is rather hard to wash out if it manages to dry into your hair (believe me, I so know from personal experience). The lycanthrope will be hungry immediately after transformation, and less powerful individuals may not be entirely in control of themselves until after they feed.

Most lycanthropes learn to control their transformations and learn to retain most of their reasoning
ability even in the transformed state with practice. Even weak individuals can generally change shape almost at will, although they all must transform with the full moon. Strong emotions, pain, magic, vampiric powers, and mind-altering substances that work on lycanthropes can however erode that control, or even remove it entirely. Lack of control is usually seen as a sign of weakness in were society, so more dominant lycanthropes usually strive especially hard to master their urges. Lycanthropes that simply follow their instincts may command fear, but rarely any respect, and they usually end up getting put down by either human authorities (usually with the help of a vampire executioner like me or a bounty hunter) or the other preternatural beings of the area after they become too destructive and disruptive to tolerate.

A newly infected lycanthrope will likely experience their senses sharpening as well as a slight rise in their base body temperature. They may also gain some instincts typical for their particular type of lycanthropy even before their first transformation. It will usually take some time for them to master their newly increased speed and strength, and sex can be extremely hazardous to their partners, you don’t want to lose control of your beast when you orgasm, that usually results in the death of your sex partner and a one way trip to the execution chamber for you; and no, the law does not give a crap about extenuating circumstances) Kill a person in were or half were form and it’s an automatic death sentence. It’s usual for a new lycanthrope to have very little control and no memory of their initial transformations, although they usually start to get better at both after a few times. It’s the responsibility of their lycanthrope group to keep them in check during this learning period.

New lycanthropes generally start at the bottom of their lycanthrope group's internal hierarchy, and need to work their way up according to the customs of that lycanthrope group, their personal ambitions, and their power level (which may or may not increase over time). Well-functioning lycanthrope groups assist their new members in the adjustment to their new circumstances, but even badly-functioning ones usually at least keep the new lycanthropes from slaughtering anyone until they learn control; not doing such tends to result in villagers with pitchforks or more commonly now, people like me showing up.

One of the goals of the Lycanthrope Coalition, founded and run by Micah, is to extend this kind of help even to single survivors of lycanthrope attacks and to small lycanthrope groups who might lack resources by themselves; and to all weres regardless of type. To care for other’s who are not part of your were group was rather a new idea in the were community.

**End INFO Interlude**

So… Nathaniel shifted, leaving behind that clear goop, and a black leopard now circled us. Nathaniel’s animal form had always been a black furred leopard, but now it was as if he was darkness given furry form. And he was strutting his stuff as it were; he was a stripper and just know how to showoff.
Interestingly, when he moved into a shadow it was like his cat body just vanished; talk about perfect camouflage. Although if you looked closely you could see his cat eyes, which were now red instead of their former green.

Nathaniel started to circle us a second time when Illyana reached out and tweaked his tail. Started he leaped into her shadow, but came out of another shadow behind me.

Nathaniel froze, stunned as the rest of us; except Illyana who just looked slightly impressed as she commented. “That should come in handy at some point.”

Nathaniel transformed back, looking very surprised.

“And your beast is under control?” Asked Richard and Micah at the same time.

“Yes.” Answered Nathaniel, rather smugly I think.

“I don’t… know.” Sighed Illyana.

All eyes focused on Illyana. “What’s wrong with Nathaniel?” I asked with a sudden anger.

“Nothing’s wrong with Nathaniel.” Was her reply as she poked at the fire again. “He’s fine.”

“So why… oh. That.”

“Yeah… That.”

I once said on the list of things you don’t want to hear, the IRS wants you to answer a few questions, the police consider you a person of interest, and a demon finds you interesting; I’d pick the police and the IRS before the demon. Now add the statement that a were dragon was having trouble with her beast. I’d definitely pick the IRS and the police first, and I’d not sure between the dragon and the demon.

All the guys exchanged glances. That kind of glance that said Houston, we have a problem.
“What do you mean you don’t know?” Was my question.

“I… don’t know. The dragon urges have been getting… stronger.”

“Was it us?” Asked Jean-Claude.

“Possible, but I suspect it is what has been done to me here by the unknown enchantments, and, I suppose, how I first expressed the dragon form.”

“How did… you express dragon, if you don’t mind sharing.” Asked Micah. “Sometimes it helps a new were to talk about their experiences.”

“I’m not a were.” Was her answer. “The moon means nothing to me and you can’t catch dragon from me.”

“But you have a dragon form.” Replied Micah. “The beast is the beast regardless.”

I added. “I caught a sliver of a memory from you when we were in Khufu’s pyramid, when you… we… raised Khufu from the dead.” I left unsaid about how that had ended in the blowing up the pyramid, but that’s another story.

She stares at me and I remember it all over again:

Bound!

I am bound and they are consuming me.

Flesh and blood are taken as I scream.

My pain is also being… fed upon; but it is not diminished.

I am… nourishment.
He knows so much about my kind and the rules that govern us. But he has made a mistake.

I am more then he knows.

With a scream I give shape to the hunger that lies at my core and burst my bonds. With a beat of my new found wings I extinguish the flames that provided illumination. Yet I can still see, see and hear and smell. It's as if the room is still lit. I seal the door with a minor enchantment and give voice to my displeasure.

I... I lose myself in violence for a short while. I recover to find the doors opening to show yet another vampire...

I shake myself loose from the memory and gag a bit as I remember what I… no… what she had done.

She watches me gag while the others next to me hold me for a few moments. I finally stop gagging and spit out the saliva behind me. She looks… not embarrassed, but…resigned?

“Well?” I ask.

A scowl, but that just don’t have impact on us anymore. Slowly, hesitantly, we learned how Illyana came to our world, and what happened in that temple in Egypt.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

I figured that Illyana would have trouble with deep links from Nathaniel. And now for a retelling of how Illyana first came to Anita’s world, but this time from Illyana’s perspective so there should be some interesting details that were not know before. I actually wrote the first draft of 22b several months ago.

Hope you enjoy.

Part 22a: Rage finds form

All dimensions… universes… realities, call them what you will, differ. They have rules that govern them, sometimes the same; and sometimes not. This dimension is particularly bound tight against creatures such as me. No admittance unless summoned. Can’t just waltz in. And can’t stay as well.

I was in pursuit of Khufu. He’d fled to this locality as the rules did not block mortals like him, but the rules did lock him within this locality once he gained entry, which was not his plan. A one way door is a good analogy. He had a little help gaining entry with an obscure magical device; one that he thought would also let him escape as well. It malfunctioned, resulting in him being cast 45 centuries into the past, and broke… trapping him in the past and in this locality.

So… I couldn’t get in. But I wanted my questions answered; really wanted them answered. I suppose I was… obsessive about it.

I poked around and after awhile I determined that while demons had to be summoned… there was some traffic of that ilk with your world. The quandary of nobody knowing my name here hindered me until I seized upon the idea of grafting another demon’s name onto me, one who apparently was summoned now and them. His name was Gzzzkl’e, or that’s how you’d pronounce it in English. In his native tongue you would pronounce it as such:

Illyana then produced sounds that I didn’t realize the human throat could create.

Gzzzkl’e
Real bastard of a demon, but then again...

I piggybacked on the next summoning, Gzzzkl’e was less then happy as he was my involuntary prisoner by then, but it wasn’t like I was giving him choices. That’s when… that’s when I saw all the dead children the satanic werewolves had slain for their summoning ritual for Gzzzkl’e.

I was displeased. Upset… I don’t like it when kids are involved. I believe all of you know how I expressed my distress. They perished, Gzzzkl’e was the first.

I saved their leader for last. I had questions. He did not wish to answer. I convinced him otherwise.

Yeah, she’d convinced him. The crime photos showed that his feet had been partial eaten by what the crime lab decided were rats (bite mark analysis). Rather sure that would convince almost anybody, it sure the hell would have convinced me. Nasty... and yet… I’ve read the file of what the police had determined that group had been up to so no tears from me; or anybody else for the matter. But… nasty. A remainder that the supposed young woman before us was anything but that.

This world was strange, magic didn’t function in the manner I’m familiar with, and I couldn’t just teleport about using my disks as that would have immediately ejected me from this dimension; which would be foolish after all the effort I had done to get here. So I had to move about conventionally, or using teleportation spells that did not cross dimensional boundaries. I retrieved the monetary contents of the cult and made my way to a library to learn of this world.

Yeah, heck at one point she’d shown up at my house using Uber of all things.

I did some searching and located Khufu in the historical records, and there was still lingering magical residue that I could sense, as that god machine he’d built had been bound by his own power and blood so it cast a shadow, or a faint stench to use another analogy, that I could detect. It was old… potent… and stale.

I made my way to Egypt, via Delta airlines if you want to know, as I was conserving power. A summoned demon is not allowed to remain in this world per the rules unless the world recognizes it as one of its own. Think of it as a slowly growing head wind that you’re walking into, or holding your breath under water; or a rising level of pain, rather like an ever growing migraine. You can persevere for only so long. I suppose the time crunch encouraged me to take shortcuts I shouldn’t have, wished I hadn’t in hindsight.
I could feel the itch of ancient magics as I landed in Egypt. Ancient necromancy and such, all focused on the Cairo necropolis. I had already learned of were's and vampires and some aspects of how magic functioned; I suppose at some point I should return the books I… borrowed from the Smithsonian restricted section; I had first gone to Washington D.C. first because I needed a good mystic library to access; that and the FBI’s forbidden archive, mostly seized stuff I think.

Well that’s wonderful. Really hope that there’s not any video footage of that. Or anybody searching for her at the Federal level that the Marshals would not know about. I made a mental note to not conduct any searches about her on the Marshal computers, or heck any computers. And not to let her leave any books lying around.

I did laugh a bit as I landed in Egypt, a golf course just outside of the necropolis boundaries… Just so… human to do that. I later learned that one of Khufu’s favorite palaces had been there; he’d noticed the golf course towards the end of our fight as he was trying to use his interface to the dying god machine to escape and the golf course had momentarily distracted him. Khufu always did like his bling, back when I knew him tastes were… well white rapper wantabe would describe him quite well, even the sideways baseball cap which was just… pathetic.

Back to the story, for some incredibly stupid reason I decided I’d try be polite; like that ever works. Be polite and get tortured. Forbore and you’re considered weak. Try to play nice and just get burned alive for your troubles, all because you found somebody that you kind of… kind of like.

Oops… the last part had been about me and mine. Okay, in hindsight some of her statements that I had taken as threats could be viewed as… not as threatening as I had thought. But, uhm, hey… demon? How the hells was I to know that some of her words had… well… not been threats?

Anyway… I needed more answers as to how magic worked in this world, and just what had really happened to Khufu; not just what was in the history books. I could sense all kinds of nastily things lying dormant in that necropolis and I wanted to have a better understanding before I set foot in there.

So I contacted an underling of the local Master of the City and he agreed to meet with me. Assurances were made and his oath given… which turned out to be as worthless as he was. Idiot. Blood oaths made with such as I, even in this remote locality, have power. I demanded the oath deliberately as a backup plan just in case. The worse the betrayal, the greater the power of the broken oath. Although if I had known what his true intents were… well… I… would not have meet with him; rather I’d have… done something else.

That slight hesitation, bet she’d have just attacked.
Rules are rules, as he and his learned.

So, dumb o’l me actually accepted his invitation. Went to his secret temple where he was holding court… and learned that he was a demonologist. A competent and practiced one at that, but he thought me but a normal demon, bounded into a human body; a misunderstanding that I did nothing to correct.

I entered his temple but never even got a chance to ask my questions. I was stunned by an enchantment and bound to a T cross with silver chains. That’s when the rape of flesh and blood began by him and his court. Apparently I was the main course, and they just loved that I could magically regenerate my blood and flesh, leaving me as an endless smorgasbord I suppose.

A snarl of rage from her, and on the links as well.

Bastard could feed on pain and suffering as well, so I guess I was a double jackpot for him. His was the first bite that ripped my throat out and he drank deep, then he keep feeding upon my pain as other vampires feed on my blood and weres feed on my flesh.

Then a slight tremble in her voice. And the feeling that she was really locking down on something.

I was… was…

I was upset.

Very upset.

And the oaths he had sworn to were bound by the name Gzzzk’l’e. I could not break the bounds by normal means and I… don’t like… what they did to me. Bad memories, I think I… I…

I remembered a much worse time where I was…

She closed her eyes and was silent for a bit. I felt something scratching at my link with her, scratching to get out… and she was resolute in not sharing it. Which was okay by me, anything that could horrify a demon was something I really didn’t want to know about. But the realization was…
Gzzzkl'e is not just a name in his native language, it’s also a description. Great beast, great lizard, or...

Dragon.

I’ve always hated shape shifting magic. I like her… my form and no other… but… I was in extremis.

I took the power of the betrayed oaths.

I gave a form to my rage and took it as my own.

It was made manifest and took shape from my adopted name.

I broke the bounds, physical and mystical.

Sealed the room.

I took my vengeance upon them all.

The dragon fed.

I fed.

And the pressures to depart this world eased for a time.

I… was not very… rational after that. Or willing to attempt to be accommodating.

Enough with being polite was my conclusion. No more stupidly trusting those of this world to keep their oaths as this world had definitely shown itself to be no different then that any other world.

I took control of the remaining Cairo vampires. I found and freed Ōyutaka and he swore unsolicited oaths to my service; with him I also took control of the Weres of Cairo.
From my new… associates I learned more of the vampires, weres, magic, and of the Council. And the now departed Master of the City had additional books of value to me.

I carefully investigated the Giza necropolis, but not carefully enough: just my presence within the boundaries awoke things. I learned just what Khufu had built there, and incidentally tracked down his body in the Cairo museum, mislabeled and forgotten, which was worth a few snickers as to his ignoble location. I determined that his body was spell bound. Tied to what he had built on Giza, his god machine. If I was going to ask Khufu any questions then I needed more knowledge as to how the dead worked here.

Well… who better to ask then the dead?

I located the Council in Paris. I scouted out their archive. I then raided it in the light of day and took what I wanted.

And incidentally learned of necromancers, and you… Anita.

You mostly know the rest.

And no, the dragon is not Gzzzkl'e, the dragon form is… me I suppose.

Part 22b: Dragon

No feeling of shame from her as she finished her story. No downcast eyes, but… a sense of subdued unease, unease about us of all things.

Okay, three magical massacres, any of which would earn her an instant death penalty; as if there was anybody who could actually serve it. And more then a little ironic as all three incidents were perfectly legal if… big big if… you’re a U.S. Marshal serving a warrant for execution. The Egyptians would have just tried to burn her most likely, which oddly kind of matches U.S. law as well. I was not about to feel any remorse for her first two big kills, the satanic werewolves and the Master of Cairo and his Court; I do rather wished she’d found a better way into the Council’s archives, but supposedly the body count from that was much lower and… I could see how she might have decided that a smash and grab was the best solution.
And… would not have been in a mood to ask. I could understand how she might have been… unstable after that. Hells, rather sure she was unstable before.

“How did you feel afterwards… after you shifted back from dragon.” Inquired Micah.

“Angry… Frustrated… Somewhat full… Less pressure to depart.”

“Any… urges to just turn dragon and resolve… annoyances?” Asked Richard.

Okay… good question. And rather nice to know if she was feeling like just monstering out and killing everything.

“At times… just as I’m sure all of you have either wanted to turn into an animal and start killing, were or vampire; and I’ve attended staff meetings at RPIT so I’m sure Ms. Blake as felt the same. Things are… simpler when in dragon form, but I still know that I will have to clean up any messes. Urges are not compulsions.”

She had a point about the staff meetings at RPIT. Sometimes I just want to… Okay the meeting aren’t that bad but… they can kind of drag on at times.

“You don’t have to… consume to shift back?” Was the simple, yet important question from Jean-Claude.

“No.”

A question that I suppose prompted Nathaniel to ask. “Can we see it… your dragon form.”

That sense of unease suddenly spiked.

“Why?”
“It would be helpful to know.” Answered Asher. “You have seen all but Micah’s beast form, we have seen your… Darkchilde form… we will likely encounter your dragon form at some point, so why not now?”

Jean-Claude, Belle More, and I had seen her in the Mother of Darkness’s dreamscape. But I wondered if the physical form was different then the dream form.

I prompted as well. “I won’t promise to not have issues, but we will all likely find out at some point.” There, didn’t over promise like I had with Richard. I did hope that she wasn’t going to kill a deer, but there was already a deer carcasses I suppose she could eat if she was hungry… um… I think I just compared her to a vulture. No reaction from her so either she didn’t get anything from the links or she wasn’t insulted.

She set down the stick she’d been using to poke the fire with, stood up and walked away for about thirty paces as we all stood. Turned and…

It just smoothly flowed out of her form, with none of that goop that the weres generated while shifting.

Dragon.

The fire illuminated her sleek body with a warm golden glow as she settled down. She precede to recline upon the ground, wings folded, head above her front claws, just looking at us as her tail flicked back and forth a few times and then just lay still.

We had braced for terror and fear but… honestly… Her dragon form was magnificent. Both terrible and beautiful to behold. Was I apprehensive? You bet. Terrified? No, none of us were; rather we were all kind of entralled. I suppose this was what the characters in Jurassic Park must have felt like when they first encountered something so… impossible, and not trying to eat them.

Her head was about half the length of a horse attached to a long flexible neck. A long jaw that was filled with sharp spiky teeth even thought the mouth was closed. She had backward facing spikes on her head and concealed within the spikes were two flexible ears. Parts of her skin looked leathery, the rest was scales, mostly of a golden hue, although some were copper and a few were silver’ish or emerald green. Her tail was twice as long as her body, and I’d have to guess that she was as least eighty feet long noise to tail, rather hard to measure as she was partially curled up, might have been a hundred.
Her claws looked like she could gut an elephant. She had four limbs and her wings were separate, not part of the forelimbs like a bat or a bird. Her eyes were of burning reddish golden flame, partially reflected light, partial a light burning within. She blinked, revealing that she possessed double membranes like a reptile. I was expecting her scent to be… harsh, and I suppose it was, but it didn’t smell… wrong. The air was strongly flavored by the smell of black gunpowder, black pepper, and wolf, but there was also the smell of Pack, and of the Pard.

We all exchanged glances and then moved closer to her as we surrounded her front.

Her breathing was like some vast diesel that only cycled once every thirty seconds. She watched us, slightly shifting her head as we all approached from various frontal angles. Jean-Claude and I were on opposite sides of her head, I hesitantly touched the side of her neck and I could feel muscles twitch at my touch. Turns out dragons are warm, not cold, and I do mean warm… like hundred and five degrees warm. The skin was dry and felt like thick but supple leather. The spikes on her head blunt and bony, the ones on her neck were flexible and pointy.

Asher was at her very nose and he reached out his hand and touched her upper lip, her lips pulled back as her mouth opened and she bared her teeth at him and gave a slight rumbling growl. Don’t know if that was supposed to scare him off, but it didn’t. He reached out again and felt one of the white teeth.

Meanwhile Jean-Claude stroked her behind her right ear, causing other one of those muscle twitches. He began to scratch and her eyes closed as she lowered her head upon her front claws. A rumble low rumble slowly began.

“That’s… purring”. Whispered Nathaniel sounding just like a kid seeing a great cat for the first time.

I gently scratched behind the ear that faced me as I felt the rumble of her purr in my chest.

Nathaniel was behind me and he sketched out his arms as he pressed himself against her side, right ear pressed against her.

“I can hear her heart. It’s slow… like a train just idling.”

Richard joined Asher by the head, reached down, and rubbed the bottom of her chin; just like you’d scratch a cat. Damian did the same as Nathaniel, just on the other side.
I could feel his Richard’s excitement. Richard is a high school science teacher and had just recently earned his Maser’s degree in biology, and here before him was a noble prize winning body of research in the flesh.

Micah was the most daring. He shifted into his black leopard form and lightly leapt upon her back after pausing for a few seconds. She didn’t start so I guess he had asked permission. Another one of those muscle twitches was all the reaction that she gave. He settled down on her back and kneaded her, like a kitten looking for milk, with his front paws as he began to purr back.

Should have guessed that one of the cats would do that. Cat’s love a nice hot spot when it’s cool. I then imaged a Pard kitty pile, but with Illyana in dragon form and all of the wereleopards in cat form draped upon her as they all just snoozed, I supposed that the wolves would feel left out and want in on the action as well.

It was a pleasant moment. I guess the first one that we’d ever had with her. It was a completely new experience and one that was exhilarating and yet relaxing for everybody.

I touched a dragon. You just… you just had to be there. Think snuggling with a full grown tiger and you’d be close.

So of course it ended. Nothing dramatic, just… sad in retrospect.

Suddenly I felt her muscles tense up and her purring stop. She twitched and gave a little shake that we all correctly interpreted as I’m going to move. Micah jumped down and resumed human form as she stood up on all four limbs, gave herself another shake as she grumbled.

Then it was just Illyana again in her yellow and deep blue spandex looking confused at us. Guess she’d expected some other reaction then the one’s we gave.

Shard’s I’d petting a dragon! We all had! It had been a magic moment.

And then it was over. And we remembered she was a demon.

Or… did she remember that first?
Chapter Summary

Been writing other things for awhile. What I write is based upon available time, mood, reader feedback, and the state of my creative muse. Plus, this story takes extra time because it is one of my more serious works, and it is tied to a very complicated crossover as it involves not only Anita Blake, but all of her main boyfriends as well.

An ongoing discussion LordGrise and I have is “Did Illyana always have her soul?” Now Marvel canon says no, but I’ve… put my thumb on the scale as it were with my fan fiction as several of my stories show her having undiagnosed brain damage that was only rectified once Dormammu tried to kill her (which is way way after this story). Plus, for those who’ve noticed, the recurring internal mental meme “You are not her” that I believe Belasco created when he caste her out after summoning/creating her (but only after, in my writing, abusing the hell out of her causing the damage and solidifying that concept in her mind; as he did reject her for not being the Illyana he desired). Broken bones don’t heal right without a splint, and neither does a broken mind. So… that leaves a certain interpretive ambiguity that I like.

A song that I am found of, and one that describes Illyana so very well, is Behind Blue Eyes by the Who. Why? Read the comics… Illyana almost never ever shares what is going on in her mind. And never asks for help, until finally she sought out Dr. Strange for help after Dormammu.

*No one knows what it's like*

_To be the bad man_

_To be the sad man_

_Behind blue eyes_

*No one knows what it's like*

_To be hated_

_To be fated_

_To telling only lies_

*But my dreams_

_They aren't as empty_
As my conscience seems to be

I have hours, only lonely
My love is vengeance
That's never free

No one knows what it's like
To feel these feelings
Like I do
And I blame you

No one bites back as hard
On their anger
None of my pain and woe
Can show through

But my dreams
They aren't as empty
As my conscience seems to be

...

Part 23a: Touch

Illyana turned her back on us for a few seconds, to gather herself was my thought. Likewise the rest of us all exchanged glances about what has just happened as we moved away from her.

The were and vampires have a term for it. Touch Hunger. A need created by the prolonged lack of physical contact.
I don’t mean sexual touch, just normal touching, hugging, cuddling, being held, and sleeping as a group like the were loves to do in their big puppy piles. This can become quite the affliction for weres as almost all were groups are social gatherings with pack dynamics; even if the base animal is not a pack animal such as panthers, snakes, and the like. Conventional theory is human nature combined with the animal resulted in the enhanced pack behaviors; extra so for base pack animals like wolves. Being denied such pack contact becomes a hungry agony for weres, hence the name.

Vampires can suffer from it as well, but only after very prolonged shunning. Asher had suffered from such lack of contact for centuries after he recovered, but not healed, from his torture by holy water. He was thought a grotesque monster, a freak due to the scaring on half of his body. Shunned by almost everybody in his old Kiss, the one run by Belle Morte. Shunned but for those who liked broken things. He’d been starved for contact as it were when he came here. Both Jean-Claude’s, and my, acceptance of him as he was, had both hurt him and helped him. Hurt in that the pain, the trauma, so long repressed, could finally have an outlet; and… hurt in that he could have escaped it a long ago if he’d only had the courage to leave. Helped in that he was cared for now, he mattered, he was loved. Asher now understands that he is more then just what he had been told he was; more then just a twisted monster.

Or… a demon?

I’ve felt other demons, the reek of uncaring evil, malice, cruelty. She has many of the same magical… tastes as the other demons. But…

There appears to be so much more going on here.

A sense of angry caring was one. Only for us few, but… the feeling of caring really felt like it was there.

I’m certainly no a demon expert, nor do I wish to be, but… the shared glances my men and I exchanged spoke volumes. Since when does a demon have touch hunger? I knew what the answer had to be… assuming this as not all just an incredibly detailed lie which… well… that demon thing.

Asher and Nathanael exchanged a private glance, then Asher walked back over to her and stood next to her while Nathaniel came to stand close by me. Brief words were exchanged by Asher to Illyana, I don’t know what he said to her, nobody knows as even the vampires and were could not make out the spoken words. Apparently, when she has a private conversation, it stays private. It made sense in hindsight, that one of most socially ostracized of my men, so very socially damaged, would see reflections, as he later told me, of himself in her. Plus I suppose that whole she might be
able to really heal him of most of the scars, which, I guess, rather motivated him to try to be supportive. I watched him go stand by her and… yeah… felt a pang of jealousy.

Jean-Claude sent to me… somehow speaking out loud felt… wrong. *(Most… interesting ma petite.)*

*(That’s one way of putting it…)* Was my reply. I wasn’t quite sure if he meant our petting the dragon, Asher showing what appeared to be actual concern, or just everything in general.

Micah started to rub my shoulders, nothing sensual… mostly… just a nice massage. He sent as well, and I could feel Jean-Claude’s agreeing with what he said. *(You feel… apprehensive… and I know both that look and your proclivity to relationship apprehensions.)*

Jean-Claude added. *(We are not going anywhere ma petite.)*

The massage felt nice. Just what I needed. And why was I apprehensive? What the brain and heart tell you can be different. And insecurities of the past just don’t just go away because your head tells you.

*(You fear that we will suddenly leave you for her.)* Sent Micah. *(Like I would leave my Nimir-Ra.)*

What can I say? Sometimes a girl just want to hear her men tell her that she’s special.

But Micah was not done. *(In truth I suspect we have far more reasons to be nervous then you.)*

*(In what way?)* I sent.

Micah paused in his massage but it was Richard who answered. *(She’s leaving you for last and… you were the first to…)*

Yeah… first to fuck, so not happy about that. I won the fight against the others last night, a fight I don’t really remember or understand how I could have won. Heck, I don’t think I want to remember.
Jean-Claude answered. *Fury ma petite. Fury. It was as if she was the sun and you a comet destined to plunge into the fire. The enchantment that she spoke of, the one that was meant to kill you and harm us… That may have been the reason for your sheer fury to be one with her.*

(Um… and… her?)

(*She burned as only the ardeur can cause. She would be with whoever won.*)

Time to change the subject. So wanted to change the subject as I felt another sexual memory trying to surface. I really did not want any more memory flashbacks about… that. I asked Nathanael what he and Asher had mentally talked about.

Nathanael replied after a glance at Illyana and Asher. *(Asher and I felt that it would be wrong to leave her alone.)*

I think… I can see why. No need to encourage isolationist behavior, the pushing away of people. Based upon my own tendencies, I can see why my men are attuned to such. I noticed that Asher hadn’t touched her, and stood about two feet her. But still… a twang of irritation about it. I know… not fair… but… still irritation.

**Part 23b: Micah**

And then it was Micah’s turn.

She turned around and walked back towards us, leaving a scowling Asher to walk behind her. Guess she was either still moody, or didn’t much like what Asher had told her. Micah stopped massaging my shoulders and began to take his shirt off as we all backed away to give them room. Like Richard and Nathaniel before him, Micah stripped, folded his clothes, and stood naked before her. I did see her glance at Micah’s groin, and then quickly look away which caused me to grin involuntarily. Can’t really blame her much. Micah’s package really is impressive, doubly so as he’s only my height. But there was power in his back, in his legs... in him, really. That thought led me to compare Richard, Micah, and Nathaniel in another way. Richard is by far the most buff, Nathaniel
has a swimmers body, whereas Micah is my size, which, as I’ve said, means short.

But don’t count Micah out in a fight, he’d once gone head to head in a drag out fight with Richard, which just goes to prove the proverb, it’s not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog, or cat in that particular instance. He may not be as physically strong as Richard but, Micah is metaphysically very powerful.

There was a long silent stare between Micah and her. I assumed they were privately conversing to make sure that there were no surprises like Nathaniel. And then again she started walking around and again I saw the glyphs and circles as they shimmered into existence. Micah had all these little galaxy-like associative in distant, faded orbits... representative of all his treaty ties, I guessed. Which reminded me that Micah’s work with the lycanthropy coalition meant that he dealt with all kinds of were groups and individual were. That usually worked fine here as he was allied with the Wererats and the Werewolves, two of the biggest were groups in St. Louis, to say nothing of Master of the City, and I, so none of the other local were groups are stupid enough to give him much in the way of crap. The fact that the coalition was really run for the benefit of everybody and did not try to dominate the were groups really helped as well. Most areas tended to have various were groups constantly jostling as to who was in change or just one group being dominant. Richard and Micah may have their differences, but Micah had been there for one of Richards’ wolfs having a very bad night. That had convinced Richard to support the Coalition.

But the success of the coalition on helping were meant that other locality had invited Micah in to either setup additional local coalitions, or as a mediator involving existing differences. More then a few of the trips to other were localities ended up with Micah being in some kind of fight as the idea of were groups working with each other is just so foreign to were society. Fights that had injured Micah more then a few times. I hated… the fear that something might happen, which I suppose must be how the others feel about my Federal Marshal work. Damn it, if only his were form was more…

That’s when there was a flicker of memories, just as I felt a hot flash and a wave of sudden anger flow across the link from Illyana. A mental snarl from her just as she teleported in the deer. Micah shifted in order to make the kill. He struck with his jaws and the deer’s throat was ripped out in a hot spray of blood.

…

The focused driving need for completion in this writhing screaming woman beneath me. Anita rakes my back as her legs grip me to provide more leverage to thrust upwards as I thrust into her harder and harder as we both…

…
The stink and roar of the gunfire is deafening as fire erupts from her pistol. The vampire has a hole the size of my fist where his heart once was, and the back of his head is gone. Anita ejects the spent clip and slams home the next one as she spins…

...

...

This meeting is not going well as the tigers and the bears are just not willing to even attempt to see things from each other’s perspective. They’ve both gone half ware, posturing and trying to intimidate the other. The posturing degrades into a snarling fight that drags me in as well…

...

The memories faded and I realized that things were not as with the others as I witnessed:

A black space, filled with nothing but isolated glowing rings and glyphs, like a night sky of endless stars. They were definitely inter-related, and yet at the same time oddly apart from each other, more self-contained, with none of the organized symmetry of the rings and orbits I had seen with everyone else. More… primal, more elemental. A blink and…

I’m back in the forest, but now the human forms of all the weres were gone. A massive black furred burning wolf sat where Richard has been standing and a night black panther with glowing green eyes where Nathanial had been. All three vampires were just unmoving naked marble white statues of male perfections, even Asher, with tiny streams of blood running from their mouth down their necks and onto their chests. Where Micah had been there was only a cat shaped blur in his place, like it was a cat that had not yet crystallized. Where Illyana had been there was now a thing of fire and darkness that was reaching down into the pool of blood besides the deer. Another blink and…

A thing of fire and smoke, impaled with seven shafts of light… or are they burning swords? A blink and…

A large cat and a small dragon on a featureless white plane… or is it a large dragon and a small cat? I can’t tell as there is no perspective to the scene. Just staring at each other with their tails lashing back and forth. Another blink and…

A return to the animals, statues, and the thing of fire and darkness that was drawing a shape burning shape on the black cat blur with a bloody finger, as if the cat blur were some kind of chalk board, the finger was drawing a cat outline with large fangs. Another blink and…
I feel broken glass crunch beneath my shoes as I found myself standing outside what looks like a very large two story house, looked like a mansion made of glass. Broken glass. The smell of smoke and what looks like a small fire burning in one wing. I turn as I saw a flicker of movement in the corner of me eyes, just an almost glimpse of something, and the feeling of terror, but then…

I’m back in the woods, and before Illyana is a very large jet black panther, almost tiger sized, one with saber teeth. One that then sifted to the Micah’s traditional sized panther.

(I felt your concern) Sent Illyana. (So… I made a tweak… a second animal form, and likely a second half animal form as well.)

Not hard to figure out why. (So the bigger weres will think twice before they fuck with him.) I sent back.

Just a sense of agreement and suppressed rage from her as we watched Micah transform into his normal were panther half human form, and then into another larger form that had very large teeth. Okay… I can live with that. I guess this was the gift for Micah as he demonstrated no other new abilities.

We could all feel her sudden rage at the thought of something harming him… harming us. Oh gods, I hope she wasn’t going to be a hover mother, we so don’t need that…

Part 23c: Anita

And at long last, it was my turn. Yea. Hells, even mystic rituals can get rather boring after awhile, when something or somebody is not trying to kill you that is.

Richard inquired if I had to be naked for my ritual and all the male eyes looked in my direction, I swear I could feel the mental chuckles. Yes, the idea of naked breasts, a unifying hetero male focus. Yell fire in a theater and you get a panic. Yell boobs and every guy sprains his neck trying to checkout the displayed goodies.

Illyana and I shared a quick glance that spoke volumes (Men…). Then Illyana just shrugged which I suppose meant that clothing was optional. Well… the clothing stayed on, much to the male
disappointment.

Illyana had teleported us to a cemetery, no great surprise. We appeared to be in some remote desert location. Sandy ground. Dark hills. No sign of any human habitation other then a few scattered crumbling tombstones and crude wooden crosses. Only the old dead were here, felt like a century at least, maybe a hundred and fifty years. There were a surprising number of unmarked graves around us, the stones either tumbled and buried or else never present. There was a backpack next to a head stone and a chicken clucking away in a cage.

I mentioned to Illyana that my powers had grown strong enough that I could use just a little of my own blood for the raising instead having to kill the chicken. A comment that elicited a polite and carefully thought out reply from her.

“No.” Was her statement as she pointed at the backpack and the chicken. “Use the supplies in the backpack. Kill the chicken and use its blood. Pick a grave and raise a zombie. Stay outside of the circle.”

Now I may… just may… have trained my men to take direction from me with a minimum of “why?” statements. But this was not a battle and she was not my boss.

“Why?” I answered back as I crossed my arms. And yes, I was pleased to see her frown at me. “And don’t reply by saying because I told you so.”

Which earned me a sarcastic eye roll and the reply. “Is this going to be a thing?”

“Yep, it doesn’t hurt to try explaining instead of just pointing and ordering.”

Did the men looked concerned? Worried? Apprehensive?

Nope, they all just exchanged a glance that looked disturbingly like the glance Illyana and I had shared. But I think theirs conveyed (Women…). But being men of course there had to be fewer words. Right?

But no stare down between the two of us. First just a contemplative look from her then… “The master traditionally examines the apprentice while they are using the traditional instruments of their craft. You are very advanced in your abilities, and the simple ways allow for better…
insight.”

My reply of “I’m not your apprentice.” Just earned me a neutral look from her, then a private thought.

(Yes, you are. That is why I’ve permitted you to… see better.)

(Bull, I’m a necromancer, not a mage, or a witch.)

(Sorceress is the traditional term, I dislike the term witch, which I am not.)

(I am not a sorceress. That means one who has bargained for the power that they have, usually at the cost of their soul or harm to others. I owe no one anything.)

(Where I am from, it denotes a female practitioner of the mystic arts, nothing more, which is what you are now that we are bonded. You have the talent but not the training, and that can make you a danger to everyone around you if your abilities… manifest in ways you are unfamiliar with.)

(And now you’re Yoda?)

I got a strong sense of irritation from her instead of a mental reply, then she spoke aloud.

“If you use your blood before I’ve… assessed you, then you may find that there might be a power surge or other complication. You may raise more then you think. And unwanted things may answer the call as well. Use the traditional methods…Please. Circle of salt around the grave, blood of a sacrifice. NO blood from you - I absolutely guarantee that would go badly wrong right now. Your power will suffice, you do not need the name of the subject.”

“Without the zombie drinking my blood, it will remain just a zombie. No mind, no thoughts. Plus, I need the name to call it back into its sense of former self.”

“I… and you, have no need of names. Nor in this case do we need to converse with the dead. Were you not raising the dead before you even learned anything?”
I sent. (I don’t want to talk about that.)

Okay… what she was saying made a kind of sense, so of course I had to be sarcastic. “Gee, see how easy that was… explaining that is. Last time I checked it was the in thing with all the adults.”

No reply, just a look from her that stated she was in awe of my people skills, again meaning not.

The guys made a circle around the grave I selected. It was an old one, the dead felt a hundred years old or so. I opened the backpack and found the salt, it was a four pound box of Morton Kosher. There was also the jar of the ointment that I use, a silver bowl, and a scorched, silver plated, steel machete… crap it was the one I lost in the pyramid of Khufu. Give the girl credit, she was thorough.

This time Illyana did not walk around the subject, the subject being me; instead she just stood there, slightly within the circle of guys. Hmmm, Jean-Claude on her left and Richard on her right, bet that was not by chance.

I opened the Morton’s and started to pour a salt circle around the grave. The purpose of the salt circle is to both ward the zombie from external entities that might wish to possess it, and to keep the zombie within the circle once I sealed it with my power. I would also use the salt to bind the zombie back into its grave when we were done. I found myself remembering the first time I did this with Manny Rodriguez, my mentor in the zombie raising arts and vampire hunting, as I walked around the grave pouring the salt.

“Less salt Anita, nina tonta.” Manny told me. “We raise the dead, not salt fish to dry.” Manny was one of the first people to make me feel… normal. Mostly… And he gave me an outlet for the anger, the rage that… DAMMIT!

(Get out of my memories!) I sent to Illyana. (I don’t like sharing, and this is not the time to be distracted!)

(That make two of us.) Was her reply. (You are using your power, and the bindings between us are opening fully.)

(So this is not your doing?)
(Shards, no. The last thing I want is such understanding of all of you, but such is the familiar relationship. And Manny is right, you still use too much salt.)

Everybody’s a critic...

Circle complete, I got the jar of ointment from the backpack. I dabbed the ointment on my forehead and cheeks. The ointment, which all Animators make, is made from a blend of herbs and graveyard mold; all Animators also have their own variations of the recipe. Mine is a pale, off-white color with flecks of greenish light. It has a waxy and thick feel on the skin, but is quickly absorbed. The mixture usually includes varying amounts of the herbs: rosemary for memory, cinnamon and clove for preservation, sage for wisdom, and thyme to bind it all, it’s actually rather good for the skin.

Apparently she agreed with Manny on other things as well. (And you also use too much rosemary.)

(Since when did you become an expert?)

She replied. (I think she... I was ten at the time I first learned. There are many versions of these rituals. While I know many of them, I dislike and avoid death magic.)

(Too hard?)

(Too dangerous. She had those she longed for. Using such magic was too much of a temptation for her.)

(And it’s not for me?)

(Of course it is. But Necromancy is your magical nexus. And you appear to understand what so many do not: that the dead are dead. What we bring back is not what we lost.)

(What is your nexus?)

A flicker of a memory…
...Again I've failed. I've been banished to this frozen hell for I don't know how long, all that I know is that I've grown a head taller. I'm sustained only by the energy that Oak gives me, and in that taking I hasten the death of Oak. But the tree gives freely to me. I try once again to create something pure... unsullied. And once again I fail. But now... NOW...

Now Oak is dead, the last of Ororo’s works. I watch the tree crumble to dust and blow away in these never ending arctic winds. I’m not her, I’ll never be her. Ororo created for it’s own sake, a metaphor of her freedom from Belasco. An affirmation of the woman she once was. But I don’t want a metaphor... I want vengeance, the utter destruction of my tormentor!

But... is it that simple? Not a metaphoric weapon, but...

I cast my master spell, using what remains of the strength I took from Oak, and all of my own. I wonder if I should pray... but I don’t. All my prayers are used against me. Only Belasco listens... only Belasco answers. As I plunge my hand into the energy sphere... an image comes to mind... of a sword.

The blaze of power is like nothing I’ve ever felt. I...

The flicker of memory about that frozen hell vanishes as Illyana sends her answer to my question.

(Destruction.)

I hoped she’s kidding, but somehow I knew she wasn’t. And there was that certain destroyed pyramid in Egypt that was still burning.

(So you can’t raise the dead?)

(I can, zombies are not difficult, but to restore a zombie to thinking, to the belief of being who they were? To truly raise the dead, so well that they can forget they died? To look as they once were? I know madness for me lies on that path if I were to walk it so... no. I have never done that.)

Time for the sacrifice. I gently retrieved the chicken from the cage. For a hundred year old death a chicken would normally not suffice, but I had progressed since the last time I had done one of
these. I don’t so much use my power as I stop not using it. My necromancy is like a clenched fist inside of me. I simply relax that fist and my necromancy fills the night air like a cold invisible fog… but tonight there was a sense of heat as well in my power; fire mixed in with the cold. Plus… I could swear that there was a trace of brimstone in the air.

“Control pequeño, control. Simple imagine the flow stopping. Like holding your breath.” My grandmother had taught me.

“Or clenching a fist abuela?” Had been my reply.

“Yes pequeño, like a fist. You only let go when you want.”

When I was ten, two years after my mother’s death, my father remarried a woman named Judith. Suffice it to say that Judith and I clashed. Even then I could see ghosts, and accidentally raising my dead pet dog and random road kill sooo did not lead to a happy family life. Ever have a dead raccoon wander in during supper? I have, and it's areal mood killer. It was summer, and we were eating in the backyard; an undead raccoon wandered in out of the twilight, everyone except me scattered, and it made off with an ear of corn. So yes, let’s just say my family was dismayed. Back then I had little control over my powers, which eventually led my father to request that my maternal grandmother teach me how to “turn off” my abilities. Abuela taught me how to control it… mostly, but seeing how powerful I was, she encouraged dad to raise me as a Christian. She was concerned that evil would find pathways into me due to the strength of my….

A grumbled thought from me. (You’re doing it again…)

(I told you, I’m not doing it. You thoughts and memories are like a rude neighbor who won’t turn down their stereo.)

(How come I don’t get anything from you?)

(I am not known for sharing. Hmmm, I do see where some of your feelings about blondes come from.)

If that was true, then why did I remember a dream about a dragon in Egypt, and other other’s each had dreams as well. And… just before… that flicker about her sword. Hmmm, bet she doesn’t know about that. Ha! A secret.
I continued to voice my complaints as it were. *(What did I say about this?)*

*(You are the one sharing… regardless of your complaints. I suspect I would have… harmed your ex if that had been me.)*

My college fiancée.

My Ex.

My first lover, and my last until Jean-Claude.

When my father had remarried, the resulting situation was one where I so did not fit in with the Nordic remake of my family, my blond father, stepmother, stepsister, and eventual half-brother. I was always clashing with Judith over my "unladylike" interests, independence, and of course the necromancy. Maybe things would have worked out better, but Judith was always quick to tell others that I was only a stepdaughter with a Mexican mother. Which of course always left me feeling alienated.

I went way for college and I fell in love, and so in love with being loved for being me. And then it all came crashing down when he broke it off. He told me that his parents disapproved of me. They felt that I’d hidden what I was. Not quite sure just what exactly that was, but it was obviously very racist. His parents had threatened him with being cut off from their money and… that mattered more then me. I somehow imagined them whispering with horror the word Hispanic as they drove away. After that I just… shut down. And the rage that had always lived in me just grew even stronger.

…but for a time I had felt that I was loved for who I was… and then I was rejected for being who I was. It hurt so bad…

*(Damn it! Do I have any privacy?!)*

*(Do you want an honest answer?)*

*(Yes!)*

*(Then basically no. And like I said, you handled it far better then I would have.)*
(So you would have killed them dead?)

(Totally.) The images that accompanied that flaming red and black one word answer made me shudder... and yet, at the same time... It was my ancient grievance, not hers... but she still felt for me.

Back to the sacrifice. I did it quickly, I don’t like the animals to suffer. A quick chop and the blood filled the bowl. I dabbed blood on my forehead and cheeks. Then I sprinkled a bit of blood on the salt circle. Normally I’d start calling out the name of the one to raise, but in this case it was a generic raising. But I did voice a complaint.

(It’s hard to raise them without their name.)

(For one of your power... no it is not. The rituals you use make it harder as they are focused upon raising a zombie to think as the person they were. Have you not accidentally raised the dead?)

Yeah. Even a professor in college who has committed suicide. Showed up knocking at my dorm room door. He wanted me to … convey his apologies to his wife. My roommate moved out the next day…

(I’m getting tired of the flashbacks.)

(Likewise.)

(I saw rings and glyphs around the others. Levels of power. Connections and abilities. Plus sometimes I saw auras with no effort.)

(Lessons…) 

(Don’t start with that apprentice bullshit again.)

A mental tone of sarcasm from her. One that sounded just like me when I was doing a bad job of humoring some obstinate idiot. (Sure, wouldn’t think of it. What could I possibly know about the topic?)
And now I know how others must feel when I speak like that. *(That’s very annoying.)*

*(You are correct.)*

*(That’s annoying as well.)*

*(Once again you are right.)*

*(I can get snippety as well.)*

*(My mistake, I thought you already were.)*

I gave up commenting about being snippety before it got worse. I finished the ritual. I put the bowl of blood in the circle and began to chant as I sealed the circle with my power.

*Hear me, I call you from your grave.*
*By blood, magic and steel, I call you.*
*Arise, come to me, come to me... Come to me now.*
*I give blood to the earth.*
*Life for death, death for life.*
*Raise and drink the blood.*

As I spoke I felt the occupant of the grave stir. Dust and bones reforming, taking shape, the ground parted as a desiccated corpse clawed itself from the grave and lay upon the ground in a tattered and ruined dress, then it crawled to the bowl of blood and drank. As it did, its flesh inflated like a balloon, and likewise the dress grew less tattered. But the zombie was not restored to human form they usually did with me; it still looked like a rotting corpse. I’m capable of raising a zombie to look fully human, but not by these rituals. I need to know its name. The zombie, and it did look very much like the classical zombie, raised her head, stood, and stared at me awaiting orders.

Stood with a red glow in her eyes, and a bullet hole above and between them.
My Browning was in my hands without a thought, just a reflex. Glowing eyes meant that something was in there. If it so much as twitched I was going to blow its head off.

But nothing happened. It just stood there awaiting orders.

Illyana began to walk around my circle, as if inspecting it. Then when she was on the other side she spoke and gestured to the zombie. “Come here.”

I started to point out that… “The zombie will only obey me or those whom…”

The zombie turned away from me and walked over to the other side of the circle and stood before Illyana. Illyana seemed pleased as she commented. “This has been a very educational night.”

That’s when I realized that as we had explored the links, all of us, we’d also been teaching her about us. Teaching and demonstrating.

Our abilities.
Our lives.
Our powers.

Oh
Utter
Crap
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

As I mentioned back in chap 7, the published Anita Blake stories have fallen into a predictable pattern of other women always being annoyed at Anita (who is, of course, blameless). Good plot gimmick for a few books, but it get’s old and very predictable after twenty plus iterations (and frankly makes we wonder about the author’s relationship with other women). Hence… my story, in part, turns it around in that it is Anita who keeps getting angry at whatever Illyana does (if you haven’t already noticed). But don’t worry, this is not going to be a constant for this entire story, in fact it should start dying out by the end of this chapter.

It is canon in the published comics (The original New Mutants from 30 years ago), and the current works, that Illyana’s actions are frequently misunderstood. Plus this story does take place during her journey where she is very damaged (the end of her journey in time/dimensions is the relaunch point of the New Mutants comic, which showed her to be damaged, rather crazy, and socially dysfunctional). And a reminder that this story takes place before the story Cat’s cradle.

In hindsight having all seven characters, plus Illyana, in this series of chapters is a massive writing pain in the ass. But Anita was so not going to let Illyana be alone with Anita’s boyfriends, or make any decisions without her presence and concurrence (Author complaint: Thanks Anita for being a hassle as always…) A demand that Illyana surprisingly acquiesced to, rather quickly I might add.

Suspiciously quickly…

Part 24a: Betrayal?

My hands itched to point the gun at her. I guess violence does tend to be my main go to reaction, but… that’s kind of a non starter in this case. Hmm, hand to hand combat and beating the crap out of her might still be an option, she uses that sword well but pure unarmed combat? Yeah… who am I kidding but… a girl can dream can’t she?

Everybody tensed up at the sudden realization as to just how much she must have learned from us. The cold night air was silent, I suppose it would have fit the mood if an owl hooted or a coyotes howled, but only silence. Then her tone changed from pleased to… exasperated?
“Okay… what have I done wrong now?”

Asher was the first to say anything. “Educational in what way?”

Richard contributed. “That sounded like a threat.”

“Magik, have you been playing us?” Asked Jean-Claude in the emotionless tone of voice he uses when he is hiding all reactions.

A sense of irritation from her as she answered. “No… I’ve been learning who you are, what you can do. How the links have affected you. And, in part, how they have affected me. Apparently I’ve gained some control over the undead, from Anita, obviously. What I’m doing, what we are doing, is what you’re supposed to do when you are newly bonded!”

Okay… that made a kind of sense. Rather liked her avoiding the word familiar regardless of her explanations about her choice of term. Then I asked in question. “And the zombie’s glowing eyes?”

She did not appear to be very concerned about that. “Side affect from your link to me.. Thus my desire about you not raising the dead until we… had some time to explore your powers.” She was trying to keep it casual, but the tension was still in the air. “Now I suppose you need to work on suppressing that link when raising the dead.”

I half lowered my gun. “So how exactly were you able to command my zombie?”

“The links, and the fact that some of my power was involved in raising this creature. Hence… that creature is also kind of… mine.”

Which I suppose also made sense. It did leave me feeling rather bitter about it. What is mine is also hers. And I’m really not big on sharing what I consider to be mine with others. With that I holstered my gun. “Now what?”

“Now put her back in her grave.” Again with the orders. I sooo wanted to make her say please but… it did have to be done. Then a thought occurred.
“Can you do it?”

A neutral look from her. “I... don’t really know. I think so, but she might well be...restless, and spontaneously rise at some later date if I were to do it. It would make more sense to have you do it as you are the true summoner.”

Good thing I had not raised the zombie to remember its past as zombies that were murdered are uncontrollable and go after their murderer. Of course, the age of this zombie made that rather hard as its killer had to likewise be long dead, which likely why this zombie was manageable even without its memories.

I did the ritual to bind her back in her grave with salt. As I did this I wondered just who she was. But that now made me think. “Can you now raise the dead?”

“I couldn’t before per the rules... that was why I had to employ you the first time I was here. Now... I suppose we should test that.” Authors Note: See the story Scary Things.

With that a small blazing silver fire pentagram burst into existence around Illyana. At the same time a circle of silver fire surrounded another grave. She spoke no words but suddenly her soul sword was in her hand and I felt my Necromancy clench in reflex as a similar feeling of power came from her. It was hot whereas mine was cold. I could feel the summons but the corpse at first did nothing despite ever increasing power from her, so much power that the air was beginning to feel heavy and hard to breath. I felt like suggesting that perhaps a ritual might help (it's what I usually do, but hey, after all... what do I know about the subject), but I kept my opinion to myself (see... trying to play nice).

She paused, then a trace of cold power flowed into the summoning, and I felt the corpse stir, awaken, and claw its way out of the grave.

What emerged was a tattered thing, more dusty bone then flesh. It looked about, and charged at us. Again my gun was in my hand as all the guys reacted, both Richard and Micah sprung in front of me. But it turned out to be unnecessary as the zombie rebounded off of the magic circle wall.

The creature snarled a raspy slight sound and clawed at the barrier, but it held. She looked rather dissatisfied with what she had raised as she commented. “The rules still hold, but for your influence Ms. Blake.”
The creature was spooking us a bit, me and my guys, not so much the snarling cawing zombie but... okay, it was the snarling clawing zombie. “Cease movement.” I commanded.

Illyana just gave me an ironic look that I interpreted as being told what a silly thing to have done. Shards, I could feel her shock as the creature stood still. Then a look of concern from her as she stared at me.

“That... should not have happened.” Was her statement.

Well goodie then, guess she now knows how I felt.

Part 24b: Zombie boot camp

Apparently she was rather agitated about what had just happened.

“You do not understand.” Was her statement to us. “That should not have been possible.”

“Why?” Was my question.

“It’s not supposed to work that way. That implies that I...” A hard stare at me, then a grudging answer that gave me the impression she really did not want to say the words. “I may not... be quite the center as I thought.”

“And Anita is?” Asked Damian.

More grudging words from her. “No... well, possibly, yes... there may be a bit of overlap... there... might not be a center. The... relationship may be far more two way then I thought.”

“Why is that bad?” Asked Nathanial. A question that I rather agreed with, didn’t sound so bad to me.
“Feedback loop potential.” Was her reply, then she clarified a bit. “Do you know what a nova is?”

“Yes…” Was his careful reply. “It’s when a star explodes.”

I think I got what she was getting at as I stated. “Rather sucks for the star.”

“Or stars in this case.” Was her sour faced reply. “First things first, I need to put gruesome back in the ground.”

“And if you can’t?” Asked Micah.

Her reply was cold, direct, and to the point. “I believe fire always works well in such situations.”

And it did, as apparently the rules would not let her bind the zombie back into its grave without using my power and that concern about the zombie being restless so… she was correct. Fire always works for such situations, as it did in this one.

So… it was zombie raising boot camp for me as I raised and unraised zombie after zombie. Only after I could block the glowing eyes would I then try to raise a zombie to full awareness.

And as I did this it was slowly made manifest to me that she was upset. She was trying to hide it but… I could tell she was angry, and I could feed mental sub currents from the others that they could feel it as well. Jean-Claude was the one who first tried to address it.

“You are angry.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Was her rather mumbled reply as I continued to practice raising zombies without glowing eyes.

Raise zombie, put zombie back. Rinse, lather, repeat as it were as Illyana made occasional verbal or mental comments. Guess it really was true, those who can’t do coached. That was a variation of a school joke (Richard is a teacher and that means you hear lots of education related jokes from him). Those who can’t do teach, and those who can’t teach, teach gym. But I digress.
And of course Asher just had to be a bit of a dick about it. He so hated not being the center of everything. “All of us are good at sensing and responding to the moods of Anita, why should you be any different?”

“Do over…” Stated Micah much more diplomatically. “That means trying to communicate, being honest to each other. Explaining what and why you might be upset.”

“Don’t lecture me Nimir-Raj.” Growled Illyana. “Pretty words, but ultimately meaningless.”

“Why would you think that?” Replied Micah, rather nicely I thought, just as I got done putting the latest unglowing zombie back in its grave. I decided to listen for a bit instead contributing.

“Regardless of what I do, you won’t believe anything I say.”

“Why do you believe that Fille Magique?” Replied Jean-Claude. Hmm, I think that was magical girl. Jean-Claude was searching for a French phrase for her, after first mentally checking with me because… well, would you like your guy giving another woman a nickname without your permission?

And she opened up, verbally and emotions on the links at us. Gods, she was so angry, and also… I could feel terror as well.

“Because nothing I do means anything. It’s as bad as the New Mutants were… save somebody from demonic enslavement and get an attempted murder attempt for my reward because people just always assumed the worse about any action I took. Geeze what does it take with you people… Heal these poor murderous child vampires Illyana, I demand it of you. Done. Find out if you can heal Asher! Do it! Do it now! Done, and my finger still hurts, just from that I fucking know skinning him alive is going to feel just fantastic! Oh no - the Weres are concerned you might take over their groups…! Fine, I submitted to the authority of the Pack and the Pard to put both at ease… Oh no, Anita’s status might be in question…! Fine, I give my throat to both affirm her social ranking over me, as well as her authority over me in both Pard, Pack, and Kiss. Likewise Jean-Claude must be shown to be in charge in all things Vampire in the city…”

Wow… major and sudden female diatribe as she continued. She felt very… um… human as she ranted at us.
“And just when I think we’re finally beginning to get along and I make a comment about how pleased I am… wham. Everybody thinks it’s all a setup and I’m planning nasty things for you. One minute I’m trying to figure out who’s fucking me over in this dimension, the next I’m actually being fucked, over and over, by what has to be an Olympic gold medal grade fucking team. Everything is so damn bright! Everything is so damn confusing! And nothing I say matters. And all of your thoughts and emotions in my head are like a screaming flock of birds because I can’t shut you out while we’re doing this! Plotting your harm? Ha, Like I could do that to those I….”

She didn’t finish, instead she turned and stormed off into the desert.

Okay… we all exchanged looks as she climbed up a small hill and sat down with her back to us.

(Has anybody else noticed… Autistic like behavior?) Sent Richard, somehow it felt like not speaking was best.

(In what way?) Asked Jean-Claude.

(She appears to not be able to properly anticipate social reactions well or understand… certain things. Both the last time she was here and… now. That statement about the color blue she made yesterday.)

I observed that. (She certainly knew what she was doing in the Throne room.)

(Politics…) Replied Jean-Claude. (Are not the same as the bedroom. And as she just stated, she may have been dealing with some of the situations as we wished them to be dealt with. I, for one, was concerted about Ma Petite’s perception by others as some are so frequently wont to do.)

Then… (I wished that she showed no threat to any of the Pard.) Commented Micah.

(I wish to be healed, to no longer be so hideous.) Sent Asher as he looked at his left pinkie. (I wished to be as I once was.)

Yeah, I’d seen her rubbing her pinkie like it hurt, I hadn’t been sure if it was an act, might still be an act…
(I did not want the Lukoi power structures interfered with.) Replied Richard.

(I did want to see a dragon.) From Nathaniel. (And for her to not hurt people when she was going to slaughter them.)

Silence for a few seconds. Then I chimed in.

(I didn’t want her messing with my men without me being around… and I wanted Asher healed… and the problem of Valentina and Bartolome resolved.)

A bit of silent musing, then Nathaniel made a comment. (Aren’t demons supposed to make bargains before they do thing? I didn’t agree to anything… did anybody make any deals?)

Um… Nathaniel’s comment was kind of a big yes on that from all of my experience and reading and heck Vampire and Were power interactions. Rather big on the no freebies principle. We exchanged glances and all gave small negatory shakes of our heads. Well… that… okay, something to think about.

(Could be an elaborate act?) Suggested Richard with a mental tone that implied great doubt as to the validity of his suggestion. An idea that we simply couldn’t agree with because… If she was that good then we should all just give up right now. And if she was that good, she wouldn’t keep making missteps (unless that was the idea which again would just mean we should give up).

(She seems to understand missteps… after the fact.) Observed Micah.

(Likely because our reactions or the links providing our emotional reactions to her.) Replied Richard.

Damian then sent. (You all felt the burst of terror from her. Terror that is disturbingly similar that that which I endured for centuries… and Jean-Claude as well. I think she fears both for us and…)

Jean-Claude finished. (Us. And I suspect that she fears… She is not what she once was, and does not know what she now is. Bindings are… bindings. But more critically…)
I finished as I got it. *(Based on how she’s reacting, she’s suddenly afraid that she might be the familiar.)*

*(Or… as she said… we could each perhaps have both roles.)* Sent Asher.

*(Somebody needs to go talk to her unless we want to spend the rest of the night here.)* Concluded Richard with a mental tone of weariness. Yeah, it had already been a long night, and dawn was still far away.

So of course a vote was taken and I lost (in that I won by six votes to one for Jean-Claude, which was my vote by the way, talk about one sided.)

*(You are the Femme plus âgéée in such matters).* Sagely concluded Jean-Claude, which I think was a total copout.

Right… the older woman. So much for vampire charm I suppose. So of course the guys sent me, the smallest person here, to go deal with what we all thought was an emotionally upset female demon that could kill us all, except that she may really be in love with us.

Sigh… I think I’m getting too old for this.

**Part 24c: Girl talk (part a)**

And so I walked up the same hill that Illyana was sitting upon, the gritty rocky ground crunching underneath my feet. She resolutely ignored me as I walked up, just stared out at the distant horizon.

I sat down next to her and was silent, not because I was trying to make her say the first words, I just wasn’t sure what to say. After a minute or so she spoke, as I’d hoped. No real emotion in the tone other then a hint of tired irony.

"*Guess you won the prize to bell the cat."*
Huuu… Ahh, a reference to the story about the mice deciding that the cat needed a bell, and of course the resulting discussion as to just who was going to do the actual deed as every mouse loved the idea; just nobody wanted to be the one to do it. Sounded like she was trying to make a joke.

So I went with the theme. “Yeah… male solidarity in the face of angry female, so… toss another female and run like hell.” Slight exaggeration but… felt right. “We’re um… kind of sorry.”

“Kind of?”

“I’m… we’re confused as well.”

A sigh from her. “Yeah… I can relate.”

A sudden question from me. “Why don’t you have bodyguards? I would have thought you’d have at least an honor guard or something. In case somebody… um… attacks you. I can’t usually go anywhere anymore without bodyguards.”

She gave me a sideways glance, then answered. “Hell Lords don’t… well… if you need guards to prevent your death from others then… kind of how the game works. If you’re that weak then you’re toast.”

I started to bristle at being called weak and I heard her sigh as she then said. “And again I manage to find a way to say the wrong thing. This is so frustrating, and yet so familiar. Tell the truth, get punished, lie and get punished. I see why she never spoke about so many things. I am a fool for not following her example.”

I swallowed back the irritation. “We’re not weak, but I think that was not what you were trying to say.”

“No it was not. In hell circles, if you have to have body guards to prevent people from killing you, or at least attempting, then your threat means nothing. You mean nothing.”

“What if somebody hires somebody to take a Hell Lord down?”
She just gave me another sidewise stare until I answered my own question. “Anybody that could be hired to take down a Hell Lord would likewise be at least in the league of a Hell Lord. Right?”

“Correct. And… the consequences of failure tend to be apocalyptic, otherwise… well… Hells are ruled by fear, not love.”

I could relate, heck it’s also one of my saying that a threat has to mean something. “So that’s why Narcissus got the stick.” I stated.

A nod of her head. “Disrespectful, he needed to be shown that that was a very bad idea. Ditto the Lions, although they were less insulting… but not by all that much as he went for the direct challenge, I’ll give him some credit for at least having the balls to try.”

“You were nicer to the Lions.”

“You like the Lions, not so much the Hyenas; none of you do other then Asher that is and even he… likes them for his power and his… hobbies, not for themselves.”

Okay, valid point as to what I thought of the Lions and the Hyenas. I asked another question

“Is your world really similar to ours?”

She picked up and lightly tossed a rock. “Lot’s of historical similarities. And apparently, just like the X-Men, you guys get somebody picking a fight with you all the time. Although I guess aliens don’t show up trying to take the planet or eat it.”

“Eat a planet?”

“Yeah, or steal it; that happens every once in a while.”

“Steal a planet?”

“Hmm… Okay… I think things might be a bit more dramatic then your world once you put it like
that. Let’s see, what else… Way more ninjas then here… Shards I think every fourth person she knew was some kind of Ninja. The school she attended was a bit odd, good education, shards I hated math, then there was Danger Room training and…”

Her cycling of pronouns, I to her, was a bit disconcerting. That and her description of her school. I mean… really? A danger room with holograms, giant robots, and flamethrowers to train students? Not to mention the guns? I kind of concluded that she had to be pulling my leg as her story continued. Her description of the school building reminded me of something… oh well, it will come to me.

“Then of course most people are way more fit in my world. It’s like everybody has eight pack abs. Gods Wolverine would love it here, although I don’t think any of the were male Alphas would.”

“Who’s wolverine?”

“Short guy, shorter even then you. Goes by Logan. Canadian. Smokes these really nasty cigars and drinks beer like a fish breathes water, yet is never drunk. Unbreakable skeleton and has these metal claws he can pop out of his wrists. A Ninja of course, and likes to say he’s the best at what he does, but what he does isn’t very nice. A healing factor that is incredible, and were grade senses. And…”

She suddenly sounded embarrassed. “Oh gods, I just figured it out… man he must be able to… um… let’s just say I think none of your guys have anything on his endurance or stamina and… um… not that your guys aren’t really… um… good…”

She stopped and I could so tell she had to be furiously blushing. I couldn’t help but gave a small laugh. She tried to give me a glare, but, then couldn’t help but give a giggle. Then a sigh…

“After this is… done, we still need to talk about… um… female things.”

“No guys?”

A shudder from her, and I got the impression that she was horrified. “Shards no.”

“Okay… no guys then.”
“No guys…” Was her agreement reply back.

Things went quiet for a bit as we just sat there. In the distance I could hear the guys having a quiet conversation about some guy topic. Maybe baseball or whatever guys talk about when women were not around, although I think I distantly heard Jean-Claude being complemented about avoiding something.

Then she asked a question. “Why so… quick to get upset?”

That… was a good question. Might have even qualified as a great question as it made me very uncomfortable. I gave it a bit of thought before answering.

“You… don’t fit the pattern. I’m usually confronted with women who give me grief while being much weaker then me. Or are stronger then me and let me know at almost every chance. Plus… envy… lots of envy over the men in my life, and confusion as to why my men prefer me to them. You don’t… do any of that. You’re stronger then me, had sex with my men, and… me… and… I…"

Okay… that kind of confused me. Yes that annoyed the crap out of me, but it was the inability to… inability… that was it. “I don’t like it when… I can’t do something. Passivity… I hate that. Being powerless, unable to contribute, not being in control. This night sucks, and not in a good way.”

She gave a slight bitter laugh, before replying. “Not being in control… I can relate. But you’re more in control then I am.”

Now it was my time to just give her a sideways stare until she clarified with a sigh.

“I’m blind, Anita. Completely blind to my enemies here, those who are doing this to me, to us. I don’t… the bad things always happened to her… to me when… Hells, I don’t think I could see them if you found them and introduced them to me. You’re… not… confused like I… am. I’m just… doing the best I can.”

She stared at the horizon and softly spoke. Not sure if she was speaking to me, or just confessing to herself.
"I’m not sure about… I fell very… I think… Um… I sometimes don’t think I’m… okay… I… sometimes… think something is very… wrong with how I … think. Like… everything is suddenly so colorful, so hard… then… it’s gone… all black and white… no grey at all… and everything is just so obvious… and then… it’s not…"

Okay… if this is an act then I really did need to give up. “And that scares you.”

“I would think so…” Was her mumbled reply.

“Yeah… so… um… how good are you at hand to hand combat?” Was my attempted casual question.

“Passable… Why? Want to do some reps? Bet you just want a chance to punch me… Dani always liked combat practice for that.” Was her answer. Okay… rather think she’s lying, trying to sucker me in.

“Sure…” Was my answer… Hmmm, I might actually get a chance to throw some punches after all.

“Let’s meet at the Circus after the wererat knife training tomorrow. Then I’ll teleport us to the Pard barbeque?”

“Okay… that should work.” Was my reply.

She stood up, brushed off her knees, turned around and walked back down the hill. Okay… rather abrupt but… I was less annoyed then I would have been. Richard’s autistic comment appeared to be… well, it kind of fit some of her behaviors.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Almost done with the night… Damn this is taking forever. I feel almost as tired as the characters. This chapter was originally quite different, but felt off… and of course LordGrise pointed out the obvious flaw, now fixed (and no I won’t tell you the readers what the flaw was other then to thank LordGrise for being both the Anita police and being firm in his convictions). One reason I went to these lengths is that it will make sense when Illyana makes a comment or decision that only somebody very familiar with the Anita Blake stories would do.

The delay in publishing is that I’ve been so very busy at work, but have finally moved onto my new division (the old one had one last death march of an assignment.) Ah… so done with that.

Part 25a: Good ideas gone bad (the now, part A)

I had my arms around Micah and Nathaniel’s shoulders, they had carried me between them as I was just too exhausted to run… a fatigue that was now thankfully fading. We were all standing on the small hill I’d recently climbed down from, apart from her, Illyana, who was now just walking up the hill to our location after doing what she’d done in the former graveyard.

Before God I swear, the tableaux that confronted me looked just like some horror film scene where everything’s burning and the antagonist (that would be Illyana) strides slowly towards the heroes (that’s us in case you don’t know). Illyana was ominously backlit by the flames yet also front lit by reflected light. She was back in her human form again, apart from the glowing eyes, her long blonde hair twirling behind her due the wind rushing into the flames, and that tight spandex thing she wears showing off her body so very well. Damn, she looked invitingly sexy as I found myself admiring… Ahh… that must be… spillover emotion from the guys.

Yeah… spillover.

Richard, Jean-Claude, Asher and Damien were standing between me and Illyana. I think they were being masculine and resolute, but I’d been rather distracted by my fatigue due to my part in what had just happened. And her? The damn Hell Lord? Was she apologetic over what had almost just happened? Two words, just two words said it all.

Hell No.
She sounded more annoyed than apologetic as she stated, “No more soup for you.”

Which oddly helped in that it I started to get angry as I exclaimed, well call it a loud whisper, as I shook off Micah and Nathaniel to stand, somewhat wobbly, on my own. “This is no time for Seinfeld jokes.”

Which elicited a “Who’s Seinfeld?” reply from her.

Nathaniel answered, rather crossly I thought, so... good for him. “The TV show, the Soup Nazi episode.”

“Never heard of the show.” Was her dismissive answer as she glanced behind at the ongoing conflagration, damn the graveyard was melting into a lava lake.

“So how do you know about the Soup Nazi?” Was Micah’s comment, sounding way too calm after what had just almost happened down there.

“Kitty and I used to eat there from time to time when we went into the city. Great soups, but the guy who owned it was a bit of a dick in how he wanted customers to behave. Really good soup though, so most people put up with it. I never had any problems with him.”

“Enough with the soup comments.” Growled Richard, he wasn’t a Seinfeld fan, by the way. “Care to explain almost causing what looked like an honest to God zombie apocalypse?”

Part 25b: Reflections and zombies… (the very recent past, part A)

That had definitely been one of the more unusual conversations in my recent experience; listening her briefly reminisce about this school of hers, and her prior life at that school. Not so much the content of what she said, but how she said it. The constant use of her and I on describing what were the experiences of one person was… well… crazy. It kind of reminded me of a short circuit or something. She just kept cycling back and forth, apparently oblivious to the changing perspectives. It was like…
Her.

Not her.

Her.

Not her.

Her.

Not her.

Over and over. So… yeah, definite issues along the lines of Houston we have a problem. She obviously needed therapy. I wondered about introducing her to Father Dunly but somehow I think it would go badly. Gee Father, I’d like you to talk to this girl who was issues, she’s a demon, a hell lord, sorceress, part time dragon, and she’s a moody barely legal teenager. Yeah… definite bad idea. Hmmm, however… Sylvie’s girlfriend Gwen was a both a psychiatrist and a powerful werewolf so… that was a possibility, but first needed to talk that over with both Sylvie and Gwen but if Gwen was willing then that was a definite possibility.

I stood up, brushed off some clinging dirt, and made my way back down the hill after her, musing a bit over what she had said about that strange school. As I walked Jean-Claude sent a thought my way.

(Thank you Ma Petite. I knew that the wisdom of Femme plus âgéé was the needed salve for the situation. Women I understand… but these things called teenagers? We did not have such when I was young, nor had this angst been invented that I hear so much of.)

(Yes… right.) Was my response as I carefully walked down the hill.

(No… it is true, adulthood came much earlier centuries ago, twelve to fourteen as it were, not delayed like badly aging wine.)

Okay… I did have to concede that he had a valid historical point as he continued.
(No… we are men and the camaraderie of a woman’s touch was called for.)

(Sexist…) Was my slightly amused thought back. But… he was kind of right. Somehow I don’t think she’d have had that conversation with any of the guys.

(But true? The logic of la femme is rarely a path that l’homme can decipher or navigate. Do you not all depart to the room of rest at the same time? And does not all of mankind converse upon the topic when you depart en masse for purposes that are but barely understood by mankind?)

(Always good to have a mob with you when contending for the best stalls, some bathrooms have been known to have gangs. Plus… plotting the upcoming female uprising takes time. First item on the manifesto is either more female restrooms - or larger ones. With better amenities as well. I’m holding out for an espresso bar but I’m having problems convincing the sisterhood.)

Which elicited a chuckle as sensual as melted caramel from Jean-Claude on our telepathic link.

I mean… right girls? Guys can just stand there and let loose whereas we… stop. Best not to reveal the secrets of the sisterhood.

I made it to the bottom of the hill, and after one more general zombie raising, it was time for the big event; meaning raising a zombie with a mind. Which went kind of odd.

The first zombie was male and must have had some kind of Tourette’s syndrome or something based upon the amount of his random cursing. I did learn some old western curses as apparently blatant obscenities were just not done back then. Thank God for small favors as a modern zombie would have been dropping the F-bomb all over the place. I mentally cringed at the possible reactions of clients, or the horror of relatives wondering just why old Aunty So-and-so was suddenly crude and foul mouthed.

Looks like you’re studying to be a half wit, and failing.

You couldn’t teach a hen to cluck.

Nest of black hearted villains. (My vampires and were, I think.)
Dang cluster of milksops if I ever saw one. (I don’t think he found my men manly enough - rather amusing considering the prior comment.)

Imported miscreants. (In reaction to Asher and Jean-Claude's French accent.)

Bunch of foppish tenderfoot whippersnappers heelimg after this slug-a-bed skinflint of a skirt. (I know, disjointed, right? I think insults for everybody.)

Wag-tail (apparently a prostitute, so yeah... got called a whore yet again...)

Those were just a few of the choice terms flung about by the zombie. I did have to laugh when Asher got huffy at being called a gilded European dandy (apparently dem’s fighting words!)

The second zombie went better, and by the third and fourth I had it down pat and was feeling rather proud. Why... I was a pleased as a puppy with two tails (as I said, I learned a few sayings).

Done... so done!

Well... almost. Meaning...

That’s when she manifested that sword of hers and offered it to me.

Part 25c: Good ideas gone bad (the now part B)

Then she stood before the guys and actually admitted that she was in the wrong, not that she looked embarrassed or anything. “Okay... bad idea.” Rather weak as apologies go. But the guys did relax. I of course was gracious.

“No...! You think?!!"
Okay, maybe not very gracious.

She replied with an I-just-don’t-care tone. “Your contribution did not help.”

I replied with some heat. “The power had to go somewhere. Re-raising the bad guys as fast as they went down was going to get everyone killed or worse. I found an outlet.”

“Like that?”

“Okay… not ever like that before.”

“If possible, please refrain from such in the future. Having something like that wandering the desert would not be a good thing.”

Which of course just feed my anger. As if I would have ever done something so monumentally irresponsible. I’d have stood myself up to drag that thing back down with me. Shards… I was so pissed at what had happened. And she was being so insanely damn casual about it, almost like…

“You’re deliberately getting me angry.” I accused, with less heat now.

She shrugged, and actually looked apologetic. “It was the best idea I could come up with. You are understandably upset. I figured giving you somebody to yell at would help.”

I suppose it did.

Part 25d: Soup for the soul (the very recent, past part B)

“Why…?” Was my response as all the guys backed up a bit. That sword just blazed on the occult radar.

“Trust.” Was her answer. “I am attempting to show it.”
My first internal thought was bullshit. Okay, I guess the western cussing lessons had not quite stuck, historically the word hornswoggle would have been more appropriate (yeah the first zombie had said that more then a few times). God, the power coming off of that sword… I wondered why she trusted me not to try to kill her with it. Then again… could she be killed? I certainly wasn't about to try…

“Any other reasons?”

“Trust and… I'm curious as to just how much you will be able to utilize it. I’m not giving to you, just loaning it briefly - as you have not won it from me, you won’t be able to turn it against me. 'Why' is because, you are my closest companion. You were the first to… create bindings between us, and you are the most magical of my companions in that your necromancer abilities are inherent to you.”

Okay, but that still did not quite answer why she was suddenly offering me her sword. “Malarkey.” Was my mildly spoken reply. See, I did learn a western curse word. Need to start using that word more often … Malarkey, rather liked how it rolled off the tongue; much more elegant then bullshit. But… a sudden thought.

When did I start being concerned about elegance?

A look from her that just so-oo stated why oh why was I always difficult, then a response that surprised me. “Because you wielded my dream version of my sword back when we fought Marmee Noir. When I tricked her into pulling you into her dream space.” (Chapter 14 folks).

What… Oh… yeah… Um… Kind of forgot about holding the sword. Which in itself is surprising. Why had I forgotten about that?

“I shared my power with you.” She continued. “Surprise attack, as it were. You did not have such power, or so Marmee Noir thought. I often strive to create such openings.”

“But why do you want me do hold the sword?”

“Because I want to see how much power you can channel. Remember Giza?”
Really didn’t want to, but… yeah, she’d used me to raise a forty five hundred year old zombie by sharing her power with me. So okay. I could see how this kind of made sense.

She held the sword up and offered me the hilt. I slowly grasped it, carefully not touching her hand as I took the sword. The hilt was blood warm, not hot. Yet… oddly, it felt icy at the same time.

She released it, and I was holding it solo. Not heavy at all; in fact it was very light. There was Rage in this blade with a capital R; her rage, it tasted just like her. I opened myself to it and…

Whoa… power rush. I withdrew, and considered. So different then feeding on the rage or anger of a person. When I fed on such, it was an act of consumption; that rage or anger was gone, as generally speaking most (sane) people just aren't an endless fount of rage (rather not sure about her though). Illyana’s sword was otherwise. Oddly though, there was no psychic pressure to it, no need for me to resist feeding. It felt… crystalline, sort of, not liquid in any way. It was there, I could draw upon it, I knew… or I could set it down and walk away.

I asked a question as I examined the blade. “Is this the source of your rage?”

She answered while shaking her head no. “No. A reflection, an echo, a capture of the moment when she forged it. Forever embodied. This is all that I have left of my soul.”

“If not the source then why does it taste like your rage?”

“I am very… angry about a great many things. I do not reflect the rage of the sword, the sword reflects me. As she was, as I am. Now, please, one more time... try to raise the dead. Don't worry about their minds, this time.” Was her direction. “No ritual as well, just use your raw talent and make use of the sword.”

Everybody got behind me as I faced the graveyard, apart from Illyana who stood just behind me. I reached out with my necromancy while merely… holding the sword. Usually, to assesses a graveyard, I ease open my power and it takes a few minutes to get even a general idea of the lay of the land, so to speak. And I always have to walk around the graveyard.

Not this time. This was like a submarine going active with its sonar.

One unforced heartbeat of my will, and instantly I knew. There were two hundred thirteen dead
present within the confines of the graveyard, plus an almost completely dissipated ghost. I knew exactly how old each grave was. And I knew precisely which of them had died by violence. I was relieved to note that their need for vengeance seemed appeased by the fact that their killers were also dead. I’d bet a few of them lay here as well.

“Look at the ghost…” Was her whisper. “What do you see?”

“A he… and he’s almost gone… just a smear.”

“So do something about it.”

“Like… you mean… unsmear him? I didn’t think you could do that.”

“Try… “ Was her soft response.

Okay…

I attempted to exhale a breath of power, to push definition into the ghost and firm up my impressions of it. Instantly, he snapped into focus and visibility, an older, visibly earnest looking Marshall carrying a Henry lever action rifle. I knew he had died of violence; but oddly he didn't feel like he wanted vengeance on anything or anyone. He looked about, confused, then visibly focused on me. After a moment, he faded away as I suppose he went back to his eternal patrol…

So far, so good.

I eased open my Necromancy proper, and allowed the cool, cool breeze of my birthright to flow forth over the graveyard. I held Rage and Power in my hand, in my mind, but they stayed merely present, a resource replenishing what I was putting forth, and no more. Within seconds the first zombie rose out of the ground, looking just like it had before it died, except for the blank expression upon its face. It just stood there awaiting orders, no fire in its eyes, no venomous words spilling forth from its lips.

So far so good. I wondered how easy it might be to raise a zombie with a mind, and as I contemplated that idea, two more zombies came forth from the earth: I could sense they had been a married couple. Each was as intact as the first.
“Good…” Was her soft statement from beside me. “Now try for two separate graves at once.”

Heck, I’d barely had to try for the two in one. Power continued to flow into me, and my necromantic energies eased out on the breeze as I consciously avoided those graves containing those who had died of violence. Three more rose from the ground. Then three more. Then an entire family plot, all dead of disease one winter. More power flowed ever more to me, as I sought out the peaceful dead. I smiled… as the ease of it all.

“That’s enough, Anita.” Illyana said, and laid her hand on mine. And that fast, things went sideways. Eighteen wheeler liquid oxygen tanker jackknifing at a hundred miles an hour into a gas station that had a propane truck refueling sort of sideways; meaning Boom!

At her touch, the sword ceased being a passive resource; suddenly it was a blast furnace, a roaring, living fusion explosion in my hand. I should have been instantly cindered, destroyed, obliterated so completely not even my soul would survive. Instead I simply accepted all that Power and Rage, transmuting it the way an engine takes fuel and air and produces force… and what had been a cool, cool breeze of gentle summoning wafting where I willed became a howling spectral hurricane, a burning indiscriminate wakeup call from Hell.

All control I had concerning which graves I touched vanished, dissolved into a simple expanding zombie raising wave front. All those graves I had been avoiding? Dear God, they all ignited, soaking power the way a pit would soak gasoline, each becoming a veritable hellmouth of eldritch fire before vomiting forth a blazing walking corpse to join those already standing. And the prior zombies ignited as well, going from static passive creatures to roaring monsters in but moments. Fortunately, none of them appeared armed in the manner of the Marshall’s ghost.

And then they all turned toward us in that horrifying zombie horde kind of way that just screams run.

Which of course Illyana promptly screamed at us. “RUN!” As she morphed into her female demon form and slammed a hand down on the ground, whilst she also tore the sword from my hand. An enormous containment circle of silver fire rose all around the periphery of the graveyard, containing the tsunami wave front of my burning cerulean power, keeping it from flowing forth across the landscape seeking ever more dead to raise.

Which created one little problem.
With that containment circle in place, we couldn't run. Not to mention I was the font all this was coming from, as the last of the two hundred thirteen corpses erupted forth from their graves. The guys made a circle around me, and Illyana started slaughtering the attacking zombies. I couldn't fault her decision, God alone knew what would be unleashed if the power had continued to spread. But damn it, we needed out of this circle and I needed to expend the forces roiling around in here, before anyone currently living died - I knew they'd instantly rise if they did, and we'd never get them back. I centered, focused, and sought out anything else that might be dead within the circle.

Nothing!

Damn it! There was nothing!”

Okay, if I couldn't find anything, then my best bet would be to…

Down…

And that's when I found her. Millions of years dead, deep in the rock beneath us. I laid my will upon what was after all my power to call and command, and directed it down, down, and down. An impossible raising, nobody could do it, but it was a drain to throw the power into. An endless sump to drain this burning power into. The energy flowed down and away from me like a tsunami ebbing away. Then… to both my surprise and horror, it took.

Impossibly it took!

I could feel it, soaking up and drinking in all the power Illyana and I had released, felt it pouring down the funnel of my will into that impossibly old fossilized corpse half a mile below us… and then it was done and I was back on my own resources.

I barely had time to recognize the power flow and release my will as the power flow sucked me dry. I staggered, and Micah and Nathaniel each grabbed a shoulder of mine to keep me on my feet. Illyana apparently recognized I had somehow discharged the necromantic energies she had held contained, because she released the circle.

With that Micah and Nathaniel ran away with me, while Damian did a fighting rearguard action, wielding the dark sword of his as it destroyed any of the undead that he struck. Richard, Asher, and Jean-Claude joined Illyana in the melee attack upon the mass of zombies, just as the creature I’d poured all that Hell-fired Necromantic energy rose from the ground with a monstrous roar and
joined in the mayhem.

Part 25e: Burn baby burn (the very recent past part C)

Flickers of imagery came to me while Nathaniel and Micah ran:

Richard transforming into a hellhound. Eyes blazing as he fought through the mass of zombies in the direction of the burning zombie dinosaur, which incidentally looked kind like a T-Rex, but not quite.

The dinosaur roaring out a challenge and striking at anything within reach. Stepping on one zombie while at the same time the head lashed down and crushed two zombies in its jaws.

Asher and Jean-Claude protecting Illyana's flanks as she hewed down zombies with that sword of hers. Armed with just their fists and vampiric strength, they smashed all that came within reach.

Damian covering our retreat, destroying any zombies that attempted to assail us with the black sword of his. One strike and the zombies just fell apart crumbling into broken dry bits.

A thrown rusted knife that was hammered out of the air by the sudden appearance of the spectral butt of a rifle accompanied by a ghost of a thought that suddenly clarified, then faded away. “Must be the end of days… devils, demons, monsters and witches…”

Richard upon the back of the zombie dinosaur tearing out giant chunks of ectoplasmic rotting flesh. Breathing out gusts of fire which was dramatic, but not very effective against a burning foe.

Illyana burning and hewing upon the dinosaur's left leg, allowing hellhound Richard to leap free as the beast crashed to the earth crushing a few zombies, and then squashing even more as it thrashed about.

Then the guys retreated as she reestablished the binding circle sealing in the zombies.
Illyana screaming something unknown in an ominous harsh language that sounded like all consonants as the graveyard began to immolate with purple-and-green flames that of course surged out of control as they blasted into the sky...

Part 25f: Good ideas gone bad (the now part B)

“Was the lava really necessary?” Was my sincere query as I looked what had become a small scale volcanic event.

She answered as she turned and likewise looked at the now molten rock. At least the event appeared to be calming down. “No…” Not a disdainful no, or a nonchalant no. It was a worried no.

“No?” Asked Damian.

“No.” Was her repeated answer. “That… was not what I was attempting to do. I called upon the Flames of the Faltine; they are insanely destructive to the undead, and that was all that was needed to destroy the dead and the graves, not…”

I finished. “Melting everything.”

She mused aloud as we stared at the diminishing fire. “The power surged… just has it did with Anita allowing the rising of that beast. Much more happened then I intended. I think Kitty would have described it as a non linear response, she always did like using that phrase, so math nerdy.”

Then a glare at the molten rock. “I… must think upon this. Likely more misfires of the enchantment that was caste upon us. Likely… some intent to channel power was part of the original purpose.” Then with a more upbeat tone. “Was rather fun though. Feels like it’s been forever since I’ve killed a dinosaur, much less a zombie dinosaur. At least something entertaining finally happened this night.”

The men and I all had the same tired thought: Gods we really needed to have her rethink her idea of fun. Micah put our thought to words.

“Please stop calling things like this fun.”
“Why? Heck, haven’t killed a beastie this big in… Oh… at least two weeks.”

“Really…” Muttered Aster. Don’t think he was buying it.

“Was also a kind of dinosaur… it tasted like chicken.”

Nathanael laughed, then the other guys exchanged glances and chuckled as well. She was pulling our collective leg.

“And where was this?” Asked Richard, playing along.

“The forbidden zone in Russia, I go there sometimes as Dragon when the hunger gets too strong, good place for really big prey.”

Silence. Okay… maybe she’s wasn't pulling our legs. Jean-Claude then inquired with an expressive wave of his hands

“You really enjoyed… this?”

“Yes… once you were all safe it was a fun outlet.”

Okay… I really need to talk to her about this.

“Why didn’t you shift to dragon to take on the T-Rex?” Asked Nathaniel.

“And chew on something like that? Pffff. Ask Mr. Zeeman how that tasted.”

Richard gagged a few times before replying. “Truly atrocious.”
We watched it burn for a few more minutes. For a second I heard a man's voice whisper “Looks like a Reckoning be a-coming…” But nobody had spoken.

“Now what?” Asher finally asked, echoing what we all thought. Hopefully not more fun was my silent prayer.

“All done so… I guess we return to the catacombs.” Was Illyana’s statement.

A flash of light, and we were back in the Blue room. Finally the night was over…

(We still need to talk about some things, Ms. Blake.) Was her thought to me.

Sigh…

“Ok guys, Illyana and I are going to go have a private conversation.”

Illyana took my hand as she commented. “Hope you’re as hungry as I am.”

And we were gone before I could say anything.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

I’ve been waiting for this set of chapters for some time. The chance for lot’s of character interaction and dialog; which tends to be so rare with Illyana (dark mysterious people just don’t tend to be chatty). Which brings me to the topic of mentors. Illyana has been rather dearth of female mentors if you think about it. There is Cat, and of course Kitty, Dani, and a bit of Ororo. But if you look at it since she was rebodied/resurrected by Marvel, Emma Frost has actually been the adult female she most interacted with in so many ways until finally Kitty started to again associate with her. Makes me wonder what role Anita may play in this story.

Where am I going with this? No idea in the fine details (I do have an outline) but, as Lord Grise commented in our frequent texting, “I’m a bit at sea on this.” Meaning adrift and no idea where it is going.

And of course there are the issues about sex, something Marvel never addresses with Illyana. A topic I occasionally write about in some of my stories. But a topic that is significant in the Anitaverse; which I rather accidently, and massively, stumbled into.

Oh, and the Cosmo comment comes from the story Tag by Benway, one of the best Kitty/Rogue stories I’ve ever read (and you should read it as well).

Part 26a: Interactions

I yanked my hand from hers the moment we appeared and fell into a partial defense hand to hand combat stance as I quickly glanced at our surroundings. We were in a small dark ally next to a well lit street with traffic and pedestrians. Across the street was… a club that I was familiar with.

We were in the vampire district of St. Louis, ground zero of the local tourist industry. Nicknamed the District, or Blood Square. The politically correct name was the Riverfront for those more civic minded.

This is where all of Jean-Claude’s nightclubs are located (Danse Macabre, Guilty Pleasures, Laughing Corpse, and of course the Circus of the Damned). You’d think Los Angeles or New Orleans would have a bigger Vampire tourism industry but nope. St. Louis has legalized vampires way ahead of other locations and nobody had an act like the Circus, although I’d heard that Las Vegas was planning a vampire themed hotel, but for now, if you wanted the real thing you came
Illyana stepped back and looked at me as I took it all in, one detail was that her clothing was now just casual jeans and a light blue shirt instead of that tight spandex full body thing she’d been wearing (damn I have got to learn that trick). She commented. “And once again my actions are either misjudged or misunderstood.”

A thought from Jean-Claude. *(You are well ma petite?)*

*(Yes.) Was my reply. (We’re in the District.)*

*(Likely to dine at some local establishment then. Remember my love, you are the Femme plus âgéée, we know so little of her and you are likely the one she will confide in. Listen and remember your teenage years.)* With that he withdrew.

Okay, time to eat a bit of crow. “*Sorry, I mistook your intent.*”

Her tone was neutral, but I caught the sub tones of frustration. “*I don’t mean any harm Anita.*”

Okay… I confess I overreacted… I thought she had been referring to other… hungers. Let’s spin this a bit was my thought as I gave an answer I’ve been thinking about. “I’m careful and… just because you don’t mean harm does not mean that something you do might not result in harm. I meant no harm by having a taste of your rage, but then we all ended up doing the beast with eight backs.”

She looked at me for a second, then gave me a reluctant nod of understanding. “*I... understand. Sorry. By hungry I meant food, burgers to be specific, not... um... sex or... whatever.*”

Ok, burgers and fries. Hungry in I want something to eat mood, not… not in the mood.

Somehow I just knew she was trying not to blush as she turned and we both stepped onto one of the main drags and started walking. She’d mentioned burgers so I had a good idea where we were going but let her lead the way.
And I noticed she didn’t try to take my hand again.

The District, where tourists can mingle with honest-to-goodness vampires. All kinds of clubs and bars here, plus shops selling everything from tourist trinkets to serious S&M leather and equipment. A varied mix of establishments catering to tourists, some to locals, some to both. Most of the activity is legal, some not; but the streets were generally very safe, heck even safer since Jean-Claude became the Master of the City as he was the first publicly known Master; he even donated to local politicians. Safe because Jean-Claude did not want any vampire crimes (bad for business) and going against a city’s Master is not a good idea for most vampires, or were as well as Jean-Claude was top dog on the power scale in the city in almost all situation. And backed up by the Wolves, Rats, Leopards, Lions, Hyenas (most of the time); plus… I was the executioner.

The sounds and sights of the District washed over us as we walked.

The chatter of excited, or jaded, tourists.

The complaints of drivers (parking in the District is a complete bitch at night).

Street performers (quick, a chance to get a selfie with Dracula! Yes the real deal! Direct from Transylvania! Just $10 bucks!).

Sidewalk trinket hawkers (buy a pair of fake fangs, capes, and other trivial. Lots of tee-shirts with fake inked blood drips).

I caught sight of a western garbed man with a Henry rifle out of the corner of my eye, but nothing when I glanced back.

The sounds of the clubs and bars, honky-tonk, jazz, disco, country, rock, punk, metal, you name it and it was being played. I heard Billy Idol belting out Rock the Cradle of love as we passed a theme bar.

... 

... 

*It burned like a ball of fire*

*When the rebel took a little child bride*
To tease yeah, so go easy yeah

‘Cause love cuts a million ways
Shakes the devil when he misbehaves
I ain't nobody's fool
Come on shake it up
Whatever I do

Rock the cradle of love
Rock the cradle of love
Yes the cradle of love don't rock easily it's true
Sent from heaven above that's right
To rob the cradle of love
Yes the pages of love don't talk decently it's true
...
...

And now it was my turn to blush slightly... I know she’s of legal age... I mean she is... Right? Oh God... I so don't need that... I don't know why but somehow having carnal relations with an underage female demon was even worse then just having carnal relations with a female demon. But... is it even possible for an underage female demon to exist? Gods I am so not going there.

I then realized that even though the streets were crowed, we were walking in a clear zone. It was like there was a ten foot people free bubble around us. Nothing blatant that I could see, just people just got out of the way, stopped, or turned around. Nobody appeared to notice that it was happening, and nobody was paying any attention to us. Yet another useful trick, I wondered if it was magic or some form of vampire mind trick.

We turned a corner and there it was, Dead Dave’s bar and grill, which make total sense as they did make a burger to die for, or so their menu claims.

“I heard this place mentioned at work.” Was her comment. “Been meaning to give it a try.”
“It’s a good place, tends to be really crowed at night.” Was my reply. “But most vampire spots tend to be unofficially off limits to RIPT folks. Don’t want the officials getting too close to the monsters.”

“Yet all have apparently eaten here.”

“Unofficial… and everybody ends up taking a look, but you’ll get a talking to if it happens to often.”

Crowds were not issue for me at vampire owned establishments as I was the Master of the City’s main squeeze and Dave was a vampire. But… looked like getting a seat was going to be a non issue as the place was completely emptying out as we walked up.

“Your doing?” Was my question, not that I didn’t already know the answer.

“Not in the mood for crowds, and I want a private conversation.” Was her answer as we walked into the now empty bar.

**Part 26b: Dead Dave’s (girl talk part 1)**

Dave is a vampire who had been on the police force before his demise; he’s still rather upset that the law did not allow him to continue to be a police officer. After his demise he’d bought this place.

The bar is all dark glass and glowing brand name beer signs, making the windows look like glowing modern art at night. The bar’s interior is dim even in daylight hours but at night the place is a deep gloom peppered with bright spots of light. On hot summer days the air conditioning works at full blast, making the entrance feel like stepping into a dim freezer, but now just the reverse as a wash of warm air chased away the night cold. The place always smells like stale cigarettes. The place has booths, tables, and bar stools along the bar.

Like most bars it’s best after dark, rather like most vampires I suppose. In daytime a bar just looks… asleep, waiting for the darkness to return so it might live again. I used to come here to get info on the vampires and weres. Back when I was less connected to the monsters. Dave would ‘sell’ info on some things, at a price way below what it was worth; his way of still fighting the good fight I guess.
Back when I wasn’t one of the monsters I suppose.

The place is popular with both the tourists and the locals. I rarely come here now as I have much better sources of information, but I do still stop by from time to time because the food really is good; they put ground bacon and ground seared pork crackling in the burger patties, I know this because the Pard gets their burgers here when we have barbeques. Life must really suck if you’re a vegan and you become a were.

A song was playing as we walked in, it was My Girl by Aerosmith and again the song gave me an internal pause as the confused waitress (human by the way) escorted us to one of the suddenly empty booths while Dave gave the two of us an apprising look from behind the bar.

My girl, she breathes hellfire
And my girl, she feeds my desire
My girl Sadie, she's the wind in my sails
A puss'n boots lady with a cat o' nine tails
Comin' after you honey, feet don't fail me now

My girl, she's bare back rider
And my girl, she's Lady Godiva
She's a full time love no mon ami
Sweeter than honey from a honeybee
And it all rubs off on little old me, oh
Slippin' in and out of love
Slippin' in and out of love

The waitress gave us time to examine the menu after taking our drink orders (Coke for the both of us, but I also ordered a cup of coffee with cream on the side).
I just had to ask. “Are you playing with the music?”

“Ah… no.” Was her answer. She looked distracted about something as she studiously examined the menu then… dropped it on the table and put her head in her hands.

“Gods, I feel like such a slut.” Was her sudden statement.

Okay… that came out of the blue.

“In what way?” Was my reply. I could relate as I really disliked what the ardeur had caused when I first manifested it. Casual sex is so not my thing but now I have little choice in that I needed to feed (that is have sex) once or twice a day. Yeah… horrors you say, well… I’ll admit there are enjoyable side affects, but I could really understand what she was likely feeling.

“Been there, felt like that.” Was my sympathetic reply. “Bad enough that I feed on sex, but when somebody triggers the ardeur forcing me, and others, to fuck our brains out… really makes me feel bad. And so many people keep trying to slut shame me and calling me a whore as if this a choice on my part.”

“It shouldn’t have worked on me.” Was her complaint, still not meeting my eyes.

“The ardeur?”

“Yeah… I should have been proof against that. I swore nobody was ever going to do that to me again.”

I wish her statement was not a surprise to me. “Again?”

She took her head out of her hands and resumed examining the menu, still not meeting my eyes. “Belasco liked… sometimes he liked it if you resisted, other times… he wanted… call it the approximation of voluntary participation.”

Crap, not… unexpected based upon that conversation I’d had with her next to my burning house. She’d described herself as a toy and pet. Hmm, suddenly there was a lack of ‘I’ and ‘Her’ in the
way she spoke about the past.

“How old were you?”

“Not sure… I suppose nine’ish when it started. Really don’t want to talk about it.”

Yuck… Time to make a suggestion. “I hate how this sounds. But I think you need therapy. Priest, professional, hell… apparently your world has lots of telepaths so maybe even that professor X you talked about.”

Just a cold silent stare back at me as she met my eyes again. Most people would be able to tell that she was upset, but one thing about links, you can almost always tell that you’ve said the wrong thing to somebody that you have a link with.

I confessed. “Okay… now I’m the one who said the wrong thing.” Apparently this professor X was not on her friends list.

Blue eyes stared at me, then… “How many ways, and times, have you been raped Ms. Blake?”

“Ways?” Of course another tell on her internal state was the Miss Blake statements, rather obvious every time she stopped using my first name she was either putting distance between us or was pulling back.

“Physical, mental, spiritual… ways.” Was her answer. “Abuse comes in many forms.”

“There’s physical…” Was my slow answer. “I’ve had dealing with some rather nasty folks and unsurprisingly more then a few thugs wanted to play hide the wheenie with me. And being a small female makes most people think that I’m weak. I usually get to surprise the assholes either via my strength, or my mystical abilities. Can’t rape the willing is one of my statements but… but… then there was…”

I paused and then finished with one whispered word. “Seraphina.”

Just a neutral look from her. Rather annoying but… most of the time I’m not big on the huggy
feelie so I continued.

“Seraphina was a female vampire. High on the power index. She took me… mentally, and possibly physically as well, I don’t remember. Rape of body and mind is how I think of it. She started making me her servant, but she underestimated me and I burned her and her’s alive after the sun rose. Gods that hurt. I loved her, she’d made me love her… and I hated her for that.”

I paused for a moment, then continued. “Then there’s the mommy dearest, she’s repeatable triggered the ardeur. Accidental orgies with folks you know and already have sex with is one thing, complete strangers is another… hate the bitch for that. Shards, makes me feel so cheap. And Belle Morte has likewise triggered the ardeur. So physical rape, mental rape in that I’ve been made to do what I would not choose to do, as well as having things erased… and I suppose… spiritual in some ways due to the pain and harm. Then… what my ex fiancée did to me when he dumped me because who my mother was… I consider that mental and spiritual abuse…”

Her eyes warmed a bit from the icy cold blueness as she replied with a question that really spoke volumes. “So… would you give those who had done such a second chance?”

My reply was direct. “Not on your life. I take it this Xavier guy screwed up.”

The only emotion she showed was a brief clenching of her left fist, that and the return of the I and her way of speaking. “Her mind shields are impermeable, nobody could get in. The professor tried many times, failed many times. I thought of him as a kind of surrogate father. Stern but fair. Then… then the one time that she did not posses such shields as my evil was split from her and sealed away, taking the shields with it… he… he… made me take it back. Forced me to resume a path she desperately wished to escape. A path that lead to her death and… and… and … that. So… no. Never ever trusting or letting a telepath have uncontrolled access to my mind. They’d… likely just try to brain fry me if they took a full look. The professor was… and likely is… very sure of the decisions he makes, for himself, for others… but it is others that pay the price. I can’t help but wonder just how many things he’s done that nobody remembers. I’m sure he believes his actions to be totally justified, but funny how nobody gets a choice other then him. Shit… I’ve met demons with better ethics.”

“So for you mental, spiritual, and obviously physical.” Was my reply.

A shadow of something that was way beyond horror in her eyes. Shit, I just had to ask. “Did you kill him? The Professor X guy that is.”

“Xavier, his full name is Charles Xavier and no… she left him live, cursed him with some
interesting dreams as he so liked to play god I thought I’d give him a more direct opportunity to
experience the consequences of such decisions.” (Author’s Note: See the story Do unto others).

I’d briefly known a vampire by the name of Xavier. Strong and he’d had a thing for young boys.
He’d burned along with Seraphina.

“Why? I’d have shot his ass dead.”

“I… don’t understand anymore. I would have. But… she… didn’t. She understood and… I don’t.
Maybe the betrayal just hurt too much. She was… better then me. I want to be as I was. So… I
move on.”

“Forgive and forget?”

“Neither.”

“Yeah… I can relate.”

Part 26c: Dead Dave’s (girl talk part 2)

That’s when the waitress brought our drinks and departed again as we still were not ready to order.

I observed that… “This is rather a public place for a private conversation.”

“Nobody can hear us or read our lips.” Was her reply as she took a sip of her Coke.

“Magic?”

“Magic.”
I gave the coffee cup a sip, now Dead Dave’s has good coffee, but this… yuck. Decided to try an experiment as I asked her to take a sip.

“Could you try some coffee?”

“Why? I don’t like coffee.”

“I love it, but now I can’t stand it, and I find that I now like tea.”

“So you can improve, good to know.”

“Ha ha. Please…”

“Please?”

“Yeah… please.”

“All right…”

She added two sugar packets add some cream. She took a sip and…

“Yuck…”

“Try another sip…”

She did and… “Yuck.” As she pushed the cup back to me.

Sigh… “So why does coffee taste bad now?”
"No idea, not my doing."

I decided to make an observation about what she’d done. “Rather rude emptying out the place. Folks got to make a living.”

Just a puzzled look from her, followed by a quick glance around the empty bar and the staff just standing around as I then asked her if she was… “Ready to order? The seared Ahi tuna is very good.”

“I had tuna a few nights ago so… naaa, going for a burger.”

I gave a nod to our waitress, but it was Dave himself who walked over.

Dave was formal in his tone and manners. “My lady, Ms. Blake, how may we serve?”

“Start by not being so formal Dave.” Was my reply, although I understood why he was playing it safe. Obviously what she’d done to Narcissus was making the rounds, which was likely in part why she’d done it. Nice to see she understood the carrot as well as the stick as a gold coin rolled across the booth’s table to rattle in a circle before Dave as she spoke. “I’ll have the house cheese burger with parmesan fries and a chocolate shake.”

I went for the blue cheese burger with some fruit. Then after Dave retreated with our order and the coin, I tried teasing her a bit.

“So… you’re a practicing vegetarian, but not tonight?”

“Huuu? I’m not a… oh… funny I suppose. Na… meat is good. What do you think heaven serves? It’s not tofu. Pepperoni and sausage all the way.”

“Cheese burger in paradise?”

“Totally.”
Okay… let’s return to a prior topic. “So… you feel like a slut because..?”

And as I expected, she stopped meeting my gaze and didn’t answer. I gave a guess after a long pause. “Because you enjoyed the sex part of it?”

A wince from her which was likely a bingo. I continued as she started to blush.

“The ardeur rather ensures that. One of the few positive things about the ardeur is great bone rattling blow out the candles sex.”

“That’s an understatement…” Was her reply. “I’ve… um…”

The word was orgasm, or orgasms in this case, but no need to drive that home. She continued.

“I never imagined it would be so… so…”

“Enjoyable?”

A negative shake of her head. “Messy… I’ve… done it before but… Gods, Cosmo never said anything about how… icky the aftermath could be.”

“Cosmo?”

“Yeah, Kitty liked to secretly swipe old Cosmo issues that Rogue threw out. Ororo liked to swipe them as well. Ha… the two of them would never admit to reading Cosmo, Kitty hid her stash under her bed, I found them when I was searching for Lockheed and read a few issues.”

So demons read Cosmo… who knew? I gently replied. “That… what we did was a rather an extreme example, but good sex usually means messy sex. And great sex has been known to ruin furniture. Any other reasons you might feel bad about yourself?”

“Gods… everybody knows we all did… it. Gods, if Rahne ever finds out she’ll always be harping about it.” Then she did a poor Scottish imitation. ‘See! See! I told you’ll she was a demonic slut!’
And she has social angst as well, I really needed to stop being surprised and just think teenager. “Yep, welcome to my world. Not only does gossip travel faster than light, with were and vampire senses everybody knows the physical truth. Sucks but… I found my emotional skin toughed over time. At least nobody’s calling you a whore.”

Something I confessed to myself that I’d likely enjoy, not the insult, just what she’d do to whomever was stupid enough to do it; somehow I think there will be lots of consequences, lots of entertaining consequences. But time to raise a delicate point.

“You looked very… um… hurt when we first woke up. The wounds kept bleeding and it hurt for you to move. And you were very… um… upset.”

“Richard and Micah are… big.” Was her reply. “And Richard is very… vigorous. I don’t like my cervix being smacked about.”

“And the injuries?”

Her expression was almost like she’d forgotten about them. “Oh… that.”

“Yeah… that.”

A sigh from her. “Black magic familiar binding rituals tend to be… rather… bloody. Sealing the bounds as it were. Plus…”

“Plus what?”

“Plus what you observed might not be quite… um… real.”

I digested that for a few seconds, then. “Did you pull any mind tricks on us?”

“No, it’s… complicated. Reality can have different… expressions. I was upset, confused… and yes
I was hurt. But… reality was… blurry at that point. What you observed was correct, yet not complete. Not surprising considering how out of control things magical had become.”

“So… um… no hard feelings sounds really trite and wrong, but… you not harboring any… revenge thoughts about… what we did?”

“No.”

Hmmm, her statements likely explains why Claudia refused to describe what she had seen.

Jean-Claude was defiantly correct, no way she’d be sharing any of this with the guys. I guess she really did want a female to talk to. Speaking of guys… “What to you think of the guys?” Was my casual question.

“There okay, which is odd as I’m not into most guys but… your guys are… okay.”

Rather liked the ‘your guys’ comment; yeah I’m possessive about my relationships.

“Just okay?”

And there was a hint of an embarrassed grin she tried to conceal by taking a sip of Coke. “Okay… better then just okay…”

Damn straight they’re better then okay. I am blessed with a living room full of top grade male goodness. “Any preferences?”

And of course our girl talk degraded into chatter about my men. Not surprised that she ranked the less threatening men higher then the more traditional alpha male that Richard embodied. Total boy scout was how she described Richard, not disparagingly but… I understood what she was saying. There is the way the world works, and there is the way you want the world to work; Richard tends to not understand the difference. Which is one of the problems between Richard and I.

Passivity was also not high on her preferences so Damian and Nathanial got lower marks as well, keep in mind that they were not getting low marks, just lower marks. Unsurprisingly Micah, Jean-
Claude and Asher got the highest rankings with Asher getting demerits for being ‘such a damn drama queen, otherwise he would have gotten almost as high a ranking as Jean-Claude (something that would appeal to his vanity).

Jason Schuyler, my wolf to call, reminded her of some young Brazilian guy by the name of Berto, or Bobby for short, from her New Mutant days, but apparently in a positive way as this Berto fellow had kept running hot and then cold which had totally confused the heck out of her and made her feel bad about herself.

I inquired about his offer to her. “Are you going to take him up on the offer to attend Guilty Pleasures?”

“Not sure… I’ve never been to a strip club.”

“It’s another thing that their, shall we say, okay at.”

“That good?”

“Yeah… they really are that good. Were and vampire strippers can just move the body in ways that are both astonishing and very very erotic.”

“Is… he a tease?”

He being Jason. And she sounded hesitant about asking, with the tone of voice that makes me think she’d been stood up more then a few times, which makes no sense at all. I mean… looking like that… blonde hotness incarnate… she’d have had to be the popular girl. But then I thought about some of the comments she’d made and reconsidered the popular girl thought. I gave her an honest answer.

“Complete flirt, but means what he says.”

“So interest is… interest?”

“Yeah, Jason does love the ladies.” So… definite interest from her.
Our food arrived and the conversation went into a lull as we both were hungry and dug in. I learned that she liked ketchup with her fries (yeah I know, minor detail, but she really liked dunking her fries in a pool of the stuff).

That’s when my phone rang with the opening theme song from Empire strikes back (Nathanial just loves adding differing ring tones on my phone). But this one meant trouble because…

Empire strikes back is Edward’s ring tone.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Much of the summary about Edward comes from Wikipedia (one should always give credit). Also Anita’s dislike for blondeness is very well documented in the books, as we find Anita always having issues with blonde women or making some comment about her Aryan family and how upset she is that her Father married a blonde woman after the death of Anita’s mother. For example, from the book Bullet, we see the following statement in the very first paragraph ‘… My hair was a little curly and a little too black for all the blonde mothers, but no one gave me a second glance…’. That very line just sums up Anita’s blonde issues because… why would the blondes, or heck, anybody care? I’m sure there were brunette and red head mothers there, not to mention fake blondes, so… keep in mind just how blonde insecure Anita is (but only if the blonde is female).

As always, a shout out to LordGrise as his inputs are invaluable to me on keeping Anita in character.

Part 27a: Edward, a summation

Edward (also know as Ted Forrester), nicknamed Death:

Edward is a human assassin/bounty hunter who has choosen to hunt supernatural targets as ‘normal’ humans were too easy (yeah, he is that good and no he has no powers so… extra scary). Edward and I have a strange relationship. Neither of us is attracted to each other, but we both consider each other a friend to be trusted. His alter ego, Theodore "Ted" Forrester (his actual name) is registered bounty-hunter, vampire hunter and U.S. Marshal. He’s currently engaged to Donna Parnell who lives in Santa Fe New Mexico. She has two children, Becca and Peter Parnell, Edward has come to consider Peter his son and let’s just say that Becca thinks of him as Daddy.

Edward's past is shrouded in mystery, however I do know that he once worked with and was trained by a man named Van Cleef, with the suggestion of both mainline military and black ops. His blackops nickname was The Undertaker" a name he apparently acquired due to having the highest kill count of any of Van Cleef's people. He never speaks of what he did or who Van Cleef is.

I first met Edward during the hunt for a vampire by the name of Valentine and his nest of vampires; back when I first started my vampire hunting career (back when I hated vampires). Edward used a flamethrower to burn down the house that was Valentine’s nest (I was in it at the time and yes I was upset with him). However, he has contributed greatly to my training.
Edward’s very much a sociopath, something Edward and I often talk about as we both can effortlessly kill without feeling anything, without caring for the ones they kill. Something I’m very sure Illyana shares with us.

Another topic that we openly discuss, is ‘who would be better’, meaning Edward or I. Edward says that his greatest fantasy is to go against me, and see who is better, heck he even claims to have dreamed about it. I’m faster and stronger now but… I really don’t encourage Edward in such thoughts.

Edward acts like he doesn't really care about anything, but I’ve seen him shoot through a whole gang of baddies to save his girlfriend Donna's children, Becca and Peter. Before that I’d always thought Edward killed emotionless, his eyes cold. "But when I’d looked into his baby blues, they were filled with fire. I had always thought Edward was scariest at his most cold, but I was wrong. Edward the family man was downright terrifying.

Edward’s alias ‘Ted’ was a licensed bounty hunter, and "good ol' boy" operating out of Santa Fe. Like me he becomes "grandfathered" in as a Federal Marshall. Just like me Edward/Ted has a nickname in the vampire/were community. I’m the Executioner, he’s Death (and yeah super strong vampires and were are that scared of him).

Edward is 5’ 8” with blonde hair, cold blue eyes and is not an imposing man appearance-wise. The only eyes I’ve ever seen colder are Illyana’s.

Edward is a deadly fighter, and expert with multiple varieties of weapons, from knives to small caliber firearms, through rifles and up to flamethrowers. He's also a skilled lock pick, and has contacts who can get him almost any kind of weapon at short notice. He has the chameleon like ability to blend into situations and adopt many disguises. He may be “just” a human, but I’d would rather take him as a backup into most fights than any of the preternatural beings in my life, and would bet on him against most opponents as well, even… gulp… me (yeah… I’m damn good, he’s better).

Edward is a gun freak, knowing a lot about every brand of gun. He commonly carries multiple firearms and knives concealed about his person (and his cars), and more if he expected to fight; I swear that he seems to posses more firepower than Rambo. He’s give me several "toys" (as he calls his weapons), at various times including a Mini-Uzi and a sawed-off shotgun, plus a large caliber derringer that 'kicks like a son-of-a-bitch'. He’ll also use any sort of firepower, regardless of any innocent bystanders (remember the flamethrower I talked about). He customizes his bullets, filling the silver hollow points with holy water and mercury, sealed with wax plus some vials of silver-nitrate, which can be injected into sleeping vampires to kill them swiftly and noiselessly most of the time.
Part 27b: Death comes a’ calling

Crap… I just knew I had to take this call. I noticed a new song was playing, it was One night in Bangkok by Murray Head.

…

…

One night in Bangkok makes a hard man humble
Not much between despair and ecstasy
One night in Bangkok and the tough guys tumble
Can’t be too careful with your company
I can feel the devil walking next to me

…

…

I hit answer and spoke. “Anita.”

You can always tell if it’s Ted or Edward by the warmth of the voice. Ted is a good ol’ boy, Edward is cold.

The cold, but intense, tones of Edward replied. “I’ve heard Childe is back.”

Crap, sounded like Edward was hoping for rematch (See the first Anita/Blake Snowflake’s passage story, Scary Things).

“She is…” Was my careful reply.

“Do you know where she is?”
Oh-boy… best go with the truth. “She’s sitting across from me.”

A pause from Edward, likely considering options, then a question. “Doing what?”

“Eating a burger, and she’s got ketchup on her face.” A comment that earned me a minor scowl as Illyana then wiped her face with a napkin.

A longer pause from Edward, waiting for the secret code words we have to indicate a hostage situation or involuntary situation. I instead gave the all clear. “We’re just chilling out.”

“With Childe?”

“It’s complicated.”

A cold chuckle. “You usually only say that when you’ve acquired an additional boy friend. Picking from left field now?”

I suppose my silence answered that question as he exclaimed with irritation. “Damn Blake… that’s extreme even for you. If you were a guy I’d be telling you that you need to learn how to keep it in your pants.”

This is so not a conversation I want with Edward. “As I said Edward, it’s complicated.”

And now Illyana was gesturing to me to hand her the phone… Oh-boy… this was so not going to be good. The last time, and only time, Edward and Illyana had interacted he’d detonated a half ton of thermite beneath her while she’d been imprisoned in a magic circle in my living room (house go boom, never did find my fridge).

I handed her my phone and she pushed the plate of fries my way. She spoke and I could see the teenage person I’d been talking to just melt away as I guess she let her monster, her sociopath out; or… had it been the reverse? Had it been an inner teenager that had been let? She spoke just one word.
“Death.”

I could just make out Edward’s reply as I nervously munched some fries. “Childe.”

Illyana looked almost bored as she spoke. “Yes I’m back in town. No, you don’t want a piece of me, for metaphysical reasons currently beyond my control. Yes you will want in on this. Here’s Anita.” She gave me a shrug as she handed me back the phone as she told me “Just cutting though the crap.” and resumed eating as I spoke into the phone.

“It’s me again.”

“She’s abrupt.”

“I think you don’t rate as high as her burger.”

“Now I’m insulted.”

“In her defense I think she’s really hungry. Plus…”

“Plus?”

“How would the conversation have gone?”

A pause from Edward as he thought about it, then his answer. “Exchanged threats and posturing as to who is the bigger bad.”

“And?”

“I guess we’ll have to see. Explain complicated.” Was Edward’s demand as he switched topics.

Time to explain complicated. “I, Jean-Clause, Asher, Micah, Nathanial, Damian, and Richard are
all bounded to her, and she to us, think vampire servants, due to some magic that went bad that had been caste upon her by parties unknown. The vampire council is coming to town for negotiations as she is being recruited by them to join, plus various other entities and groups over the next week or so. Just tonight we’ve fought Mommie dearest, then a now dead bitch of a vampire from Ireland, and finally a zombie horde with a demonic zombie dinosaur, which by the way she thought was fun so I think the two of you share the wrong definition of what fun is supposed to be.”

Like I said, complicated.

Silence for a few seconds as Edward chewed over the information, then. “Is my back covered if I come to town?” Meaning was he on Illyana’s shit list.

“Is he safe?” I asked Illyana. I was rather sure he was, but I wanted it spoken out loud.

A minor shrug of disinterest from her. “He’s safe... assuming he doesn’t try burning me again. Plus... you’d be pissed at me if I did something to him.”

“You’re covered Edward.”

Edward had that eager tone he gets as he contemplates a challenge. “I’ll come up with a work pretext for visiting, should be there tomorrow night.” Work being the Federal Marshal work.

I make sure that Edward understood that… “Everybody who is officially showing up is covered by treaty and agreements so Edward, no killing unless somebody screws up.”

“I’d complain, but we both know what’s going to happen.” Was Edward’s cold observation.

“Yeah... One or more of the monsters is bound to screw up.” Was my resigned reply.

With that Edward hung up after telling me to save some fun for him. I can just imagine Edward and Illyana in the same room talking; and now I’m worried as to who will be a worse influence, Illyana on Edward or Edward on Illyana. Really don’t need people encouraging her. Gods I could just see the two egging each other on. No... no... no, do not need Edward and Illyana becoming buddies.
A new song started playing, it was Black Magic Woman by Santana.

... ...

I got a black magic woman

Got me so blind I can't see

That she's a black magic woman

She's tryin' to make a devil out of me

... ...

“His file made interesting reading.” Was Illyana’s comment, as she made a grimace (I think it was the song being played). “Army, Ranger, Special Ops, then... Very Special Ops I’d guess, not often one talks to a person nicknamed the Undertaker; but his current nickname of Death sounds better.”

“What file?”

“His government file. Most impressive. At one point I thought his former organization might have been involved on what is being done to me but... no such luck.”

Ok… that was interesting. That meant she knew way more about Edward then I did. I wanted to start asking questions, but Edward had kept his secrets for a reason.

She continued. “The attack he put together was well done, and I suppose so was I.”

Part 27c: girl talk part 3

Yeah she’d been very much burned alive by that attack from us. Best to change the subject as we resumed eating.
“What’s deal did you make with Belle Morte? She made that statement ‘I can have anything you want’ and you replied ‘just better not take it from me’?”

“We were quoting a song, Welcome to the Jungle. I like the Guns N’ Roses version. If... big if... I join the council, then I’ll support her to be the head of the council.”

Okay, politics. “You and who else?”

A look of contemplation from her as she ate, perhaps wondering if she should tell me, then a reply. “Dragon and I think the Traveler.”

“Four of six if you join, so Belle Morte becomes the head, freeing up a space that nobody aligned to you can fill.”

“Correct.”

I finished the political analyses. “Leaving you a bit of a king maker and ensuring Belle Morte does not ‘play’ with us anymore. Or anybody else on the council for that matter.”

That deep growl again from her that nothing that size should be capable of making, and a look like she was focused on something not here. “Exactly... nobody touches what’s mine.”

“I rather dislike being considered a possession.” Was my reply.

She focused on the here and now. “Oh... um... sorry.” And with that the teenager was back again. Okay... where do we go from here? So I asked.

“What’s next?”

“Now?”

“Sure. I suppose we play tomorrow by ear.”
Illyana gestured at the remains of our food. “This helps... but the dragon is really hungry after all that we did tonight so afterwards I’ll need to feed on something more substantial.”

Gulp. “And what does substantial mean?”

She mused a bit. “I suppose I could go back to the Russian forbidden zone.”

“You’ve been there?”

“A few times, I find it a bit creepy. Good hunting though.”

Creepy. Talk about understatement. The Soviets had something like five to ten divisions guarding the place. Hundreds of pre positioned long range artillery pieces, not to mention both tactical and strategic nuclear weapons aimed at the place; and supposedly a few from our side as well. One of the most dangerous locations on the planet and she calls it a bit creepy. I think I need to create new ratings for the Oh-Shit scale.

I sipped some more Coke, then inquired “Do you hunt?”

“As dragon, not so much any more in my human or other guises.”

“Many were groups are big on hunting on the full moon. Pack binding activity. Big deal with the werewolves. But I’m not so sure hunting in dragon form would be a good idea.”

She agreed. “Not a problem. I can hunt in human or human’ish form. Is knife or spear allowed?”

“I’ll check, not common for a non wolf to be a member so, likely it will be acceptable.” I offered some additional information. “They eat the kill raw.”

Okay, really don’t want to know those details, but the whole dragon thing did interest me. “What’s it like being a dragon?”

She paused in her chewing. “Territorial… suspicious… not always angry but… most things tend to annoy. Think giant grumpy cat and you’re in the vicinity. I found it to be fun taking a sand bath and a snooze in the heat of the desert day, but camels are way too chewy and blah on the taste; goat and lamb are much better. Flying is enjoyable… heck, really fun. Also turns out a dragon can swim almost as well as they can fly and they can dive very deep. Fantastic eyesight, hearing, smell, and taste. And they have a built in nav system in that I always know were North is.”

Never knew that about camels, guess that’s why the cooking channel never has any dishes involving camels (Nathaniel loves the cooking channel). I asked a question about where we’d been.

“Is that place, Limbo, really your home?”

“Yeah… Home. Or self defined hell I suppose. Deathplace. Birthplace. I hate it, but woo to anybody who tries taking it away from me. And yet… it’s mine so I suppose I love it in a way. Limbo, the metal dimension as Dani once described it. Like it was created as inspiration for heavy metal album covers.”

“The place scares me…” Was my response. “Evil… I could just feel the evil of the place.”

“A not uncommon reaction from just about… everybody.” Was her cool answer.

Opps, I think my comment annoyed her. Best to switch topics before she stops talking. “Do you live, or reside there most of the time or do you travel?”

“Home base as I plot and plan how to recover my soul. Sometimes I travel to many localities before I return to Limbo, other times just a quick jaunt. Not… sure what to do now that… well… not sure what to do now.”

“Any other odd places like the land of beards?”

A question that earned me a snort of laughter from her. “Gods that was a strange place. Everything just as I remembered it, except for the beards, and just loose hair everywhere; like the mother of all dogs had shed on everything. Let’s see. There was this locality that felt that building
giant robots was the solution to giant monsters intruding upon their dimension, they were a bit odd. Apparently punching things was a very important part of their culture. So... no need to use bombs or missiles, just build something big enough so you can use your fists. Or a giant sword being used by a giant robot. I can just see the planning sessions... use a nuke? Grunt... Not manly enough! Hey... I have an idea... let's create giant robots using giant phallic substitutes to beat the monsters to death with. And of course a whole bunch of the robots just had to put cannons where the dick would be. It was a very male kind of place.”

Which caused me to snort some Coke up my nose as I was taking a drink at the time and the idea of giant robotic missile firing dongs was just funny. She continued on a more serious note that became bitter as she went on.

“There were the eight thousand steps of supposed enlightenment. Climb them on your knees and supposedly, if you get to the summit, enlighten is yours. The monks let me try, but later I found out because they thought I’d fail. Things got very... combative when I reached step seven thousand nine hundred and ninety ninth step. I was blocked... prevented from taking that last step with my bloody knees.”

“That sounds unfair.”

“I got rather... well... a fight broke out... the eight thousandth step was destroyed, and things went down hill from there. Some idiots from a group called the Hand, bunch of evil Ninjas, thought that I was on their side so they launched a preemptive attack only to find that I disliked them as well. So... by the end of it all just dead monks and Ninjas everywhere, quite the disappointment.”

Okay... not sure what to say.

“Then these time lord idiots from a place called Gallifrey and some weird tank like things called Darleks, decided my plans to regain my soul was somehow a threat to the universe; or more specifically them a threat to themselves. So they banded together to... arrest me I guess. Although the Darleks were constantly going on about ‘Exterminate’ every time. They tried to erase me from time but... that didn’t work out well for them. I did have fun using that term they so loved ‘Exterminate’ against the Darleks. Finally a truce was reached. Ahhh... those were some fun times.” (Author’s note, see Girl’s night out for more details).

Again with the description of fun times, and the use of air quotes from her when saying exterminate, not sure I’m buying this. “Any place you hate?”

“Many... But the worse is Asgard... hate Asgard.”
“Why?”

“She got kidnapped to there back before I died. Sucked… just sucked. Got bound to a wall by the Enchantress and my evil aspects given form to rampage across Asgard in search of the other kidnapped New Mutants. That… that was a bad time. Left to starve and rot, but unable to die… So no… not a place I like. Plus… I went back after I… after I came back… I asked for help of Odin. Asked… begged really… that… he help me. Help me be… to not be me. I swore I would serve him if you would only… stop the pain. He was less then sympathetic and invited me to go kill myself and stop bothering my betters.” (Author’s note, as recounted in the story Top Gear X, one of my funny stories, and yet… lots of not so funny stuff in it).

Odin… Norse god? Her description doesn’t sound like a guy I’d get along with. “He sounds like a real piece of work.”

“Colossal asshole.” Was her snarl. “After that… I spent a season campaigning with this mercenary band called the Black Company, the last of the free companies of Khatovar. They were in service to this religious group of nut cases called the Pain God during what turned out to be the end of the Pastel wars. Bad people in the employment of bad people being laid siege to by bad people. Evil fighting evil so… just what I had searched for as I was… rather… It has just been after I had failed on finding, much less freeing… Kitty and… Odin… I was kind of…” She paused for a moment she had a look of musing puzzlement for a few seconds before she continued.

“I think… I was in a bad way and just needed an outlet for a time. Learned some good stuff as they were tricky bastards. They kept detailed annuals of their history which made for interesting reading. Pain god priests ended of trying to screw the company and we paid them back in kind before marching north to get away from all the other folks who hated our guts. That’s when I took my leave of them.”

She continued. “Then… The Courts of Amber and Chaos were less then hospitable as they had concerns that I was thinking of trying to take over. Which always irks me as I already have a dimension to run, no need fore more.”

She finished off her chocolate shake, then continued. “Then, of course, there’s Wonderland. That was an odd place.”

“So you’re not pulling Nathan’s leg?”
“No… I rarely lie Anita, not worth the effort. Odd that he’s the most innocent of all of you, considering what he’s been though. Even Richard has more of the stain of sin about him then Nathan.”

“He’d love to hear about Wonderland.”

“What took place was… rather violent. Lots of not nice people trying to do not nice things to me. I tend to get… cranky at such things and react accordantly.”

“So their dead.” Was my statement, and I rather agreed with her. Try to kill me and I so don’t have a problem trying to put you six feet under.

“Some of them anyway.”

“Did Cheshire survive?” Nathanael would be heart broken if Cheshire died or had been kill by her.

“Yeah... He lived. I like cats. Plus he’s not stupid, unlike some.”

“Then he’d love to hear the story.” She was talkative, and not asking any questions in return. Which prompted me to ask “Why so willing to communicate all of a sudden?”

“You.” Was her one word answer after a pause. An answer that earned her a minor annoyed glare from me, which apparently prompted more details so… looks like I can now stare down a hell lord; who’d have thunk it?

“You don’t like… things being kept from you. You prefer details. And I’m… trying to be… open with you.”

“No questions for me?”

“Not at this time, still… trying to take it all in I suppose. Key details from seven people’s lives is a lot to digest.”
“How much did you get from me… from all of us?”

“Whatever your subconscious decided was critical to share.”

“I don’t think any of us got anything from you. Mostly anything, that is.”

“I am not known for sharing.”

“Why?”

“Never helps, just causes problems. I’m... not a nice person. People don’t like that. She always hid things because I was so afraid of how people she cared about would react to the things I’d done.”

“And now?” The whole I and she way of talking was disconcerting, and very troubling.

“Same concerns. Which are rather common behaviors on your men as to how much they share with you, you do try to find reasons to push away.”

A statement that annoyed me because it showed just how much of my privacy was likely gone, and because I’m like most people in that I dislike the truth being told to me. Yes I can be an emotional minefield, and yes my men did sometimes get that deer in the headlights look whenever one of those random emotional landmines goes off; other then Micah that is as he just accepted me regardless.

Only later did I realize how she’d changed the subject on me.

**Part 27d: girl talk part 4**

I decided to be direct about my lack of the *ardeur*. “Are you blocking it... the ardeur that is. *In me? In Jean-Claude?*”
“Yes. I am feeding it power so it says feed without having to have… sex.”

“Why?”

No answer just her obviously thinking about just what to tell me. I pointed out that “Lies always piss me off.”

She nibbled upon of the lasts of the fries, before she answered. “I don’t know if I can block it when it raises to feed. I’m… concerned that it will flow through the links to me.”

That was a fear I could understand. I hated turning into a bitch in heat, thank God that part was past. I had to feed, but the ardeur no longer would suddenly trigger that need to have sex right there and then.

I thought upon the topic, then asked. “That can’t be good long term.”

“It is an energy drain, but I can cope for now… but I will need to feed as dragon after this meal as tonight has been such a bitch.”

“So how long are you going to ‘feed’ the ardeur.”

“A few days, I guess… I’ll have to have you and Jean-Claude… um… feed under… um… controlled… um…”

We’d have to have sex and she’d have to see if it affected her. Which if it did then that means she’d likely need to have somebody around incase she needed to have sex… Which of course raises the question of who, and if it was even safe for somebody not bonded to her to have sex with her. Which properly meant I had to pick for us.

Us?

Her… I mean pick for her.
With that the conversation petered out. I noticed that Bad Things by Machine Gun Kelly with Camila Cabello was now playing.


Am I out of my head?
Am I out of my mind?
If you only knew the bad things I like
Don't think that I can explain it
What can I say, it's complicated
Don't matter what you say
Don't matter what you do
I only wanna do bad things to you
So good, that you can't explain it
What can I say, it's complicated

...

...

A song that was irritating the hell out of me. Made me think of things I didn’t want to think about. Kind of how I’d felt the first time I’d… played with Jean-Claude. That he was just so damn desirable. How I has ceased to think of him as a walking corpse and instead felt…

Attracted to him.

There had been no sex that time but… that was when I finally thought of him as a person and not a corpse that talks. Still a monster but… well… aren’t we all? That was when I’d finally came to grips with the fact that Jean-Claude really did look so good because that was how he really looked. Speaking of which…

“Is this your real appearance?”

A slight questioning look from her as she replied. “Yes…?”

“No mind tricks, no illusions, no… whatever?”
“No… I am wearing some lipstick.”

I could see that, and not much at that. She looked so… attractive. But ask the moth about being attracted to the flame. Damn just looking at her was annoying me, which might not have been completely honest as to what I might have been feeling, but I liked annoyed better then those other feelings.

“Why do you have to look the way you do?” I finally asked.

Illyana looked at me with annoyed confusion. “What way?”

“Blonde. Long hair. Taller then me. Thin in all the right places and curvy in all the parts that should be curvy. Completely perfect skin. Even blue eyes for crying out loud. My God, everything about you just screams what I wanted to be for so long. What… I wasn’t. If I’d looked like you I’d… things would have been different. That bastard’s mother would never have forced my fiancée to dump me because I wasn’t sufficiently WASPish. God, what that did to me, the rage that…” I stopped. Damn it, over sharing. I’ve so over that bastard and his family but… how she looked just reminded me of those old pains.

She finished as she met my angry eyes. “…In part defines you. Although your rage is much older and much more layered then just that.”

“That’s none of your business.” Was my cold reply as I looked away, which earned me a sigh instead of a scowl.

“Please stop doing that.” Was her statement.

“Doing what? Trying to maintaining my privacy? So not sorry.”

“No… being so damn… alluring. It’s very… disconcerting.”

I looked back. “In what way am I possible being alluring?” Damn, knew that the *ardeur* must have somehow altered me.
And now she glanced away and then looked down at the table. After a few seconds she softly spoke.

“Brunette, outspoken, opinionated, strong willed, female, older, in charge, deadly… really really like the deadly… gods you’re even a cat for crying out loud. There’s not a button I have that you don’t push.”

I angrily examined her words but… her description was how I was the first time I met her. That was… me. Crap. Somehow that made it even worse. She continued.

“And your scars, also a big… um… turn on. You fight, you survive, you don’t hide it, you don’t let others force you to hide what you are. You didn’t let others define you.”

Didn’t? That was a tell. “Didn’t?” I asked.

She looked up. “She killed myself because she wouldn’t deal with what I was. You…you’ve done better with your choices. I… like that and… well… I like that. Shards you interested me even before… we… did it.”

Yeah… “So now what?”

She pushed her empty plate away. “The usual, survival. Find out who’s screwing with us, deal with the council, and deal with all the complications, and figure out how to get along.”

The words just popped out of my mouth. “Be less blonde.”

A few blinks from her, and a “Come again?”

“Blonde… be less blonde. Sorry, my blonde issues, that kind of just popped out.”

She had an appraising look as she gave forth a slow “Okay… Got it. Be less blonde.”
Now I wanted to growl, but that would have just looked and sounded silly. Instead we got up and left.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Well that took some effort, writing Illyana and Anita conversing is difficult as both are just so private and not open to sharing. And of course interactions between the pair are rather… uncomfortable. Which was my writing intent for the prior two chapters.

This ended up being way more chapters for just ‘a single night’ then I planned.

Part 28a: Partings

We stepped onto the busy sidewalk and started walking in the direction of the circus, which was about a mile away as the car drives. Again there was that circle of privacy as the crowd just got out of our way. Behind us I heard people were suddenly exclaiming about how lucky they were to find Dave’s empty as people began to flow back into the bar.

The song Separate Ways, Worlds apart, by Journey was playing from a car waiting at a stop light.

_Here we stand_  
_Worlds apart_  
_Hearts broken in two, two, two_  
_Sleepless nights_  
_Losing ground_  
_I'm reaching for you, you, you_

_Feelin' that it's gone_  
_Can't change your mind_  
_If we can't go on_  
_To survive the tide_  
_Love divides_
Someday love will find you
Break those chains that bind you
One night will remind you
How we touched
And went our separate ways

Again another one of those songs that just was more then a little too direct. I gave her a what the hell look and she just shrugged and claimed she wasn’t doing it so… more wild magic just cuing in on her, or (gulp) us.

Troubled times
Caught between confusions and pain, pain, pain
Distant eyes
Promises we made were in vain
In vain, vain

I was feeling… weird. Nothing physical, just… weird. Like I had been on a date that had gone sour or… not sour? And I was upset that it had not gone sour? I know, that makes no sense, and no I wasn’t trying to be ’female’ like some women I know. I just couldn’t put words to what I was feeling. She seemed equally subdued so just the two of us slowly walking towards the distant circus in a conversational void. At one point I was able to briefly see the head of one of the three giant fanged clowns that decorates the roof of the warehouse.

“I’ve got to go.” Was her sudden statement. She turned to leave, but glanced back at me. “I really really hope I don’t kill all of you.”

With that she leapt into the air as a burst of wind blew my hair about. Meaning I got to watch her
morph into a dragon and take to the skies with mightily beats of her wings to gain altitude. The wind swirled around me, and everybody else, but only I apparently saw the dragon. Then… she vanished in a flash of light.

Before tonight I’d have taken that as a threat, but… it wasn’t, I could feel it on the link. She felt… sad. Sad and scared about what the future might be.

Which left me feeling like I’d somehow kicked a puppy.

Which makes no sense because … well… hell lord right? But... lots of complex and contradictory feelings. Not sure if that was feedback from her or just general confusion on my part. Which of course just left me in a grey mood (not an uncommon state of affairs for me) about little miss blonde hotness from hell.

Crap, this kind of feels like when I was conflicted about Jean-Claude… denying the attractions I felt towards him. Attraction that just got more difficult on dealing with after I stopped thinking of him a monster. And I was concerned that I wasn’t thinking of her as a monster anymore; that whole slippery slope thing once a monster stops being a monster; without my usual concern about sex as that had already happened with her, which prompted a memory about said sex involving…

Sigh…

I continued walking to the circus (now less then a mile away) as I mused upon what had happen this night. If this was a film I’d be alone, on some deserted street, in the rain or something with a mournful classical soundtrack, say Wagner’s Siegfrieds Funereal Music, that’s what they used in the film Excalibur whenever something really significant happened.

Instead… lots of people, noise, more then a few drunks at this late hour, and a convertible driving off with some woman in the back cheering while the song Maniac by Michael Sembello bellowed forth from the vehicle.

…

…

It can cut you like a knife if the fight becomes the fire

On the wire between will and what will be
She’s a maniac, maniac on the floor (I sure know)
And she’s dancing like she’s never danced before
She’s a maniac, maniac on the floor (I sure know)
And she’s dancing like she’s never danced before
She’s a maniac, maniac at the show,
And she’s dancing like she’s never danced before
She’s a maniac, maniac on the floor (I sure know)

She’s a maniac, maniac at the show

Thankfully the car drove off leaving me with the… the delicious smell of cinnamon crêpes as I walked past a specialty food truck (yes I got in line and got one, the smell was that good). One of the Lukoi werewolves was in line as well and he paid for my crêpe as a sign of respect. I may no longer be the Lukoi’s Lupa, but I still was the pack’s Bolverk (doer of evil deeds, the one who meets out punishments that the Ulfric does not feel comfortable doing). To date I’ve actually never done any Bolverk duties, but Richard’s threat was clear to all by appointing me Bolverk.

I mused as I walked and enjoyed my treat.

She’s female and… well… rather more guys then girls so frankly that makes her a plus on the keeping the guys happy index; assuming that sex was on offer and I said it was okay for her to have sex with my guys. Which made me slightly chuckle as sex appeared to always be on offer for us so the cynic within me was rather convinced that the whole issue of sex was not going to go away.

Talk about a busy night: Damian now being a master class vampire, and having a female werelion as his animal to call. I’d bet that Damian and Kelly were already in bed.

Bartolome and Valentina aged from their child vampire forms to adult hood.

Two… no three battles in one night, with that bitch from Ireland toasted… that felt good. And of
course Mommy dearest, and the zombies with the zombie T-Rex; gods she found that fun, which is so wrong.

The chance for healing for Aster… shit I haven’t even thanked her for that… But I’d bet Asher did on that private conversation they’d had; which left me wondering what had been said that had annoyed her. This again just reminding me that I’m thinking of her as human rather then monster, and I’d bet that the guys were thinking the same.

Jean-Claude and Aster now being supposedly daywalkers, I suppose dawn will show if that was true; not that I doubted her on that. That is, if any of the vampires were willing to give direct sunlight a go; I kind of suspected that the morning would just be a test that they would stay awake.

The whole issue of her being able to command the zombies I raised, and I hers. Never before had I seen any animator be able to control zombies raised by another animator. That has lots of implications but no conclusions. And likely nobody I could ask about it as the witches were defiantly off limits for such conversational topics.

That’s when I walked past a Sushi Karaoke bar and heard some atrocious Karaoke being belted out by the werelione Haven (I recognized his voice). By the amount of slurring he was massively drunk and he was in the middle of singing Love is a battle field to the cheers of the restaurant crowd.

…

…

Both of us knowing

Love is a battlefield

You’re begging me to go

Then making me stay

Why do you hurt me so bad

It would help me to know

Do I stand in your way

Or am I the best thing you've had
Believe me
Believe me
I can't tell you why
But I'm trapped by your love
And I'm chained to your side

And yet another song filled with implied meanings… or maybe just an appropriate song for Haven as the two of us were at a relationship impasse.

Which got me thinking about what had happened to the Lions, Hyenas, and a now fried Irish bitch of a vampire. A correction, a punishment, and a killing. And how she had behaved with the other groups in the meat and greet. Each act a lesson to any who observed.

Wolves demonstrated the intent of not disturbing the existing order, that she was subordinate in the pack to the existing pack hierarchy. Likewise the Leopards, as well as showing no threat to any Pard member.

Rats showed she could be respectful and did not feel the need to throw her weight around.

Lions demonstrated that public disrespect had consequences. And showed that she could take over the Pride anytime she wanted with that Japanese werelion of hers.

Hyenas showed just how unpleasant those consequences could be. To both the members and to Narcissus. And that she didn’t have to do it herself.

And that Irish bitch Morvoren, demonstrated just what happened when you attacked her… or us. A demonstration to all vampires, although I’m rather sure that the word will spread the various were communities as weres and vampires have lots of crosstalk.

That song was still bugging me. Who was chained to who? She appears to be much more emotionally vested then any of us. Made me wonder about…
That’s when I heard a vehicle honking off to me left. I turned and there was a scruffy looking lavender Suzuki Samurai two door convertible pulling up to me with the top down. Being driven by an enormous bald black man smoking a stubby cigar.

“Hiya cuteling, Boss babe said to give you a lift.”

It was the transformed demon S’ym.

Part 28b: S’ym, a brief summation for those who don’t know

S’ym:

S’ym is the most physically potent native demon of the demonic realm called Limbo, serving the ruler of Limbo if the ruler allows it. The main muscle as it were. Super strength and near invulnerable. He is stronger than Colossus (Illyana’s brother) and easily snapped one of Wolverine's claws in half. 7’5 in his demonic form, red eyes, purple skin, 1500 pounds. Cunning, but rather not the smartest bulb (a 3 on a scale of 0 to 10 on the intelligence scale), and he so loves to speak in the third person (check Wikipedia for the answer as to why).

S’ym served Belasco, the ruler of Limbo who kidnapped Illyana when she was six. At the age of thirteen Illyana successfully rebelled against Belasco and defeated him in both physical and magical combat. During that fight Illyana eviscerated S’ym with her soul sword; which he barely survived (see the original Storm and Illyana Magik limited series).

Of particular note is that S’ym killed one of the original X-Men when Illyana was first trapped in Limbo, her beloved brother. In addition, whenever Belasco needed Illyana punished, S’ym was the one to usually do it. To quote Illyana after she slices S’ym up (and thinks that she’d killed him). “S’ym was a walking nightmare who haunted my life from the moment of my arrival in Limbo, the murderer of my beloved Peter… but also, more importantly, because as he falls, Belasco’s face shows an emotion I’ve never seen before: FEAR.”

Later, Illyana defeats S’ym at the home of the X-Men, to save his life S’ym swear his allegiance to Illyana only to later rebel against Illyana in an attempt to rule Limbo. That rebellion ended in some very bad writing that killed off the original Illyana character (In the horrible Inferno storyline).
Fast forward 25+ years (five+ years Marvel time)... Illyana is brought back by Belasco who snuffs him this time and again S’ym swears allegiance to Illyana. Then, in the X-Infernus graphic novel, we see that S’ym is Illyana’s right hand man as she leads her demon hordes across Limbo, fighting to find her missing soul sword and soul gems. In that book the daughter of the slain Belasco, Witchfire, has the missing soul gems and takes over Limbo when Illyana briefly departs to recover her soul sword. And... who refuses to yield the Witchfire? S’ym of all people who remains loyal to Illyana. When Illyana returns to Limbo she is upset to find S’ym enchained and tortured (who is unhappy that she is now in her human form as he missed her hooves).

At this point, story wise, Illyana and S’ym appear to have a relationship that involves some actual trust and possible some minor friendship (per Canon I’ll point out). Side note, for those who want to know the best Illyana Limbo story before she regains her soul (and after she comes back from her journey) I strongly recommend you read the X-Men Hellbound: 1-3 limited series (collected in the Graphic Novel X-Men Second Coming: Revelations.

Remember that S’ym is currently transformed into a black man.

Part 28c: S’ym

Just... great. Like I don’t have enough to deal with.

I dismissed the offer. “I’ll find my own way.”

A shrug from the man... creature... whatever the hell he was. “Have it your way... S’ym can go back and resume his fun with the Hyenas.”

Wrong thing to say. Wrong time to say it. I so wanted an outlet for what I was feeling, or more accurately, an outlet for my anger. So I took him up on his offer in that I got in the car... took his cigar from his mouth and tossed it into the road as I stated.

“Leave the Hyenas alone.”

Which earned me smile and a puff of smoke. “S’ym sees why boss likes you. Hyenas were fun... S’ym is enjoying his vacation. Nice that weres are more resilient then humans, more fun to play
The car started moving and another comment from S’yrm. “Buckle up cuteling. Safety first.”

“Don’t call me cuteling.”

“Okay sweet thing.”

“That’s a no as well S’yrm boy. Strike two… really hope you go for that third swing.”

A side stare from him. “Think you’re that good?” Noticed no cute label this time so progress.

“Yep.”

Silence as he drove the remaining distance to the circus, pulled into the back employee parking lot, and turned off the engine, then he stated.

“S’yrm would call you on it, but S’yrm not stupid enough to fight Boss Babe’s consort.”

Consort… improvement, but still irritating as I am so not a consort.

“Strike two and a half demon boy.”

“S’yrm finds you difficult. S’yrm hopes the boys are not this difficult.”

“Naaa, I’m the bitchy one.”

“S’yrm can tell. S’yrm hopes you are not such with the Boss. Boss deserves better.”
What

An

Absolutely

Unbelievable

Ending

To

The

Night.

Now I’m being lectured on how to treat Illyana by a demon. Like he’s trying to pick a fight with me, or like…

That’s when it hit me, and I relaxed as I started to laugh, not in mockery but in nervous relief. “Oh Gods… it’s the dad talk isn’t it? Or maybe the brother talk… not sure. Shards… can this night get any stranger.”

A growl from him and I think his eyes glowed. Yeah, he was trying to be intimidating but he wasn’t fooling me. “Crap… this matters to you.”

His hands gripped the steering wheel, and snapped it off the steering column without even flexing. “S’ym is constrained. S’ym obeys. S’ym suggests you don’t give cause to make S’ym angry.”

Sigh…
Definite dad/brother grade ‘be nice to my daughter/sister or else’ talk. I suppose I could get in his face but… here was the one person I have access to who knows her and he obviously wants me to get riled up. Rather then my usual aggression I decide to just talk.

“Why?”

S’ym looked at the steering wheel in his hands, like he wasn’t quite sure how it got there, as he replied.

“S’ym… is loyal. She… could have killed S’ym for what he did. For his rebellion. She gave S’ym a chance.”

“Is that all?”

“S’ym was there night Belasco brought her back. S’ym saw what was done. Even one such as S’ym… feels…” S’ym wadded up the plastic steering wheel into a ball and smushed it back onto the steering column. “S’ym is not good with feeling. S’ym prefers action.”

I can bet. He did say he was her Enforcer.

“You’re going to be all kinds of trouble aren’t you?”

A smile from him as he cracked his fingers. “S’ym hopes so.”

Illyana and I defiantly need to have a little talk about S’ym boy here.

So, demons have machismo as well, but it’s late and I’m tired so I decided the best path would be to let the guys try to have a guy moment with him over beer or something. I opened the door and got out of the car. Likewise S’ym. Which prompted me to ask. “Where the heck are you going?”

“S’ym ordered to stay at the circus.”

I thought about contravening that order, then decided that was for the best as that would prevent
him from having more fun with the Hyenas, or any others.

And that’s how the night ended. We went into the catacombs beneath the circus, Richard was still there so the two of us re-acquainted ourselves with each other with some fun sweaty physical exertions, and then went to sleep afterwards.

What a night…
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

I wrote most of this chapter quite some time ago. Never thought it would take this long to get to it.

Part 29a: Anita dreams…

Something glassily crunched beneath my left shoe… The sound, and the feeling, froze me in place like a deer that had stepped on a snapping twig.

Then… confusion over my location as I looked about while drawing my 9mm in a two fisted hold. I was the front porch of what looked like a two story stone mansion with an attic. Lots of windows and an imposing double front door that was in front of me. A bit less imposing in that one of the two doors was smashed to bits, and the other was open and hanging by only one hinge. The place looked like it was built of stone, yet… significant damage as all the windows that I could see were as broken as the door and much of the rock was cracked, and there was the unmistakable smell of old smoke and ashes.

I glanced down and learned that I’d stepped on some broken glass. I lifted my foot and moved it to a spot with no glass; then I moved to the side of the doorway and glanced in. Looked like a trashed mansion, no graffiti, scattered fire damage, smashed furniture, lots more broken glass, and stains on the hardwood floor and throw rugs that just screamed dried blood.

Contrarily, the lawn and driveway look perfectly quaffed, the perfect image of a subdued country estate. This place reminds me… kind of like the description of that school Illyana said she attended. I remembered the name because of my own experiences with a vampire by the name of Xavier. She had gone to a place called Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters. Well… the place looked like shit. What the hell am I doing here?

I turned to look back into the foyer and that’s when I caught a glimpse of pink hair out of the corner of my eye. There… over by the trees as I swung to aim at… a thin looking girl with pink hair and fish stockings. Weird… she was just standing there like some kind of ghost in those creepy Japanese horror films.

And with that a wave of horror hit me.
I took a step back, past the doorway and into the foyer while continuing to aim at… whatever I was aiming at.

I bumped into a wall as I backed away while trying not to break and run. I glanced over my shoulder and I saw a painted desert.

I tried to look away, to refocus on the weird pink haired girl, but my eyes were frozen, and the desert kept growing bigger and bigger…

Until it filled my vision and I fell into… something.

**Part 29b: Childhood’s End (part 1a)**

I hit the sandy ground yet again, and the sword goes flying, as Cat uses her knife to block my clumsy sword swipe, then casually backhands me, flinging me to the ground.

I spit blood and push myself up. There she is… Cat. God, how I hate her.

Everyday we run until I collapse. We train with sword and knife, and each day my inadequacies are made plain by her. Everyday I discover that I can hurt even more.

My skin is growing tougher, no longer soft and easily scrapped. My muscles are firmer and I suppose I bruise less now, not that the aches are reduced. I lost a tooth last week, I think it was a baby tooth being replaced by an incoming adult tooth, but… it didn’t feel loose before Cat’s blow had knocked it out.

I hate this. Hate everything. Cold nights huddling by a fire. Food only half cooked because Cat likes her meat rare. The dubiously pleasure of taking dust and sand baths to scrape the stink and filth from my body.

I want to go home.
I want my brother.
I want her to leave me alone.
I want her to die.

I want a lot of things.

I don’t get any of them.

The old me would say it’s unfair. Cat only agrees with me, and then find a new way to punish me for my bad altitude.

Every few days she comes up with a new punishment for my failings.

The latest being told to stand on one foot until I can stand no more… then a switching if she believes I gave up before my body did.

And I do it. For to disobey her is when the real punishment happens. I can talk back, but words have a price. Disobedience has a price. Failure has a price. Crying out if I am startled has a price. Weeping has a price.

I don’t weep anymore. I want to but… it hurts too much too cry, meaning Cat hurts me.

“This is hell Snowflake, everything has a price.” Cat says as she taunts me with my brother’s nickname for me. I’ve asked that she not call me Snowflake, and she partially honors my request. Now I’m only called Snowflake when I disappoint her.

So I hear it even more now.

Cat offers me a hand up, but I’ve fallen for that trick before.

“Never expect help. Never trust. Even your best friend may attack you at anytime if the Devil has his way. Trust is a lie, they always betray you in the end.” The words are drummed into me every day. “Living is moving forward, only the dead stay still.”
Not falling for that trick again, instead I clutch a handful of sand with my left hand and as I reach for her hand with my right hand I fling the sand into her face causing her to raise her right hand in an attempt to block the sand as she momentarily closes her eyes and turns her head to avoid the grit.

My head impacts her stomach and she gives forth an oomph sound before she phases into intangibility, preventing the rest of my futile attack.

But I actually managed to hit her for the first time.

And I don’t hear the sarcastic Snowflake. For the first time in I don’t know how long I hear. “Well done Illyana.”

She offers a hand up again and this time… this time I know that it is a real offer.

I feel… good. For the first time since Cat took me into the wilderness I feel…

Good.

I like the feeling.

Cat chuckles as she says I’m finally learning to be a big girl.

That makes me briefly reflect… I wonder how old am I? I was… six when I was tricked into Limbo. I think I spent a year with Ororo and then the last few months with Cat so… I guess I’m sevenish now.

That night I dream of cake and a birthday party.

But I don’t cry.
Crying is for babies.

...

...

Part 29c: Childhood’s End (part 1b)

Hunger.

So hungry now. Several weeks ago Cat had declared that. “We eat what you kill from now on.”

Which is not good as I’m a bad hunter. I didn’t like killing. Cat has been teaching me how to kill but… I guess I’m more motivated now.

My eyes are constantly looking for food. For something to eat. Berries and roots help but what I crave is…

Meat.

“High caloric value.” Is Cat’s explanation, then she has to explain that the word caloric means high energy food, fatty or high in sugar.

I crave such food.
I dream of food.
I grow even thinner.

So does Cat as she only eats her portion of what I gather for us.

I… learn to hunt better. To quickly kill what prey I locate or trap.
To eat things that I’d never have touched before.

Killing means not being hungry. A lesson in life says Cat.

Finally Cat is willing to aid in the hunting and gathering rather then just the teaching as she expresses satisfaction with my efforts.

That day I cut a deer’s throat that Cat had hamstrung.

I don’t even hesitate. It’s just food.

She makes me drink the blood, it’s thick, warm and salty.

I throw up.

But I don’t cry.

Crying is for babies and…

And I don’t… I don’t think I’m…

I don’t want to think about what I am.

All I want is Cat to be happy with me.

…

…

Part 29d: Childhood’s End (part 1c)
The demon hurt CAT!

It attacked us! Cat drove it away but she’s **HURT**!

**Cat’s hurt!**

I panic!
I don’t know what to do!
I forget everything she’s taught me!
I’m such a baby!
I’m useless!
I scream inside at myself!

‘The demon will go bring more demons!’ Says Cat. ‘You have to stop it!’ Then she passes out!

I… I run.
I follow the tracks just like Cat has taught me.
There are drops of blood, the demon is hurt. Cat hurt him.

He hurt Cat!
I… Rage fills me. And fear…
Cat is all that I have!

I find the demon, he has paused and is clutching his bleeding belly. I leap upon his back.

I stab and I stab and I stab in a hysterical frenzy, but the demon keeps moving. Why won’t he die! The demon is screaming and I think so am I. He hurt Cat! **Cat**! He has to pay! I have to protect Cat! To show Cat that I’m not useless!
He has me down! He’s on top! But a desperate thrust up through the jaw into the brain finishes him and he collapses upon me. I gasp and try to contain the panic, just like Cat has trained me to do. To be calm on the outside even if I am not on the inside.

I force the body off of me as I part push, part crawl from beneath it. I am scratched, cut, covered in both my blood and the blood of my prey, and my ankle almost buckles as I try to stand.

No matter. I must get back to Cat!
Make sure she’s safe!

I silently cry as I make my way back to Cat. The tears are from the pain… or so I tell myself.

I am strong.
I am not weak.
I’m a big girl.

I cry my eyes out when I finally find that Cat is still safe.

She hugs me and for once lets me cry. All the while purring her satisfaction at how I’ve saved us both. How I’m her big girl.

How I’m her Kit. She holds me close for the first time as we go to sleep that night. Cuddled together helping to keep each other warm.

Somebody cares for me… That… matters so much.

In this hell somebody cares about me.

I will so make Cat proud of me.

…

…
I ask a question as I look at the small ruin. “What is this place Cat?”

Cat has a weird expression that I don’t understand. “A place Logan and I dwelt for quite some time.”

We’re high up in a mountain range. We’d been gaining in elevation for the last week or so. Then we’d stumbled upon this place. It was mostly just a concealed sandy plaza with cave openings that led to small rooms that had little stone openings for windows.

“Kind of like a home?” I ask.

“No... not a home.” Was her reply. “This... this is where Kitty became Cat. Where I learned how to deal with what Belasco had transformed me into. This is where Logan trained me.”

“Did you build it?”

“No... there are many forgotten things in Limbo. It existed long before Belasco, it was once a realm of his dread elder gods. Many have dwelt in this cursed place.”

“Are we staying here?”

“No... When I was here I hated this place. Hated what I’d become...but now?” Her voice trailed off and she didn’t finish.

“Now what Cat?”

“Now I can barely even remember what it was like not to be me. Come Kit, we’re leaving.”
Part 29f: Childhood’s End (part 1e)

The days pass, I don’t know how many. I think… I don’t know… call it two years?

I grow a head taller.

The knife is now like an extension of my body.

We pause in training. I ask a question.

“Hungry?”

“Yes.” Answers Cat while licking her lips in contemplation of food.

“So am I. Let’s go find something to kill.” Is my eager answer.

We go off to hunt.

…

…

Part 29g: Childhood’s End (part 1f, taken from Issue 2 of Magik Limited Series)

I’m taller and thinner by the time we reach the mountains. I’m able to keep pace with Cat no matter how fast she runs. Lately, in our duals, she’s been keeping the sword and leaving me the knife.
And sometimes… I’ve begun to win.

Cat is pleased. “Very good. You never cut me before.”

I’m pleased as well and feel a bit smug. “I figure that makes us even for the one you gave me.”

Cat gives me a grin as she says. “That it does.”

I ask a question that has been on my mind for some time. “Cat… How much time has passed for the X-Men back on Earth, since I was kidnapped?”

Cat’s answer bothers me, although I suppose any answer would have bothered me. “Probably none.”

“But… I’ve aged… I think three years now. They… won’t believe their eyes.”

Cat gets serious. “Don’t get cocky Kiddo. Your not home yet. Far from it.”

“What’s our next move?”

Cat points up. “We climb. To Belasco’s Citadel.”

The climb takes forever, even with Cat’s ability to air-walk us up the mountain with her phasing ability.

In Belasco’s throne room we encounter Kurt, my brother’s good friend, and mine. He told me bedroom stories and made me laugh when I was sad. This creature that Kurt has become is twisted inside and out. He bears Nightcrawler’s face and name, but it isn’t him, not really.

I react as Cat has taught me as I throw the knife at his back as he knocks Cat to the floor.
For all the good it does me as Kurt teleports out of the way, grabs me with his tail and hurls me across the room to collide with Cat as she stands back up.

Cat phases into the floor and vanishes, leaving me to fight Kurt alone. I’m good, but not that good. Kurt arms himself with a sword in each hand, and a sword gripped by his tail. He taunts me as all of my strikes miss as he teleports about, gloating at my failings.

He finally stands still, the better to gloat. But he doesn’t see Cat as she passes up from the floor behind him, grabs his left foot and phases it into the rock floor before letting go.

Flesh and blood merge with stone… the leg is irreparable shattered.

It’s awful.

His screams seem to last forever… before Cat finally puts an end to them.

I know we’d fought to the death… I’d tried my best to kill him… but I hadn’t imagined it would be like this. Looking at Nightcrawler, I don’t see the demon he is… but the man he was.

And my heart almost cracks in grief.

Cat takes me to Belasco’s alter, the place where he performs his most powerful rituals. She says this is the place that the dimensions are thinnest. Her phasing powers will allows us to return to my Earth.

It is a wondrous journey, thought realms of sparkly lights… more colors then I ever dreamed existed. I hear music… so beautiful I wan to stay and listen forever, but Cat pulls me on.

And on.

And on…

Then… I see Kitty’s hand!
She reaches out to me!
Grabs my wrist and pulls me Home!

**Home to Belasco as Kitty morphs into him as he gloats.** “Do you honestly believe I’d let you go so easily? And yet, I couldn’t help noticing a momentary surge of joy in you, child. When you saw it was me and not the X-Men. Your heart, it seems, knows its true allegiance... even if your head denies me.”

Cat attacks!

We lose before the fight before it even begins.

“**Your impertinence, and bravado, no longer amuse me Cat. Stop where you are.**”

She does.

Her face is a terrifying mix of confusion and despair. She doesn’t understand what’s happening to her. Why her body is no longer her own.

Belasco continues. “**Your sword Cat… thank you. I see now my mistake. I left you too human… which in turn gave you a semblance of free will...**”

He touches her on her forehead. “**But that, fortunately, is easily rectified. Cat you are in name.**”

Cat drops to her hands and knees, fur covers her, a tail grows, likewise whiskers.

“**Cat so you shall be in form.**”

She… she… she rubs herself against his leg as he scratches her behind her ears as she purrs.

Will… Belasco do that to me?
Transform me into one of his creatures?
Or does he have something even worse in store?!

I’m scared.

Yet… I can’t look away.

I’m excited… I want to see him do more… I…

I want to help. The evil that is me… wants this…

Ororo wouldn’t let me play with living things in her garden. Maybe… Belasco will.

She said it was wrong. Evil. I know she’s right. But…

I… I don’t care. Belasco summons me to stand by his side. Gives me a knife.

I sense the magic in the blade. And it, the magic in me.

I could… I could kill him. Shove the knife in his black heart. We’re standing so close together that not even S’ym could prevent it. Belasco’s smile dares me to try.

Instead I cut myself.

Across the room I hear the sound of feasting, see Cat hunched over Nightcrawler’s body. Tears sting my eyes… I remember how peaceful he looked, as if in death his soul had regained the innocent stolen from him in life.

I wonder if I will be so lucky?
Belasco conjured the first bloodstone in my locket.

My blood creates the second one.

He is pleased with me. “Come child. I will show you your apartments. In the morning you’ll begin your apprenticeship.”

“Can’t... I go home Belasco, please?”

“Ilyana, you are home. This is where you belong... Now and forever by my side.”
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

I had been trying to write some more Cat/Illyana content, but just didn’t have the right story context. Then the whole memory thing with familiars gave me the idea of having Anita experience critical memories of Illyana. But thankfully the prior night is now done after only… gee… 20’ish chapters? I’ve been trying to write some chapters in other stories, but my muse appears to be focused mostly on this story for now (much to the delight of LordGrise I’m sure).

So… a night that likely leaves Anita a bit confused. Heck, I know I am. Oh, and the briefly glimpsed pink hair in the prior chapter was NOT Illyana. Give a guess if you think you know who it is (meaning a review… hint hint).

Part 30a: Morning

RING….

Belasco looked so content, like his victory had been inevitable, preordained.

RING….

We, but helpless pawns in his hands.

RING...

The plight of Cat. I’m so…

RING…

I…
I groggily blink my eyes and focus on the sound. It was my cell phone ringing on the table next to the bed. I rolled over and fumbled for it, which of course meant I knocked to the floor.

RING...

A growl of irritation from me and greater clarity as I continued to awaken.

I was in Richard’s part-time bedroom, the one located in the Catacombs beneath the Circus. Sometimes Richard sleeps here, sometime Richard sleeps in Jean-Claude’s room when he and I and Jean-Claude sleep together. But mostly he sleeps at his house. Speaking of which, Richard was nowhere in sight, the explanation obvious as I finally retrieved as I leaned over the bed to fumble at the floor. I noticed the time on the phone was cheerily announcing 10:03am; it was a work day and Richard had to have departed hours ago for his teaching job. Rather glad he hadn’t woken me up, but a goodbye kiss would have been nice, then a recollection of a kiss so… goody for me.

RING...

I finally retrieved the ringing phone. I glance at the caller ID, it was Zerbrowski, from RPIT (See chapter 9 for Zerbrowski’s summation) so I answered it, with a somewhat groggy. “Hello? Marshal Blake here.”

Zerbrowski’s teasing and playful tones replied. “Time to wakeup princess. Geeze, I need to become a Fed, such easy hours you guys keep, or did bedroom athletics tire you out? Anyway, rise and shine zombie queen.”

I replied back, slightly exasperated, and a bit teasing myself. “Lay off Zerbrowski. I got to bed late last night, and you know I keep late hours.”

Zerbrowski is a good friend of mine, and an unrepentant lech. My only true friend on RPIT now that Dolph has gotten all moody about my relationships with folks he considers monsters. I’d saved Zerbrowski life more then once, something his wife apparently didn’t forget as their house was one of the few homes that I was welcome to bring more then one of my boyfriends at a time when invited to supper or a barbeque. I still wonder how on earth he got her to marry him, apparently she first noticed him in college after he set his dormitory kitchen in fire trying to warm up soup of all things, and yes he’s horrible in the kitchen, yet weirdly a master of the grill.
I flopped back onto the bed. “And to what do I own the distinctly non pleasure of your call.”

“Apart from getting you out of bed?”

The sudden movements had reminded me of last night’s physical activities… The fights that is, not the athletic ones with Richard. “I don’t want to get out of bed.”

A chuckle from Zerbrowski. “Sounds like a fun time.”

Some of you might think this was harassment. It wasn’t. This was Zerbrowski being Zerbrowski, and Zerbrowski treating me like I was one of the guys. I’d worked long and hard to be considered one of the guys and this behavior was actually a sign of the trust that Zerbrowski had for me. Here’s a hint girls, not all boys being boys behavior is sexist or harassment; they do the same to each other. Sure, you can make an issue of it and shut it down, and never ever have a chance to be considered one of the guys, or you can take the complement for what it is, that you’re one of the pack. And if you violate the guy trust then you will never ever get it back as all they guys will let the other guys know that you can’t be trusted.

“It was… now either piss off or tell me why the heck you’re still on the phone instead of letting me go back to sleep.”

Zerbrowski’s tone was now much less teasing. “Duty calls. Dolph directed that you be called in, likewise Marshal Kirkland.”

Odd, Dolph (See chapter 9 for Dolph’s summation) usually tries to keep me away from RPIT; ever since he’d tried to lockup Jason just for being a werewolf. “And suddenly I’m being invited to the party?” Party being whatever criminal act that either needed my kind of expertise, or my Federal Marshal powers. Oh, and Marshal Kirkland, otherwise known as Lawrence Kirkland is my apprentice as it were; although graduated apprentice would be a better description, more on him later.

Zerbrowski’s tone went cold. “Yeah… really yeah. I’ve seen it and… yeah.”

“That bad?”
“Mums the word until you’ve seen the crime scene, don’t want to bias any impressions. Meet at RPIT as soon as possible. Oh, and look professional, I think your boss will be there.”

Boss in this case would likely be the local Federal Marshal head. Good to know.

“Shit… okay, I’ll be there in… call it an hour.”

“We’ll be waiting, there are a others to round up, although I suspect the rest of them were already at work. It’s important Blake, real important, so don’t take any time-outs for a quickie.”

“Nag, nag, nag. I’ll be there.”

With that we both hung up. leaving me staring at the ceiling… well trying to, the room was dark so not really able to see it. So much for seeing in the dark I guess.

The dreams had been… had been like the prior dream that I had had. The one about being her and being a dragon in Cairo. A memory… but these had been much more varied. Very much like the memory spillover when she had done the familiar ritual with Jean-Claude, Aster, and Damian. But that was from the familiar to the prime as it were. Another indication that the whole (who is the center) may really be up in the air, or… could there be more then once center?

My initial conclusion from the fading dreams was… I really didn’t like this Cat woman. That had been blatant Stockholm syndrome, Cat had known exactly what she was doing to the young girl. I’d come across this in my law enforcement training, and a common occurrence in the vampire and were communities.

**Stockholm syndrome**

From a psychoanalytic lens, it can be argued that Stockholm syndrome arises strictly as a result of survival instincts. The victim’s need to survive is stronger than her impulse to hate the person who has created the dilemma. A positive emotional bond between captor and captive is a "defense mechanism of the ego under stress”. These sentimental feelings are not strictly for show. Since captives often fear that their affection will be perceived as fake, they eventually begin to believe that their positive sentiments are genuine. The conception of Stockholm syndrome has grown to include victims of kidnappings or hostage instances, domestic or child abuse, human trafficking, prisoners of war, political terrorism, cult members, concentration camp prisoners, slaves, and prostitutes. It is believed that women are especially prone to developing the condition. Typically,
Stockholm syndrome develops in captives when they engage in "face-to-face contact" with their captors, and when captors make captives doubt the likelihood of their survival by terrorizing them into "helpless, powerless, and submissive" states. This enables captors to appear merciful when they perform acts of kindness or fail to "beat, abuse, or rape" the victim. Ideas like "dominance hierarchies and submission strategies" assist in devising explanations for the illogical reasoning behind the symptoms of those suffering from Stockholm syndrome as a result of any oppressive relationship. Partial activation of the capture-bonding psychological trait may lie behind battered woman syndrome, military basic training, fraternity hazing, and sex practices such as sadism/masochism or bondage/discipline.

But… it was not that simple… there was real love there as well. The desperate love of a child towards the only care giver she had and… the returned affection of a caring adult. The abuse had really only lasted a few months… the kind of abuse that any intense training regime has… but…

You don’t do such to seven year olds!

Yet… how do you train to survive being in hell?

And… shit… based on that dream she’s really really good with a knife.

Well time to get up. I reached for the light switch next to the bed, flicked the lights on; revealing on the far side of the room an awake and alert Jean-Claude sitting in a chair.

**Part 30b: Morning rituals**

His presence slight startled me as I pulled the sheets over my naked breasts, then let the sheets drop (I sleep naked most of the time because… well… because).

"Apologies ma petite… I came in after the dawn and… it struck to me that I have never really just watched you sleep. You are beautiful ma petite."

I rose from the bed. "Flatterer."

Jean-Claude rose as well and met me half way to the bathroom. "One tries ma petite."
We shared a kiss. Light. Sweet. I noticed he was warm. “You’ve fed.”

“No… I find that I have no… hunger at this time. Other sustenance appears to be offering sustainment.”

A frown from me. “Illyana.”

“Yes… the ardeur is quiescent.”

I gave him another kiss, and then reluctantly broke away. “Work calls.” But I was sure that he already knew that with vampire hearing. “She told me last night that she’s feeding it, keeping it at bay. That she plans to do that for at least the next few days.”

A kiss from him upon my hand as I went into the bathroom. “I might ask why ma petite, but the answer is plain.”

I started running the shower, regretfully no time for a bath. “She’s afraid that we can’t feed it without triggering involuntary sexual… heck… I guess call it nympho grade lust in her.”

Jean-Claude followed me into the bathroom. He was leaning against the marble sink and watched me as I stepped into the hot shower (Ahhhhhhhhhh… so good). I began to shampoo my hair.

Jean-Claude replied. “Possible, such things are always uncertain at first.”

“So you think it’s possible?”

“Oui.”

“Damn.” Hair lathered, time to scrub the body. “She did say that she’d ease off after a few days and let you and I feed under, and I quote ‘controlled conditions’ unquote. Which raises the question of what to do if it spreads to her; as an aside, I think she finds Jason attractive.”
“A good selection if she, and he, are amiable.”

Yeah… somehow the idea of Jason taking another one for the team was likely not going to be an issue.

“I would offer to help you wash ma petite, but…”

“I’m in a rush and if you help, then we both know it will take longer… much longer.”

“Oui ma petite, but… much more enjoyable.”

I glanced at him as I began to rinse off. “Tempter…” Much more enjoyable, and so not part of my time table.

Jean-Claude gave me a smoldering look of temptation. “Always ma petite… always.” Then. “Aster and I greeted the sun this morning.”

I paused with surprise, and some disappointment as I’d have liked to have been there. “Um… wow… Where?”

“On the roof of the circus. It was very impulsive.” Then a note of annoyance entered his voice. “Aster suddenly decided, just before dawn, that he wished to see the sun now. I had wished to share the event with you, but Aster impulsively changed his mind.”

That sounded like Aster. “Anybody with you?”

“Just the Master of Cairo, he was upon the roof when we arrived. Apparently he tries to greet each sunrise that he can.”

“How was it?”

“Extraordinary ma petite. I would… I see why the Master of Cairo does as he does. I would be grateful if you would join me in witnessing the next dawn. This time, just the two of us.”
“I’m at the rental house tonight, the Pard is having the meet and sniff I with Illyana. Could you meet me there in the morning?”

Jean-Claude replied with a rather formal tone. “I will ask Micah if that is acceptable to him.”

“You know he’s going to say yes.”

“Most likely, but it is better to ask.”

“Guy thing?”

“Oui… as you say… A guy thing. Micah is a strong were and showing such respect is appropriate. Speaking of gender conversations, how did your talk with Magik go?”

“Odd… not… how I thought. Liked that she called all of you my guys. Oh… and she thinks you and Micah are the most impressive, and surprisingly Aster is a close runner up, but major demerits for being such a drama queen.”

“And…?”

“And she’s… apparently I fit her definition of female perfection.”

“Do we not say the same?”

“Yeah… but… I apparently match the behaviors of a woman named Cat who raised her.”

“Did you not mention that she killed this Cat?”

“Yeah… I dreamed some memories of her childhood with Cat. To quote Illyana I’m Brunette, outspoken, opinionated, strong willed, female, older, in charge, deadly, feline, scarred, and a
fighter. Imagine my surprise at finding out that I am apparently very opinionated.”

Jean-Claude replied with a teasing tone. “That description does sum you up so well ma petite, especially the opinionated statement. The creature, the one name S’ym, named quite the impression last night.”

Oh yeah… just remembered S’ym had spent the night here. “How bad?”

“The club Narcissus in chains shall remain closed for a few days as repairs are needed.”

“No… I mean here.”

“Not much, he won a contest with any guard who accepted his challenge to arm wrestle. Declared the Hyenas to be wimps, and proclaimed a fondness for our town’s craft beers. The strength of the creature is astonishing, but he shows no finesse.”

“Did that help the Hyenas?”

“No ma petite. It did not. One sees why he is her enforcer. Brute strength, brutality, and shall we say the appearance of a simple world view.”

Almost time for the final rinse. “I think the werelion is smarter, but not as strong.”

I hit the special button in the shower. The one that charged up the deluge showerheads. Only Jean-Claude’s, Aster, and Richards’s bathrooms had that recent upgrade. I loved it but I had a slight guilt that such excessive use of water was somehow wrong, like the water table was being depleted or something. Jean-Claude spoke before the shower let loose.

“I shall let you know if Micah agrees with my meeting you upon the morning.”

“Deal…”

The downpour commenced. Something like fifty gallons water poured upon me in under one
minute. And yeah, it was fantastic. It was over all too quick, and then just the normal hot water. Jean-Claude added some final tidbits.

“Asher was right as to the interest of others. Two weretiger delegations have already requested to attend, Auggie (The master of Chicago) wishes to visit, and I suspect that I will hear from Samuel (Master of the City of Cape Cod) before the end of the coming night. I fear that the tiger delegations will end up fighting. Balthasar, the servant of the Traveler, will be here tonight with an entourage, several vampires are in the entourage so they will be used to host the Traveler. And Aster plans on visiting Narcissus in Chains to examine the club and express his dissatisfaction upon Narcissus, although I suspect it is more the novelty of being about in the daylight.”

Gee… weres fighting over stuff… Surprise surprise, and the first of the council shows up. “Let’s try and get Micah to see if he can get the Tigers to tone it down a bit. Maybe have Illyana declare that fighting will offend her?”

“One hopes…”

I luxuriated for a few moments longer beneath the hot water, before reluctantly turning off the shower. To then be wrapped in a big fluffy white towel and hand dried by Jean-Claude. Yeah… it felt good. Him… and the towel.

Time to get dressed… Damn… I so wanted to… Sigh… Sometimes working is such a drag.

**Part 30c: Morning drive**

Some tasteful, functional work grade clothing had been laid out for me on the bed. Shirt, slacks, non high heels shoes, black leather jacket, and of course two pistols, spare clips, and some knives. I put them on in a bit of a rush and left.

Turned out Micah was waiting to drive me, and he had a breakfast packed to-go. After a kiss and a hug, the two of us hurriedly made our way out the catacombs, piled into my jeep, and drove off.

The radio as on and thankfully just sports talk radio was playing, meaning nothing implied about the song choices being played.
I opened the to-go box and found an egg and sausage croissant, freshly squeeze orange juice, some apple slices, and a coke (no… coffee still tasted bad and I was not… NOT… going to have black tea; even though… no… not going to have black tea with cream… some lovely lovely back tea… NO damn it!) What the hells is going on with the tea fixation? I used to subsist caffeine and adrenalin, something I got quite a bit of grief from my men about. Now I tend to get balanced meals as Nathaniel runs the kitchen, and of course when I’m at the circus I get waited on as Jean-Claude loves to show off.

Micah was driving me to RPIT so I’d have time to eat. I took a few bites, drank some OJ, then asked a question. “What did you and Nathanael do after Illyana and I left?”

“Went to sleep.” Was his reply. “Nathan and I were both tired so we crashed. Oh… Damian’s girlfriend… sorry his lioness to call, showed up and the two of them wandered off.”

Yep… called it. Micah continued.

“We slept in a bit, had breakfast and yes coffee tastes just fine for us, and discussed the upcoming barbeque. Nathanael asked me to ask you to make sure that baked beans, potato salad, ribs, burgers, some steaks, and chicken are ok.”

“Sure… although from last night I think it will be just fine. Girl definatly likes her burgers.”

We drove for a bit, making excellent time, just one of those days when it seems all you hit is green lights… You know… we’re making too good of time. It felt like… the world is getting out of our way so we get there faster.

“I noticed it too.” Said Micah. “Traffic is never this good.”

I had an idea. “Micah, hit the random tune button on the radio.”

He did and Phantom of the Opera, Music of the night began to play from station KQRD.

Night time sharpens, heightens each sensation

Darkness stirs and wakes imagination
Silently the senses abandon their defenses

Slowly, gently night unfurls its splendor
Grasp it, sense it tremulous and tender
Turn your face away from the garish light of day
Turn your thoughts away from cold, unfeeling light
And listen to the music of the night

Okay, that was rather were’ish, heck I could feel Micah’s power tense up.

I did the same and My Little Demon by Fleetwood Mac on KISS now filled the Jeep.

My little demon, comin’ on down
My little demon’s turnin’ me around
All of my friends keep on tellin’ me
That I just ain’t the man I used to be

I really don’t like it, ain’t nothing I can do
I really don’t like it, I’m leaving it to you
My little demon, making me choose
Making me an offer I can’t refuse

Crap, I turned off the radio… although I did wonder what would happen if I made Illyana hit the random tune button.
“Her doing?” Was Micah’s question.

“No… the radio at Dead Dave’s kept doing the same thing. Which appeared to really annoyed her.”

“So… more random oddness.”

“I guess… at least our shadows don’t have a mind and motion of their own.”

We drove in silence for a bit… Which was rather nice, just the two of us, usually I’d have a body guard, and one of my emergency feeding pals (fuck buddy) if one my guys was not with me. And yes, some of my bodyguards are double duty. But not today as the ardeur was currently on hold.

Which reminded me, I sent Illyana a hurried thought.

(Ilyana?)

After a moment a thick Russian accented thought was my reward. (Da?)

(Da?)

(I in character am. Find best to think like talk.)

(So you’re at RPIT.)

(Da… Lieutenant Storr is gathering troops all. You were called?)

(Umm… you’ll let me and Jean-Claude know when you stop feeding the ardeur?)

(Da… would not want it to catch you or… me unaware.)
(Thanks… um… did you have any morning tea by chance?)

(Da… Black with cream… Why?)

(Just wondering.)

(Um…) Her accent faded. (Aster wishes to do some additional healing work on his body tonight. I told him to first check with you.)

Okay… (Why?)

(You said not to privately talk with your guys without your involvement.)

Yeah… I had. Nice to see she’s trying to follow the agreement.

(Okay, can we do it before tonight’s barbecue?)

(Sure.) Then a sense of amusement from her as the Russian accent returned. (See you at work.)

(What’s funny?)

The Russian accent flowed back in. (I have never said before that.)

(Anything else?)

(Remember we have never met. And I go by name of Natasha Romanova, not that you would know that. Plus… I think I under suspicion am.)

(Why? Did you do something?)
(Of course I something done. Just don’t think it is anything here. Heck, I’ve been suspicion under since coming here. They no believe story that I here to observe.)

(And yet they keep you around.)

(RPIT’s superiors were most firm.)

(Bet Storr loved that.)

Resigned tone. (Would have been better to enchant but… )

(I’d have been pissed.)

(And that…) 

(Opps, we’re here.) With that I closed the link.

Micah dropped me at the entrance to police headquarters, that’s where RPIT’s office is located. And there was Lawrence Kirkland, wearing his Federal Marshal logo jacket and drinking from a to-go Starbucks coffee cup, waiting by the building’s main door and waving at me as we drove up.

Part 30d: Larry

Federal Marshal Lawrence Kirkland

Five foot four and red-haired, Larry Kirkland reminded me of Howdy Doody the first time I met him after he joined Animators Inc as a twenty-year-old co-op student. He also wanted me to teach him to be a vampire hunter; which I did. Larry is a very powerful animator, not necromancer grade, but really strong. He’s been my protégé in both zombies, vampire hunting, and monsters in general. He’s a fully licensed vampire executioner, member of Animator’s Inc, and a Federal Marshal.
Why vampire hunter? Larry's home town is small compared to St. Louis, only around fifteen hundred people, and a group of vampires murdered twelve people while he was away at his freshman year at college. He didn't know any of them closer than to say hi, but he went to all their funerals. This experience made him anti-vampire, and because being an animator gives him some built-in resistance against vampire powers, he decided that God wanted him to become a vampire hunter.

He's married to Detective Tammy Reynolds of RPIT; who is a Christian witch (see chapter 9 for Tammy's summation). They got married in part because they love each other, and in part because he got her pregnant (antibiotics interfered with her birth control). One reason Tammy started to date Larry was that he'd talk about zombies with her and I wouldn't. They have one child a girl, called Angelica, cute kid.

Larry actually gets more local Marshal business than I do as he tends to be the RPIT go to Marshal as Dolph keeps gaming the system to minimize my involvement with RPIT. Now if something really bad hits St. Louis then I tend to get pulled in, but smaller stuff, and the routine executions, passes me by now. Plus RPIT has its own magical resources with Tammy as she is a witch, in more ways then one (cough cough... bitch... cough cough). Yeah... we don't get along, and no I don't get invited over for supper but I do attend the occasional barbeque, by myself I might add (rather think I've graduated to whore of Babylon status with her church). She tried for quite some time to get me to join her church, that whole Christian witches thing (Church of the way), and was offended that I was not interested. Larry has since joined and is now a Brother of the way (not quite sure how much he really believes in their particulars, but they are Christians and I'm sure it makes his in-laws, and Tammy, happy.

Lately Larry and I appear to be drifting apart. Larry likes the rules, and I'm sure he finds my willingness to kill to be of increasing concern where I find his idealism a bit naive. Like me, he's learned that being a monster killer gets harder once you start thinking of monsters as people.

And Larry does not know nearly as much about the monsters as I do. He's friends with Jason as they went though some real heavy shit together when we fought the fairy Bloody Bones, and he knows Jean-Claude as well from the same unpleasant event, but they did not become friends like Larry and Jason did. As my life has gotten more entwined with the monsters as it were, I've keep more and more from him as such info would likely get me killed due to the risk of both Larry obeying the rules and what would happen if Tammy learned just a fraction of what really happens with the monsters; or some of the things I've done.

When it comes to Larry, think cop rather then assassin. And that's why when things go to shit, the Federal Marshal Service has folks like Edward and I.
Sometime you need the killers.

**Part 30e: Morning heads up**

Was I going to share what had been going on? If you thought yes then… really? The correct answer is no.

Nothing about Illyana.

Nothing about the whole binding and familiar thing between her and me and my guys.

Nothing about the impending visit by the Vampire Council.

Larry is a friend, but no… I didn’t trust him with any of this.

Not because I thought he’d betray me but… secrets… secrets that could get me and mine killed, heck, officially executed. Spouses are very bad at hiding secrets from the other spouse; and I sure as hell did not trust Tammy with any of my secrets.

“*Hi Anita.*” Said Larry as I got out of the jeep and put on my own Federal Marshal logo jacket, after first giving Micah a goodbye hug and kiss of course. Both weres and vampires are very touchie, meaning touching. Lots of contact, which is always good for the relationship. Hint folks, always give your significant other(s) lots of body contact and displayed affection/

He continued as I watched Micah drove off. “*Any idea as to why the hush hush?*”

“No idea… what does Tammy say?”

“She’s in the dark as well, no idea. Apparently Lieutenant Storr and Sergeant Zerbowski are the only ones in the know, plus the regular cops who were first called it in before sealing off the site and calling in RPIT.”

“Site?”

*Some empty warehouse down by the river according to Tammy.*"
“Good to know… anything else?”

“That’s it.”

I started walking towards the front door. “Alright, let’s get up with RPIT and find out what’s going on.”

Larry stayed put. “Um… first…” He glanced around, nobody were near us. “There’s a temporary guest official observer in RPIT.”


“None of them… she… it’s a she… is Russian.”

“Okay… from Russia Russian?”

“Yep, supposedly here to observe how RPIT deals with paranormal crimes. Russia is looking to see how other countries deal with legalized vampires and weres from a local law enforcement perspective.”

“Reasonable request I guess, after all they’re still in let’s just burn them stage on both weres and vampires, but you’re not buying I take it.”

“No… she appears to know next to nothing about police procedures, you’d swear that she’s under nineteen so no ways she’s a collage graduate, I mean… heck that would be like joining the FBI at fifteen or something? And a host of other little things according to Tammy, But the big reason that Tammy and I both agree on is how she feels.”

“Feels?”

“Feels… She’s… creepy. It was like nails on a chalk board when I meet her. Tammy says it’s not as bad for her but… it was… it was like there was something in the room with us. Like what I
could see was not what was really there. Plus... for a moment I thought... I heard... children screaming. And you can just feel the contained power from her, like how a strong were feels.”

Interesting observation. To date I’ve been the only one who could hear screaming... well heard the screaming. So the only other person is a strong animator. So looks like a definite hit on necromancy powers being able to perceive things that general magical entities can’t. But I did have to ask... “Did Tammy?”

“No. Tammy says the office gossip belief is that she’s a spy. She claims that she’s from the FSS, which is short for Federal Security Service, says she holds a position that is similar to a Federal Marshal, but more on the magical side then the execution side.”

“So she’s a witch like Tammy?”

“Not sure... she say's there are similarities ,but it’s not the same thing. Claims that it’s more like a talent.”

“Thanks Larry, good to know. Anything else?”

“Definite killer vibe, rather Edwardish, so I think more execution stuff then she admits too.” Yes, Larry knows that Ted was Edward, and no, to my knowledge he had not shared that info with anybody; which was a healthy life choice for him, screwing over Edward is so not a good idea. “Her name is Natasha Romanova, and no, don’t make any Bullwinkle jokes as she just silently stares at you as she doesn’t get the references. Oh, and she did quality on the range so she’s armed, some Russian 9mm I think.”

That was it for the info dump. I pinned my access bade on as we went in. RPIT was on the second floor, as we took the elevator Larry’s phone pinged. He took a quick glance, it was a text from Tammy, apparently everybody was in the ready room so we headed there once the elevator door opened.

Dolph and Zerbrowski were at the front of the room, hmm, the room was rather full with law enforcement acronyms. The normal RPIT stuff, three FBI jackets, one... no two ATF, another Federal Marshal jacket was already here, our boss in fact, a SWAT member. And... there was an annoyed looking Tammy and the person sitting next to Tammy was...

Larry said a simple “Oh...” As we both stared.
Illyana now had red hair.

Really bright red hair with scattered hints of reddish and goldenness highlights and darker splotches. The kind that would make the hair almost look like flames when the hair swirled, hells, almost looked burning just being static. There were red eyebrows as well that just emphasized those blue eyes, and somehow I just knew that the carpet matched the drapes.

Damn… I mean… I’d said be less blonde and… well… this was… um… not… blonde.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Been a while as I gave this story a rest while I did other things, but it’s time to resume. One interesting thing from the original New Mutants was Illyana’s affect on people. She made many people uncomfortable just by her presence, but when she wanted to make somebody unhappy, why… she could do that by just staring at them. As shown in a New Mutants issue that I can’t locate for some reason (perhaps it is in an X-Men issue).

Anyway, in that issue Illyana and Doug are hanging out at a sandwich shop (which looked like an old fashion soda fountain pallor). Doug is goofing off and falls onto a table with two girls and a jock which results in him messing up their food. The jock takes offense and grabs Doug while making some threats. Illyana, from the soda bar, says in effect “put him down.”

The jock stares back at Illyana, then starts to tremble as he puts Doug back and backs away cowering while saying “please… I’ll be good”. They then quickly leave as Doug is confused as to what just happened. I always assumed that the sequence was meant to show the reader that Illyana was hiding things and that sometimes things would just pop out. Damn I wish I could find the issue.

Part 31a: Introductions

There is red, and then there is red, and that hair was red… I mean… flaming red.

“You’re staring.” Was Larry’s whispered comment to me.

Which startled me because… Crap… I’d been staring. Time for a quick recovery. “I assume that’s her, and you said she was blonde.”

“She was the last time I saw her.” Then a recovery statement from him because he’d been staring too. “I see you caught the same vibe, knew you’d have to feel it if I do.”

Um… I wasn’t getting any different kind of vibe then I’d been getting since last night. Better pretend that I am. “Describe what you feel.”
“Predator. Like something is sitting over there that would just as easily kill you as talk to you. Plus a sense of... like nails on a spiritual blackboard, only you’re the blackboard. Reminds me of Edward. Plus something that is kind of were like, or vampire like, but different.”

“Yeah...” Then to state what should be obvious to Larry. “She feels... strong.”

“Yeah... No way she’s just a cop. Or their version of an executioner...”

With that Tammy noticed us and waved at Larry who waved back. This of course attracted the gaze of Illyana... I mean Natasha Romanova who just looked at us with a neutral look. Natasha was professional dressed, but it was tight. No guesses as to her figure from little that I could see as she was sitting down, not that I didn’t know exactly what kind of figure she had; I could exactly describe her... um... never mind. Still no screaming background that I could hear but her power was pulled in very tight and damped down, just like when we had been in Egypt.

Her name is Natasha Romanova, remember... Natasha Romanova I mentally reminded myself. Need to play it cool was my decision as we walked over while the two of them stood up. Tammy gave me a head nod of a greeting, then exchanged a kiss and a hug with Larry that was defiantly more friendly. Natasha just stared at them, and then at me with no hint of expression at all, a look I returned as I tried to think how I’d normally react in such a situation. Hmm, her left hand was holding a coffee cup that was half full with tea, there was Russian on the cup that spelled out Сука из ада со значком.

Larry introduced us once Larry and Tammy were done with their affections. “Marshal Blake, this is Agent Natasha Romanova on loan from the Russian Federation. She’s been paired with Tammy since she arrived.”

She offered me her hand to shake and I decided to tentatively take it after a second (to give anybody watching the impression that I found her unsettling). Which I did, but... but not that way any more because... crap... it’s complicated and I’m still dealing with it... She responded with a deep Russian accent and not completely correct English.

“Marshal Blake. Heard of you I have. Pleasure to meet. My superiors were hoping chance I have to converse with you, or even work with you.”

I replied with a terse smile. “Meaning you’ve read my file.”
“Da... you and your agency were part of briefing before coming here.”

“Any first impressions?”

“You are shorter then expected.”

Timmy injected. “Natasha supposedly here to learn about our police procedures on dealing with paranormal people.”

A small shake of Natasha’s head no as she clarified. “Detective Reynolds convinced spy I am. Not here to learn police procedures. Such things are not strong point and superiors can read manuals for that. Here to observe handling the unnatural parts of an investigation. Your country is more... advanced in the integration of mon... creatures not human.”

I let a slight cold tone enter my voice. “You were going to say monsters weren’t you.”

No sign of embarrassment in those eyes. “Da.”

“Don’t like the monsters?”

Another negative shake of her head. “No.”

“You’ll fit right in here.”

She then offered her hand to Larry. “Nice to again meet Marshal Kirkland.”

Larry just looked at the hand like it was a viper for a few seconds before tentatively giving it the slightest of shakes. Which did illicit an expression from Natasha, one that distinctly communicated that she thought he was rude.

I asked a question that I thought that I would have asked. “What do you do in Russia?”
She turned back to me. “Work for the Federal Security Service special branch, somewhat like Federal Marshals.”

At which point Tammy injected. “KGB before they put on a new, more family friendly name on it.”

Yep, Tammy definitely did not like her.

A cold look from Natasha at Tammy. “Da, as you say.”

I attempted to get the conversation back on track. “That’s who you work for, but not what you do.”

“Many things, but simple explanation covers most things as I…”

Which again prompted Tammy to share her thoughts with us. “Track and kill things.”

A shrug from Natasha the communicated irritation. “I think Marshal Blake you should inquire from detective of me as detective knows more then I. But she did leave out few things.”

And Tammy just kept on giving. “Oh… right. Bribery?”

Cold tone from Natasha. “No detective… interrogation, and magical things.”

Echoed right back Tammy. “Ohh… how silly of me, I forgot all about torture.”

Natasha gave a dismissive snort. “That is mostly for amateurs detective. Most suspects answer very quickly with no… physical… hmmm, how say to convince? Ah, persuade is word. No physical persuade needed.”

Tammy was not buying. “Right…”
And it turns out that sarcasm does not always translate well. “Glad you understand now detective.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“But… you agreed? Da?”

“No Da.”

“No yes? You speak confusing detective. Sometimes poor communicator you are.”

Definite cat fight brewing between the two of them. Tammy’s actions were real, but I wondered how much of Natasha’s annoyance was an act and how much was actual. Having had to work with Tammy I’d say any act was fading and I was seeing real annoyance from Natasha. Which was promptly proven as Natasha launched a verbal counter.

“In future, is rude to all FSS killers. Please refrain. I do what assigned.”

Just a dismissive snort from Tammy. Which was a mistake.

“Is not husband same?”

“What?”


A glare and a cold reply from Tammy while Larry looked like he really wanted to be somewhere else. “It’s not the same. He’s not a cold killer, like you?”

“Like me? How is this you think?”
“It’s obvious.”

“Killed I have, but not like you Marshals. That is cold.”

Larry tried to stop the fight. “Tammy, I think we all should…”

Tammy was having none of that. “No, I want to hear what she means.”

“Kill those tied to gurney? That cold. Never have I done such. Be killed they must, but others do that, not I. Stronger is Marshal Kirkland than I, glad that such duty is not mine to bear.”

Yeah… Glad I don’t’ have to do that anymore. Having to stake a vampire or a were who screwed up, begging for their life… that… takes something out of you once you stop thinking their just monsters. And Tammy looked like she’d just ingested a few lemons, well, don’t complain about being punched if you step into the ring.

Before she could reply Zerbrowski loudly announced, which cut through all the chatter. “Okay everybody, take your seats.”

I asked a final question as we sat down, she was on my left side and Tammy was on my right, with Larry on her right. “What does your cup mean?”

She raised the cup and took a sip before responding. “Oh… is joke. It means bitch from hell with badge. An acquaintance gave.”

Okay… this was mostly just Childe with an emphasized accent and a massively toned down aura of power. With… red hair.

Really really red hair. Geeze.. I mean… I said be less blonde, not… hmmmm… well, this is certainly less blonde, and yet… Somehow I didn’t find that comforting because… that meant what mattered to me appeared to really matter to her.
Part 31b: Briefing

Those still standing quickly took their seats. Apparently the local FBI head honcho had arrived, as well as the local ATF (Alcohol, tobacco, and Firearms) chief. All the big wigs sat down in front, and one of those was the chief of police for the city. Whatever it was, it was big. Usually that meant the local jurisdictions would fight like the blazes to not involve other agencies due to the inevitable squabbling over credit. Heck, breaking a big case can not only enhance one’s career, it can absolutely gold plate it.

RPIT, and the normal police bringing in all the other agencies at the start of something meant that it was either so large that there was no way to avoid the involvement of other agencies, which meant that the pie was really huge so enough cake for everybody (and yes I’m deliberately mixing metaphors).

Or, the mess was going to be so big you wanted others involved to help spread minimize the damage to your own agency. I’ll hope for the first, but I was betting on the latter. Why you ask? Because I was here, that had to mean it was going to be nasty and I was on the very short list of Federal Marshals you called in when it got extra nasty.

Dolph (Lt. Rudolph "Dolph" Storr) stepped up to the podium looking well dressed as always. Not an ounce of expression as he greeted all of us.

“Thank you for coming, and yes calling in all of the agencies, even the ATF, is a hint that the case is going to be big. National news big and likely even bigger. Due to the nature of the crime scene, the rest of the briefing will take place at the warehouse after all of you have seen it so as to not influence any possible first impressions.”

And that was it for the briefing, much to everybody’s surprise. Everybody broke into agencies clicks as folks worked out who would be driving with who. I was going to suggest that I join Larry and Tammy when Sergeant Zerbrowski moseyed on over (see, using some western terms, now I just need to throw in a ‘what in tarnation’ or a Malarkey).

He had a bit of a smirk on his face. “Detective Reynolds, Dolph says you’re riding with us in his car. And he requests that you join us as well Marshal Blake.”

Okay… did not expect that, meaning my invite. It’s not like he can order me to ride with him, but this was unexpected as both of us were avoiding any real interactions.
Zerbrowski then turned to Natasha and said. “You’re with us as well Agent Romanova. Love the new look by the way, not that blonde was bad. Incidentally, my wife likes to change her hair color from time and time and she’d love to know where you got that done.”

A nod from Natasha. “Da, few things from desk I first get. No problem sir, I later tell you about hair.”

Something about her response just made Tammy tense up again.

Zerbrowski then apologized to Larry. “Sorry about leaving out in the cold Marshal Kirkland, but that kind of fills up the car.”

Larry bowed to the inevitable. “No problem Sergeant, I’ll take my car.”

Then Zerbrowski waited for my reply.

“Sure…”

With that we decamped for the bullpen for everybody go grab their stuff. I heard Larry whisper a “What’s wrong?” to Tammy.

Her response almost made me laugh. “She refused to tell me where she got her hair done, but Zerbrowski asks and it’s all yes sir, no problem sir…”

Okay, definite bad blood between the two of them. I hated to say it, but it I enjoyed seeing Tammy getting her own behavior paid back with interest, help distract from the upcoming road trip with Dolph.

We go to the bullpen and that’s when I learned that Mag… Natasha had her own desk. What kind of irritate me in that I never had a desk as RPIT as I’d just been a civilian consultant brought in from time to time. I have my own desk at the Marshal service but… just… kind of bugged me in that it make me sad for what I’d lost with RPIT due to Dolph anger at me It was a clean desk, nice and orderly. Even had a picture frame on it. I glanced at it as she put down her cup and filled a travel mug with hot tea she had from an electric pot.
It was M… Natasha hugging some really gig guy from behind. Wait… I think that was…that was her brother Peter. Man he was huge. Looked bigger and stronger then even Richard my ex boyfriend and head of the local werewolf pack. But what caught my eye was how she looked.

She looked about seventeen years old and… happy. She looked happy.

Natasha saw what I was staring out. She again spoke with a strong Russian accent as she donned a RPIT jacked. “My brother Piotr. I was young back then. Before… well…life changes you does it not?”

Yeah, it kind of does.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

I wrote parts of this over a year ago. LordGrise came up with the fishing boat idea which I just loved (you’ll see). And a shout-out to GORM (a frequent Illyana commenter on Comic Book’s Resources (CBR) Forums (I always read with interest what GORM has to say). This chapter is dedicated to (The Man With The Stick) who responded to GORM’s request for what issue had the Illyana/Doug interaction (right there is proof that I read GORM’s postings).

The dialog in question goes like this, currently the jock is holding Doug and Illyana says…

“Put him down Larry.”

Larry is not cooperative to the request. “When I’m done.”

A response that does not please Illyana. “Now.”

Larry is so not taking that from a girl. “Who’s gonna make me, Illyana?”

No response from Illyana, just a panel showing her staring.

Suffice it to say Larry has problems. “H-Hey, Don’t look at me like that, I didn’t mean anything. I’m cool, it’s cool, No harm done.” Then in a soft whisper. I’m… sorry! Please… I’m sorry…”

Yeah… Illyana can have a presence when she wants, but mostly she tries to keep that contained because… well… once it starts, things tend to go down hill.

Part 32a: Troubles past

Tammy decided she needed a potty break so I wandered around the bullpen for a bit as it had been awhile since I was last here. Zerbowski was shooting the breeze with Natasha about Tequila and she was making gagging sounds and describing a truly epic drunk. A brief chuckle as I remembered a joke they once pulled on me, every desk had had a stuffed animal penguin (I have a thing for penguins). I’d liked the joke, why I’d even had a coffee mug (covered in little penguins) here.

Hmm, I see that Detective Shebelle still reads the National Inquirer as there was a copy lying on her desk. I glanced the headline and pauses at what I observed. Large headlines announcing that sea serpent had bought the all the fish on a tuna boat and had paid in gold. The image was a drawing, but there was a photo of a grinning fisherman with a handful of gold coins.
Um… Hadn’t she said last night that she’d eaten tuna a few nights ago? I think… I don’t want to know. That’s when I got a thought from Magik *(Sergeant is sending me down to car, I suspect they wish to have words private with you.)*

Great, had been rather expecting it. Moments after Ma… Natasha disappeared, with a rather oversized purse, Dolph walked in. Zerbrowski and he exchanged glance, then they headed over to me.

Crap.

Just what do I say? I was already so on Dolph’s shit list. He hated the monsters, and hated that I was quote “fucking” the monsters. Hated Vampires. Hated Were. And I mean really hated. Part of that hate was because his son was dating a female vampire (fiancée really) who wanted to make him undead as well. Part was that Dolph thought of himself as kind of a father figure to me (the fact that I already had a Dad did not appear to quite register on him) and he so hated my personal decisions as to who I dated or “fucked” to be precise. Yeah fucked, those were his exact words not mine.

He felt that I was way to close to the monsters, and there was the rumor that I killed for to Jean-Claude (which I so don’t… except when I have). Sigh… There was so much I couldn’t or wouldn’t explain to him, some of those things would get me executed as the law was rather unforgiving on the use of magic to take a life, even if it was in self defense.

Anyway, this meant that he no longer trusted me and tried to not involve me anymore with RPIT investigations. Of course my nifty status as a Federal Marshal rather outranked him on paranormal issues, but there were other Marshals, such as Larry, and he tried to use them instead of me when he could.

It so sucks when a friendship goes sour.

“Spill it Anita, you know her from somewhere. We both saw you start when you saw her.” Growled Dolph.

How to explain Natasha… I went with the truth (mostly).

“You know that little episode where my house went up in flames?”
“Yeah, when you firebombed it as part of some anti demon ritual?”

“Well… she was involved.” You might say I was stretching the truth here because she was involved because she was the demon. But see, no lies, just not the full truth.

“She’s not in the record.”

“Correct.” It was rather interesting that all photos of Magik had vanished from computer files. Nobody knows how that had happened, apart from Magik that is. Hmm, another thing I needed to ask her about. Which meant that nobody know what the demon had looked like who was not already in the know.

“Cover up? So the Russians were involved?”

“I’m not sure how the Russians were involved, but yes some details were left out.”

“Why?”

“I can’t answer. You don’t have a need to know and frankly I didn’t as well so the Federallies involved didn’t share. Which sucked because it was my house.” When in doubt blame unknown Federal entities, after all they did exist and some had even paid Dolph a visit or two in the past.

“So she’s some kind of Russian demon hunter?”

“Dolph, you know as much as I do.”

“Unlikely. Gee Anita, why do I think you might be holding out on me?”

Something about how he said the word unlikely sounded like he had something. “Sounds like you are as well.”

“We…” A glance at Zerbrowski. “I don’t trust you anymore Anita about some things. You’re too close to the monsters, even the one’s you aren’t fu… involved with.”
I am not doing this again. “Dolph, we are so not having this conversation again. Don’t make me make Zerbrowski be a witness to a sexual harassment complaint.”

A sour look from Dolph while Zerbrowski just looked embarrassed to part of this. “You’d go there? You’d do that to me?”

“If you keep pushing like this then yeah. I’m tired of it Dolph, you just don’t have the right.”

He wanted to push it. He always wanted to push it but I’d drawn the line in the sand. No more. I hoped he wouldn’t cross the line, yet by drawing that line I was forced to cut off yet another part of what remained of our friendship. I really begin to understand the phrase irreconcilable differences.

He let it be for now. “Any idea why Natasha gives every psychic sensitive or witch in the department the jitters?”

“Nope... I think that might just be the way she is. And yes she give me the jitters as well.”

A hard look from Dolph before the turned away, and a sympathetic one from Zerbrowski.

Damn, I missed the old times.

Part 32b: Road trip (part 1)

I was reminded of a family car trip as we drove to the crime scene. Why a family trip?

We were in Dolph’s car (Crown Victoria, call it Dad’s car) heading towards the crime scene. Zerbrowski was driving (I guess that made him Mom) and Dolph was in the front passenger seat. Which meant Tammy, M... Agent Romanova, and I were in the back seat (like three sisters or something, with one of the sisters having her mad on, that’s Tammy by the way). Tammy was seated behind Zerbrowski by the window, with a big purse on her right side, Agent Romanova was sitting in the middle, and I was behind Dolph (no way was I was going to take the middle seat even if I was the smallest). And because of Tammy’s purse, which I suspected was being used to
provide Tammy some separation from Agent Romanova, I found Agent Romanova somewhat pressed up against me; which I found disconcerting, but not for the reasons the others would suspect.

I… could smell her perfume, something lavender based, and the red hair was really just right there, so… red. Best to just look forward, but I did wonder if she found it disconcerting as well?

As we had walked down to the underground parking garage, I’d sent Illyana a brief mental message that Dolph knew she’d been at my burning house, but as a Russian agent and not the actual demon, and that he’d let slip that he’d gotten his hands on some details about her.

(Thanks.) Was her reply. (I left false front to be found. Rather surprised he got it so quick.)

I replied. (He can be a prick, but he and Zerbrowski really are good, don’t underestimate them.)

That was it for any mental exchange. Why not more? Conversation takes mental concentration, and people tend to notice if you look distracted.

We got in the car, exited the garage and turned left. Dolph turned around and faced us.

“I need A game from all three of you, the crime scene looks… magical, but that might all be faked just to throw us off.”

Good point, that had happened before. A while ago, a killer had scrawled some Norse Runes at a crime scene and drawn a pentagram with blood. It was all a ruse to hide the real motive of the killing, but the killer screwed up in that the runes were just randomly selected because they looked mystic, not because that actually spelled anything out. When you fake something folks, make sure you try to do a good job.

Dolph continued, first looking at Tammy. “Detective Reynolds is a proven asset.” Then a look at me, and a comment that surprised me. “Marshal Blake has likewise proven her expertise in such matters.” Then a look at Agent Romanova. “But you Agent Romanova, I have no actual demonstrated knowledge from you, could you remind me what it is that you do for the FSS.”

Again that Russian accent and not quite correct English as we all looked at her, apart from Zerbrowski who was driving. “Many things, but one word says best.”
Tammy still had her mad on. “Killing?”

I could see, and hear, the smile in Natasha’s voice. “No detective, that word defines your Marshals, like Marshal Blake, and your husband.”

Dolph stomped on the Tammy’s response before she could say it. “Can it Tammy, argue later. And what is that word Agent?”

She said the word in Russian first. “Magiya.” Then in English. “Magic.”

Dolph and Zerbrowski exchanged another look, then Dolph looked back at Agent Romanova who when gave a small shrug. “If second word you want then… detective is suppose correct.”

“And just how good are you?” Asked Dolph.

“At Magic? I have… skill at it. Part of what I am. At the other thing… I am also good at.”

I decided to see if I could pry some details out of Dolph. “Are you going to share anything else, or is this us going in cold again.”

Dolph liked to have folks see a crime scene cold, no advance details. Said it helped prevent preconceived notions. One of the reasons people like us are involved is that we do bring a different perspective, but like anybody else, if you share details beforehand we might then simply see what we expect to see.

Dolph shook his head no. “I… we need unbiased eyes.” Then he looked at Agent Romanova again. “Care to share how you joined the FSS Agent?”

A look back from her. “No.”

A neutral look from Dolph as he stated. “I found your file to be a most… interesting read yesterday.”
I felt her body slightly tense up, which was at odds with the sense of sudden… satisfaction on the link from her, as she replied.

“Vat… what file might that be Lieutenant?”

Dolph continued. “The one a little bird retrieved for me, interesting reading, I could see why you might want such a job after the events of your childhood. After what happened to your family, your village, I can see why such work would appeal to you. But I really only have one question.”

“Da? What is Lieutenant?”

“Do you… date the monsters as well?”

I so knew Dolph wanted to say fuck instead of date but at least he was showing some restraint.

Agent Romanova gave Dolph a slightly puzzled look as she answered. “Of course, that is when… date as you say, rare it is.”

You could just see the sudden anger in Dolph body language as he opened his mouth to comment but stopped whatever he was going to say as she continued to speak.

“But then we all do. After all, who’s left? Da?”

“What do you mean… who’s left?” Asked Dolph.

“Who meaning all. Everybody.” Was her answer.

“I don’t.” Replied Dolph with more then a little heat.

And now it was her turn to shake her head no. “Of course you Lieutenant do. Everybody a monster is. Some just more aware of what they are then others.”
“How can you say that?” Asked Zerbrowski trying to intervene and prevent Dolph from saying something he shouldn’t.

“Name three biggest monsters of twentieth century.” Was her answer. Hmm I think I knew were she was going with this.

Zerbrowski answered while Dolph just glared. “Ummm Hitler I guess and... Umm”

“Stalin and Chairman Mao” Finished Agent Romanova. “None weres, vampires or witches be. Each tens of millions killed. Each motivated great mass of people who likewise not weres, vampires or witches to do actual deeds. Being a monster is more state of mind then just physical condition. One Stalin quote sums up well. A single death tragedy is, million deaths is but statistic.”

“That doesn’t make everybody a monster.” Stated Dolph.

“Everybody can be monster, therefore... everybody is monster, just waiting for right situation.”

“Not everybody would do such things” Replied Dolph.

“Correct you may be, but such people would be dead so again that only leaves monsters. I envy such naivety Lieutenant. I came from... country where eyes open are. The horrors of communism will do that, so does Maoism or Nazism. But you... you... Americans... still pretend can. I think... I think vampires, weres and... other monsters don’t get to much pretend. Be careful Lieutenant, the three I spoke of, many an eager servant they had, most not would think they be monsters, but monsters all they were.”

“And you...?” asked Dolph.

“Naivety was lost long time ago Lieutenant, that and many other things. Monster I am, sad thought I find that to be.”

“So you’d fuck them then, the monsters.” Dolph stated in an angry tone.
Which earned him a cold "Idi trakhni svoyu mamu." from her.

“What”?

“Is Russian saying Lieutenant for people who ask rude and insulting questions.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means go fuck your mother.”

**Part 32c: Road trip (part 2)**

Real anger was flowing off of her, and her English got more broken. “Father not you are Lieutenant. Such questions not your place is. Same answer I give if in Russia I was, superiors be angry at me if I did not. If you want answer to such, answer I first have shall.”

“To what?” Was Dolph’s tense reply.

Agent Romanova glanced around the car. “Private such will I ask, not rude shall be I.”

And that’s when we arrived at the warehouse by the river.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

The ongoing issues between Dolph and Anita (in the published books) is very well conceived by the author. Quite heartbreaking to see their tight friendship fray and fade. But I am somewhat annoyed in that the Author has not done any writing about that character rift for many years. Well… I understand that things get dropped or passed by when writing book after book. Things like Dolph and… Gretchen. Opps, my bad, that wasn’t any foreshadowing now was that?

Apologies for those who will find the crime scene graphic but it is nasty, trust me that there is a reason for that. As always, thanks to LordGrise for helping craft this chapter as his knowledge of medical and criminal details is a great help.

33a: Outside the warehouse

Tammy and I exchanged glances as we exited the car, one that communicated our mutual discomfort at Dolph’s behavior, as Dolph got out and waited for Illyana (A.K.A Agent Romanova) to exit the car, which she did on Tammy’s side. This put her on the opposite side of the car from Dolph, and I couldn’t blame her for putting a bit of distance between the two of them given what he had just said. They both exchanged a look, and then Dolph jerked his head to his left to indicate she should follow him.

He walked off to his left while she walked around the car to follow him as they walked out of earshot as I walked around the back of the car and joined Tammy and Zerbrowski. I noticed that a roach-coach was parked just outside of the police line serving coffee and donuts (yeah I know, total stereotypical but heck, rather common at major crime scenes as the processing can take a long time).

The air was still chilly even though it was approaching noon, such is early spring in St. Louis. Somedays it can get hot without the humidity of summer, and other days it stays cold like it has been for the last week; last gasps of winter before Spring was firmly in control. The idea of something warm to drink was tempting, but not coffee, and no way was I going to stoop to drinking tea (at least where anybody could see me). I know, Coke can provide the caffeine I crave in lieu of coffee, but sometimes you want something hot.

I gave Zerbrowski a silent WTF look as I walked up to him. He glanced away to look at Dolph and ‘Natasha’ before turning back and answering my non verbal question. For a moment his smart ass act slipped and a look of pained horror crept out of his eyes. “I know, he’s out of line, but… cut him some slack until you’ve seen the crime scene. And… not a good time to be talking about everybody
being a monster."

Zerbrowski’s seen major shit, and I’ve seen lots of that same shit with him. He doesn’t spook easily, which meant that this wasn’t going to be good. Tammy semi whispered a question at him. “That bad?”

“That bad?”

“Dolph doesn’t want me saying, you know how he is about unbiased first impressions. That said, I suggest you don’t buy anything from the roach coach.”

That brought a question to mind, one that was absolutely legit. ”Zerbowski, if we’re here for first impressions... how in hell did a roach coach beat us here? And if it’s so bad, then how’s he doing to be doing any business?”

Zerbowski glanced over at the food truck and shrugged. “He’s got a radio scanner, whenever he hears the initial calls and on a major scene of any kind he comes a running if there’s not any close by restaurants. We checked him out when he started showing up at scenes, he’s legit, and he knows to stay out of the way. And it’s not like we’re letting anybody in yet.” Zerbowski shrugged. “You haven’t been running with us lately; not surprised you didn’t know.”

All of us looked at the truck, and then at Dolph and ‘Natasha’. Dolph was clenching his hands and looked absolutely furious about something she’d just said, and then she said something additional that froze him, leaving him just wordlessly staring at her. She shrugged her shoulders after a few seconds before leaving him and walking over to the coach where she purchased something and waited for whatever it was she bought. Dolph just watched her go and still looked stunned about whatever she’d said.

I decide to do a little mental communication. (What did you tell him?) I sent to her as she was paying for her food.

Russian accented thoughts were my answer. (Asked simple question. Son date female vampire in his file. He upset. Rage upon it. Solution simple, is not he head of RPIT, feared by vampires and weres? Did he not once hold Master of City in jail? Just order favor from Master of City, make female vampire permanently... go away, however that be. His hands stay clean, and son is safe. Problem solved.)

I was not pleased. (That’s... that’s a bitch move.)
Surprise in her thoughts. *(Why? He already thinks it, I see it gnawing upon him. I just voice what he struggles with. Wants to do. Wishes to do. But one thing I think his hand stays.)*

*(What?)*

*(If he do that, then no longer able to pretend not a monster.)*

*(Still a bitch move. Dolph is my friend, don’t you dare fuck with him.)*

A statement that slightly surprised me, yeah Dolph and I were not… friends at the moment, but I still considered him a friend and really hoped… wanted… that we would get past our differences.

A touch of annoyance from her. *(Story not finished am I. Told him falling is easy, been there, did that. Some things once done undone never can be. Plus…. What if monster says no?)*

What if the monster said no? I thought for a second as she walked back to us holding a toasted bagel, then answered. *(I guess the reason why they said no would be key.)*

*(Yes… what if monster not monster? Disheartening to find true monster in situation is self.)*

Yeah. I can… relate. And I got a vibe from her that she could as well. Crap, if he’s thinking such thoughts then he’s already getting close to possible action. It would be oddly ironic if her stating such to Dolph actually prevented him from acting upon his temptation.

Zerbrowski chimed in as ‘Natasha’ chewed on her bagel. *“I’d advise against that.”*

*“Why? Bagel is good.”*

Zerbrowski was being kind for some reason, likely that hair color promise for his wife that she’d made. *“Just saying… it is a crime scene.”*

Just a shrug of a response from her as she reached into the back seat to retrieve her travel mug of tea. *“Good am I. Bad things seen before.”*
That’s when Officer Clive Perry walked up. He’s African American and takes after Dolph on dressing nice. I’ve always found him to be an extremely polite member of RPIT, I have no idea what he did to get put on the squad (generally it’s considered a punishment but Tammy had volunteered as she was a witch and really wanted to be involved with RPIT). He had latex gloves, nasal plugs and Bengay cream for us (you put it on your upper lip as it’s right under your nose; your lip gets hot but the vapors deaden your sense of smell).

Only Agent Romanova declined the nasal plugs and Bengay because she said she wished to better sense of the scene. And damn straight I used the plugs and Bengay, you know it’s going to be bad when it’s on offer.

Dolph walked back over to us at that point, having regained his self control, and gestured with this thumb at the building. “Let’s go.”

We went, with ‘Romanova’ still eating her bagel.

**Part 33b: Discoveries**

We entered the warehouse through the office front door, past some yellow police tape. The first hints of what was coming hit us even through the Bengay and plugs, which is always a bad sign. The smell of rotting meat, a few days past bad. Agent Romanova wrinkled her nose in distaste as she briefly stopped walking and wrapped up her bagel in a napkin before storing it in her purse.

The office spaces were all empty with a sense of disuse. A bit dusty, and cold. Heck even colder then the outside air as I could feel the air flow from the air conditioning which was on for reason, you’d have thought the heat would be running. Dolph and Zerbrowski led us to the back of the office spaces where there was a stairwell leading up. We went up to a small landing at the top of the stairs where there was a door that led out onto the roof of the office space, but still within the warehouse. It gave an excellent view of the well lit open space, due to both the skylights and the lighting system.

The smell became a physical presence as soon as that door was opened, hideously thick and glutinously adhesive in the air; the kind that makes your eyes water. And heck, it was even colder then outside. I winced at the stench as we made our way to the roof edge (there was a railing) and gazed upon the warehouse space below.
There was a huge pentagram shape on the floor that was roughly thirty feet wide, which was in a huge pool of dark, almost black, liquid… Blood, it was old blood. The pentagram was… it was made from… crap… naked human bodies. Then I noticed there was a crucifix containing a body at each pentagram point. My eyes returned to the pentagram made from bodies. That’s when I realized there was a hum was from clouds of flies orbiting the bodies on the crosses, which were squirming with maggots. That thick, rotting stench abruptly crawled down my throat, and suddenly the Bengay was worthless, because I could taste…

Yeah, all of the cops with us lost their lunch. Tammy and I also lost it after first trying to choke it back. Dolph and Zerbrowski knew what was coming so they kept it down (I later learned that they both had already lost it when they had first seen the scene and didn’t really have anything to come up). Romanova was the only one who didn’t, just looked down upon the horror with expressionless eyes and turned to ask Dolph a question.

“Does this happen in country often?”

But I could feel her disgust and some nausea on our link. It was good to know that she wasn’t completely inhuman.

**Part 33c: Examinations**

So… we, meaning me, Tammy, ‘Agent Romanova’, and Larry got busy examining the mass death scene as we were the SMEs (Subject Matter Experts) on magic.

But first we needed to get properly dressed, which meant dawning light full chem-bio body suits because of that big-ass pool of blood and the dripping ick from the bodies on the crosses. Tammy, Larry, and I also had on respirators (which did help immensely) while ‘Agent Romanova’ was open faced because she said she wanted minimal barriers between her and the crime scene. This of course took us a few minutes, while we doing this, others were escorted in.

Who all likewise lost the contents of their stomachs.

The coroners showed up, and puked.

Other cops? One word. Vomit. Hmm, maybe three words is a better description as there was: Lots. Of. Vomit.
Crime scene hardened murder detectives… Yep, spewed like geysers.

Additional Forensic people? There she blows…

Marshal Kirkland? He had puked long and hard, so much for starting the day with the breakfast of champions.

The hardened FBI and ATF agents. Vomit… just great, more vomit.

I think you get the picture. Okay, I confess that I… might be exaggerating just a tad.

I know, crude and unfeeling to try to make jokes about such things, but humor is a coping mechanism and most cops turn to gallows humor as a way to deal. At least nobody had yet puked on the actual crime scene, dry heaves yes but nothing really comes up when you have the dry heaves after losing everything. I once vomited on a murder victim when I first started, gads Dolph and Zerbrowski didn’t let me forget that for years. Barfing at a crime scene was looked down on, mark of a newbie and police group think reinforces that attitude. Now almost all rookies lose their lunch at their first not-fresh body but… this crime scene was rather unique in many ways, so losing it was normal.

There was some light conversation as we geared up. I’d asked Larry and Tammy about their daughter, always a good lead-in as most parents are always willing to talk endlessly about their kids. This kept the conversation polite, at least while we got ready.

As they both informed us about the latest antics of their pride and joy I sent Illyana a thought. *(Okay, I get it. Red is not blonde.)*

She sounded pleased. *(You like?)*

Sigh…. *(It’s okay.)* I am so not fussing up.

Amusement from her. *(Good, you like.)*
Irritation from me. *(I didn’t say that.)*

*(Yes… did you.)*

*(No I… okay… it looks… good.)*

*(And not blonde?)*

*(No… not blonde.)* Crap, so not blonde. Heck, I think she’d be more blonde if she shaved her head as I’d keep remembering that her hair had been blonde. But the flaming red… that was… I reminded myself that I needed to stop thinking about her hair.

I just had to ask. *(Um… this isn’t… um yours?)*

The irritated mental vibe I got was a definite no.

With that we were done prepping and it was time to get to work.

The forensic team helped us while we did this in that they photographed everything before we touched any of the bodies as well as helping us turn over bodies when needed. Tables had been set up with lab equipment, so the various biological samples that would be taken could be cataloged and examined as we worked. Heck, they even sent up a drone photographing everything for posterity. Now usually the forensics team would wait for the magical types to finish their examination before collecting physical evidence, but in this situation, due to the mass of bodies, they worked with us because to examine this scene in detail we would have to alter it. Once we were done they’d be bagging the bodies after additional evidence gathering.

But to revisit the whole vomit thing for a moment, for a crime scene this bad, not vomiting was out of character, meaning ‘Agent Romanova’ was viewed with suspicion as I kept seeing people giving her a stare whenever her back was turned. (I likewise gave her a few stares, but that was just to fit it).

When we started we first just looked at the mass of bodied and the pool of blood. Nobody was eager to take that final step as walking in the still liquid pool of blood was going to be like walking through thick sticky syrup, beyond off-putting. Dolph and Zerbrowski were on each side of the pool so they could record down any observations made by us.
“Why is the blood still liquid?” Complained Tammy, speaking for all of us as she gazed at our task. “The flies and maggots means that time of death was days ago. The blood shouldn’t… shouldn’t be like this.”

“Anticoagulants?” Mused Larry with that tone of voice that stated that he wasn’t buying his own suggestion.

I voiced my belief. “Perhaps, but I’d bet on something magical, even if the lab boys find a non magical reason for the lack of clotting.”

“Maybe spell, Detective Reynolds? You know of one?” Commented ‘Agent Romanova’.

“There… is one that the church uses for… people with blood clotting problems, but that one is for healing and this…” A wave of Tammy’s hands at the bodies and pool of blood. “Is not healing.”

I took the lead, not that I really wanted to, best to just get the job done. “Let’s take a quarter each, and walk the edge of the pool.”

I was once at a crime scene where the perp had drawn pentagrams and Nordic runes to make it look like a satanic ritual killing. We were here to figure out if this was authentic, and if authenticate, authentic what; assuming we could figure it out. Here’s a pro tip kids; make sure if you use runes you don’t just randomly draw them; letters have meaning and that’s what runes are. Spelling out nonsense just doesn’t cut it.

So… was it:

Magic?
Vampires?
Weres?
Satanists?
Evil witches?
Girl scouts gone bad (I know… cut the humor).
Some other mystic baddie?

Or was it all just a put-on to hide the real reason for the crime…?

“Imagine summer and no AC. Hell, we’d have to count skulls to get a body count after first having to vent the entire warehouse to make it breathable.” Was Zerbrowski’s less than helpful comment. Which was horrifyingly correct; dear God, the place would be unbreathable and the flesh would have liquefied after a week in summer heat and humidity.

“Just like your car.” Was my comeback. Which was a lie, while the back of his car is a wasteland of garbage, it’s far from this nightmare.

Larry voiced what I was thinking. “Just how the hell do you kill this many people without anybody noticing? There must be thirty dead people here. Lieutenant Dolph, has there been a spike in missing persons reports?”

“No.” Was Dolph’s gruff answer. “We’ll be running prints from each of the bodies as they’re removed. They had to come from somewhere, but that doesn’t mean they came from here.”

Larry asked a question. “Who owns the warehouse?”

Zerbrowski replied. “Anix incorporated. Real estate firm. Place has been empty for three months and is available for lease. It was one of their maintenance guys who first found the horror and called it in.”

Crap, it might take days to physically process and then clean this crime scene once we were done. And when this story broke, and break it would, it was going to be international. I can see why Dolph brought in everybody at the beginning. Just no hiding this.

So we got to work. Examination of the bodies, which meant walking in the blood, and turning over bodies that were face down, with help from the forensic staff. Sigh… sometimes this job sucks so bad. Thirty bodies made up the pentagram, eighteen men, twelve women, all in good physical condition. Three women and two men on the crosses, no idea as to their physical condition due to their advanced decay. No kids thank God. Extra hated it when there were kids involved.

At times like this I wish we could just raise the dead and ask them about the murder scene, but
murder victims rise as uncontrollable killer zombies in search of their killers.

*(Good idea.*) Sent Illyana.

*(No… not a good idea. Bad demon.*) I sent back. Then paused… did I just make a joke? And… did she? Back to work…

We had started with the pentagram bodies because the bodies on the crosses were just too gross; meaning we’d get to them last after the horror of the scene had palled due to exposure; and yes folks, things do get more tolerable as time passes. A blessing and yet… one reason that bad people are able to do bad things; such things just get easier with repetition. The pentagram bodies were all naked, pale grey, waxy, no lividly at all; completely flaccid, no rigor mortis, no vampire bite marks. One wound per body, ear to ear cuts on the throats. Interesting, and thankfully, no maggots; decomposition was not consistent with the corpses on the crosses. That strongly suggested the possibility that this was not one scene, but two due to the differences in decay. At least decent quality fingerprints could be taken, something that was not going to be possible from the bodies on the crosses.

Agent Romanova observed. *“Not resisted, they.”*

*“How can you tell?”* Asked Tammy with what sounded like suspicion.

I answered. *“The cuts are too smooth. If they had resisted, then the wounds would be more inconsistent, crooked and likely multiple cuts.”*

Larry added some clarification. *“Sacrifice enough animals rising zombies and you learn what a clean slice is and is not.”*

Tammy thought about it for a moment and then nodded in agreement. Yep, hacking away at a chicken or a goat is gross, and sucks for the animal, something Larry and I both knew since if you raised zombies for a living, you learned to make your cuts quick and clean. I traced one of the wounds. *“So either they were restrained, drugged, or unconscious.”*

Eventually I got to the crucified victim I’d been working towards. I simply stood still for a few moments, looking up at the body, studying it while thinking about how I wanted to approach it. It was so decomposed I was afraid it was going to tear off and fall into the mess I was wading in, and that just wasn’t good practice. At a distance there were no visible throat wounds that I could
observe. As I got closer, I could see no visible wounds at all; the corpse was tied rather then nailed to the cross. Of course, they’re all ten feet off the ground, so they’ll have to be taken down for a detailed examination... But the body was contorted and I suppose it might have had a frozen look of horror if their faces weren’t so distorted and discolored. What skin I could see was pale and… a bit of lip dropped off of the one I was looking at, revealing a long incisor.

SHIT!

I shouted. “Fang! I see fang! Everybody back up! Dolph, I need a ladder, right now!”

Dear God keep us safe, for if the bodies start standing up we are so screwed. It’s daylight but magic has been acting weird so best to play it safe. I gestured for everybody to back away. Crap! Dead vampires kicked this crime scene up a whole bunch of notches… I glanced at my cross, no flares, likewise Tammy and Larry looked at theirs, and all the cops who had crosses, Jewish star, or any other religious symbols. Which suddenly demonstrated that Agent Romanova did not wear any religious symbols.

“How no cross Agent Romanova?” Asked Tammy. “Non believer?”

Romanova was staring at the body on the cross nearest me as she answered. “Cross symbol of faith is, Detective Reynolds.”

“And you lack faith?”

An incomplete answer that left Tammy looking puzzled as ‘Agent Romanova’ started walking around and staring at the bodies on the other crosses. “Just opposite detective.” To be truthful, an answer that left me puzzled as well.

“Thank God it's daylight, Anita, no chance of the vampires rising.” Larry said as we had a quick confab. We then requested (ordered, actually, but asking is always the polite path when dealing with local police) that SWAT be brought in, equipped with flamethrowers. Dolph agreed (thankfully) and the call went out. St. Louis SWAT trained with ghoul exterminators so they knew the drill.

After the Forensic guys brought a ladder over, Dolph and Zerbrowski aimed their firearms at the body that I had alarmed on while other officers aimed at the other crucified bodies after direction from Dolph. Larry and Tammy just backed off while ‘Agent Romanova’ went back to looking hard
at the body that I was getting ready to examine.

The ladder was set up behind the cross, no way was I putting my throat within biting distance. I climbed up behind the body and glanced around the side to take a close look at the mouth… yep, vampire fangs. And the body was dead, so dead that my necromancy couldn’t tell that this had ever been a vampire. I spoke slowly and clearly at each of my findings, finishing as I came down the ladder.

“**And the others?**” Asked Dolph.

‘Agent Romanova’ answered. “**Vampire… dry they are. Nothing left.**”

“**And you know this how?**” Asked Tammy as she walked up to stand by Romanova.

“**Witch you be.**” Was her reply. “**Can you not see?**”

“**Mystic gazing takes time.**” Was Tammy’s reply.

A shrug from Romanova that communicated that that perhaps she did not share that opinion. She then got a questioning look on her face and started staring at the bodies on the ground.

Dolph wanted a second option as to the deadness of the vampires. “**Marshal Kirkland?**”

Larry was likewise taking a long stare at each of the crucified bodies. He finally answered. “**Dead as in dead. Not a hint of anything. Even at rest an Animator can sense… call it life, within a vampire body that is at rest during the day. But these… there’s nothing left.**”

“**And the bodies on the ground?**” Asked Zerbrowski.

‘Agent Romanova’ looked up from where she’d been staring at the bodies. Then looked to Tammy, Larry, and lastly me, looked at us with an expression that clearly communicated ‘**Do you want to give the news, or should I?**’ Tammy was puzzled for a bit, the undead really were not her forte, while Larry suddenly winced as my eyes narrowed at what I suspected I knew she was hinting at.
Dolph’s voice was neutral as he asked. “Kindly share your… observations, Agent Romanova.”

“Not fully sure… but… some feel like lycan. All are dry… like vampires. Gone… sucked empty. Rise they will not.”

Larry’s statement echoed what all of us thought. “Crap, just what the hell would need that kind of power? This would be necromancy on a scale I’ve never heard or even read about except from the Aztecs or other ancient cultures.”

“A binding, or a summoning.” Was Tammy’s answer, which I was certain was right on the mark.

Yeah, just one long pig (meaning one human) in a necromantic ritual could raise all kind of zombies (and yes, I speak from experience and no I don’t do that kind of thing). But Illyana and I knew just what that ritual must have been for, and why they needed that much power. After all, binding a Hell Lord must take… a whole lot of mojo. Hmmm, I never did ask her about the other sites she said she had examined, needed to talk about that later with her.

“Any vampires missing, Anita?” Asked Dolph.

Good question, and one that I needed to be careful about. “None that I’m aware of. I’ll ask Jean-Claude tonight.”

“Hate to think your boyfriend might be hiding something.” Mused Zerbrowski out loud.

“That would make two of us, Zerbrowski.” Was my answer. “But I really don’t think so.”

“That famous temper of yours?” Was his snide response.

“Yeah…”

Later…
Damn this place was cold. Wish we could turn the heating system on or bring in some space heaters but… not a good idea. And yes it was suspicious that the air conditioning was on. Somebody had turned it on after deactivating the temperature thermostat cut-offs, and yes that was suspicious. Very suspicious, like… they had wanted the bodies kept as fresh as possible.

All non-essential activity ceased while the vampire bodies were removed from the area, a task that was not nearly as simple as it sounded. Each was lowered to the ground via the crosses they had been tied to, after photos and evidence were first taken. Removed and placed in coffins. Each vampire was prepositioned over the coffin that was prepared to receive it, and only then were their ties cut (Larry and I used our silver knives). They didn’t so much fall into the coffins as splash in, yes, they kind of fell apart from the impacts, like meat falling off of stewed bones. Then the coffins were bound with silver chains and had a big cross placed on the coffin lid, because nobody was taking chances (yet more gear that the Forensics guys had, and so did the coroners). Then each was loaded into a separate transport to be removed to the morgue, who well knew what they were receiving (they have a special vault for vampire bodies, or other bodies that folks might have apprehensions about).

While we waited for the last of the vampires to be secured, Larry asked ‘Agent Romanova’ a question. “How on earth did you not gotten sick?”

A frown from her, then a little shiver as her expression changed to one of musing “Sad…”

“Sad?” Was Larry’s question as Tammy commented.

“She’s just showing that she’s a major hard ass.”

Romanova shook her head and the musing tone vanished. “Sad that I did not. I… Detective Reynolds, what do when first body dead you saw?”

“I got sick.” Was Tammy’s reply.

“Did you later?”

Tammy’s answer started out hostile, but ended with a questioning tone. “Only when it… got… really bad?” As Tammy got what was being hinting at, that 'Agent Romanova’ had seen much worse.
“As said… sad. Perhaps hard ass as you say but… would prefer reverse.”

Larry took a step back. “Just what the hell do the Russians have you do?”

A shrug from her that somehow communicated all of what was before us as we got back to work examining the remaining bodies on the floor. One of the forensic guys shouted that the early blood tests showed that all of the clotting ability of the blood was gone as there was no platelets in the blood, and that traces of opiates had been found as well.

A few minutes later Tammy asked a question of Agent Romanova as we worked, like she was trying to make small talk. I resisted the urge to sigh and roll my eyes; Tammy always tended to being too eager. “Just what club did you go to, Agent Romanova, that you got so sick that you were unable to come to work yesterday?”

“Louder then Hell.” ‘Agent Romanova’ replied. “Club nice was. Went to gym, then club. Then… hazy. Uber I took back as car I left. Then sick… very sick. Devil drink is Tequila. Uber to car this morning before work.”

That question was a bit too obvious even for Tammy. Not that she wasn’t saying what likely others were thinking, and not that Agent Romanova appeared to give it any notice. We continued working. After all the bodies had been examined and we’d poked about for a bit I got a thought from her while we took another brief break at some chairs and tables that had been setup; unsurprisingly nobody wanted to eat or drink anything. Interestingly, the Russian phrasing of her thoughts was gone, guess she was distracted.

(Nothing… I can sense nor see nothing other then the physical that lies before us. Which means it had to be those who are doing this to me.)

I replied. (Bummer, it would have been nice if you could do that aura viewing here.)

(Yes… it would be illuminating as there should be magic residual from such a ritual. But I am still blind…) A hesitation from her before she finished the thought. (But you might not.)

(Meaning sharing your ability like those few times before?)

(No… that would leave you as blind as I. I… was teaching you how when I showed you before.)
(That apprentice thing again?)

(Yes. Look with more then your eyes. You have seen it done, experienced it, you should be able to do it as you have the talent and the power.)

(Okay, I’ll give it a shot, go over by where one of the crosses had been standing and look… I don’t know, look like you’re doing something magical and mysterious.)

(Why?)

Great, now she sounds like me, but it was a good question. (So you can take credit for anything I see, likely best to enhance your reputation and I might get all kinds of grief if I suddenly have new abilities right now.)

(Okay… um…) A sense of hesitancy in her thoughts as she got up and did as I asked (Suggest you don’t try to look at Heaven.)

(You mean up?)

(Heaven is not a physical location.)

Okay, that made a kind of sense and… kind of not. (Why?)

(It… hurts … the reminder of what I am denied. But… you are not I. Perhaps you would instead be comforted. Either way, I suggest you avoid attempting to gaze upon the Silver City for now.)

(So demons can see Heaven?) I wasn’t trying to be sarcastic, it’s just that… well… you know… demons and Heaven?

She responded with a bible quote. (Job 1:6-12 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the Lord and said, “From going to and fro on the
earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” Then Satan answered the Lord and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” And the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

(So you can go to Heaven?) Was my surprised thought.

Her thoughts started sad, but ended angry. (One supposes to the gates at least, but there I do not venture. I can see it if I wish... I... I do not wish to speak more about... it. Forget what I said, as upon additional reflection you should not be able to see the Eternal City.)

An annoyed thought from me. (Not worthy?)

(No, mortal. That whole faith thing.)

(And demons don’t have faith?)

(Faith is, in large part, about things unseen, Ms. Blake. I lack such faith as such matters are not unseen to such as I. Just unreachable.)

Opps, a Ms. Blake comment. I’d pissed her off about something, something that I can guess about as I’d had my own times of seeing things I couldn’t have.

Sigh... ok... time for the hocus pocus. While ‘Agent Romanova’ stood off to the side with her eyes closed, with several folks giving her giving her odd looks I might add, I looked at the crime scene.

And got nothing other then what my eyes could see.

(Don’t try so hard.) Was her thought. (Relax, just... look. Look with more then your talent.)
(Necromancy?) Was my thought back.

(Kind of, but not really. Look with your raw talent.)

And… I did. I think… she was somehow helping even though she was not sharing her abilities. As before, it was like an overlay upon reality. There was a silver glow, like the faint glow of a low watt light bulb at each of the pentagram points. And a similar glow at the center of the pentagram. I glanced about and noticed that Tammy was staring rather hard at Romanova, likely trying to figure out what she was doing without asking. Dolph had… had a kind of shifting darkness within him, crap… what the hell was that?

A thought from her. (It is his desire, to rescue his son, or so he thinks, by doing wrong. His… lust to do wrong in the pursuit of right.) I guess she was looking thought my eyes.

I looked back at where the bodies had been, there… was a blue glowing line that ran under the blood. There was also a blue glowing circle that circumscribed the pentagram. And… in the air above there was a red flickering… glyph? Some weird symbol that I had never seen before, looked like some kind of Chinese pictograph intertwined with… snakes?

(SIX!) Was her triumphant thought. (There are six who do this to me! To us! Five stood at the points of the pentagram and one in the center. And the spell was meant to be a transformation, not a binding, not a summoning.)

(Transform into what? And how the heck to you know that?)

(The glyph is one of alteration in Aklo. Alteration into what, that… I do not know. The spell is too faded.)

(What the heck is Aklo?)

(Demonic language.) Was her answer.

The overlay faded, time for her to take the credit. (Okay, explain to everybody what I saw.)
Romanova opened her eyes and explained what she had sensed, the lines and the residual of six, but she left off the alteration glyph. Dolph had a neutral expression as she spoke, Zerbrowski looked rather skeptical, Tammy also looked skeptical as she declared that silver was the sign of white magic, which made no sense as this was obviously not white magic. A statement earned her a condescending look from Illy… ‘Agent Romanova’ which started an argument about how things magical are not that simple from her and some denouncements from Tammy that yes they were that simple.

While they argued I got a hunch and borrowed a broom sized squeegee so I could shove some of the thick blood away from the floor. After a few iterations my suspicions were confirmed. There were incantation runes on the floor hidden beneath the blood. Looked like Latin, which meant we needed to get all of the blood out of the way so we could examine the writing. Which meant squeegees and shop vacs (yes those big drum vacuums), God you know a crime scene is beyond bad when you’re using shop vacs to clean up blood and garbage cans to hold the blood. We did the squeegee work and some guys from Crime Scene Cleanup operated the shop vacs. Oh, and annoyingly the Crime Scene Cleanup guys did not barf, which seemed unfair but I guess they’ve seen even grosser things.

Once that little nightmare of a chore was done (I think everybody here other then Illyana was going to have nightmares about this) the circle of writing was revealed. Not just Latin, there was another language intermittently intertwined with the Latin that I did not recognize. A language that apparently ‘Agent Romanova’ understood. She knelt down and pointed at several characters as she spoke.

“This is Fey.”

“Unseelie?” Stated Tammy who started to kneel next to ‘Agent Romanova’ before stopping herself.

“No… Seelie and Unseelie same language use.” Corrected ‘Agent Romanova’.

That earned her a scowl from Tammy who demanded “And you know this how?”

Agent Romanova stood back up and started to walk around the pentagram outside of the incantation circle. “Russia old world is, things still walk in forests that never came to new world. Learned such I did. Learned from such.”

Tammy rebutted. “We have Fey in America.”
Larry voiced a question. “So you think the Fey did this?”

“Would have to be Unseelie then.” Stated Tammy. “Unseelie are the dark and evil Fay.”

“Pffft.” Was Agent Romanova’s less then stellar opinion of Tammy’s statement. I think I could see how Tammy might be having issues with her that were not exclusively Tammy’s fault. “Star Wars this is not. Light and dark descriptions of Seelie and Unseelie only show lack of understanding of Fey. Fey are Fey, not human. Unseelie can do good. Seelie can do evil. Unseelie are more… honest as what they are, Seelie… less so. Complicated Fey are, one must remember. Just as magic, not simple white and black. What you do matters more then tool used.”

Larry repeated his question before Tammy could get too huffy. “So the Fey did this?”

A shrug from her. “Fey… may have participated. Any could have written this, but Latin means others as well. Fey have no need for incantations other then their own.”

“What does the Latin inscriptions say?” Asked Zerbrowski.

Tammy and I took turns answering, since we both understood written Latin; and so did Agent Romanova but she just agreed with our translation. It was complicated; the Latin had five stanzas, each invoking the gods to hear their pleas and to constrain the energies being released. Illyana translated the Fey, it was a single stanza that guided the energies, it spoke of the living, the dead, and that which was neither. But…

I finished. “There is one part that makes no sense. It’s in Latin, but nonsense.”

Tammy added. “I think it’s some other language, but written in Latin.”

“And the Fey writing?” Asked Dolph mildly.

“Protection rituals for what unleashed they who did this.” Was Romanova’s answer. (There is more.) She sent to me. (Tell you later.)
The whole Fey thing annoyed Larry. “Well, crap. Are we supposed to question Fey now? How the hell do we do that?”

I glanced around at everybody before reluctantly volunteering. “I... have an idea about that.”

Zerbrowski and Dolph gave me a look as Dolph spoke. “Let’s discuss this in private.”

So that’s how the four of us, plus Zerbrowski and Dolph and my boss from the Federal Marshals, ended up in one of the warehouse’s conference rooms.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Chapter 33 took quite a bit more effort to write and polish that I thought it would. I’ve taken some content from Chap 59 of Cerulean Sins for this chapter and I’ve also taken content from Chapter 76 and 77 from Incubus Dreams. This is for flashback purposes and to better show the reality of Anita Blake (and maybe convince you to go read the actual books). And a bit of a comparison of writing styles to see if I’m writing Anita in character.

Part 34a: Decisions… decisions

Thankfully it takes less time to get out of the chem/bio bodysuit then it takes to put one on, although Tammy and Larry did take more care then I did. One side affect of having the Lycanthropy virus is that you really can’t catch most other diseases due to the physiological changes caused by the virus... and neither can vampires. Agent Romanova likewise was rather casual, but I think that might have been because she might have never done this before?

I got a mental communication from Jean-Claude as I was doing this.

(Ma Petite, Asher would like to discuss tonight’s healing ritual with Illyana.)

Odd. (Okay by me.)

And the reason for the odd request was shown. (There is a problem, she refuses to answer any of his requests.)

(I haven’t had any issues. Why would she not…) I recalled what I had told her yesterday. (Ahh…)

(Yes Ma Petite, the social rules you laid down. Rules that she appears to be most diligently obeying.)

I repeated that little rule. (Don’t talk to my guys without my presence.)
(Oui, mon ami. Précisément)

(And Asher is pissed…?)

(Again oui. Asher is not want to take being ignored with calmness.)

Sigh… (Crap. I take it that he’s being a drama queen.)

(Oui… a most correct description. Although to use a vulgarity that you have employed, he is being a bit of a shit as you have said.)

(And he did not contact me directly because…?)

I could sense the irritated dismay from Jean-Claude. (He dislikes not being the center of all things.)

Of course. Asking me for assistance would just be acknowledging that I racked higher then him with her. (Okay… I’ll talk to her.) With that my connection to Jean-Claude closed and I sent a thought to her.

(Jean-Claude says you won’t talk to Asher.)

A neutral feeling thought from her. (Per your direction and desire.)

(It’s okay to speak to Asher about tonight… um… this time.)

A hint of a mental grin from her, which irritated me as she sent (Okay.)

My thought of (Don’t get any ideas.) Generated the feeling of confusion from her.
(About what?)

(Talking to my guys without me.)

(Okay… it’s not really the guys I want to talk to.)

Ooops… forgot that she’s more focused on me then on the guys. I’m… really used to the reverse, meaning other women being interested in my guys.

Once done changing, and after a quick restroom break, oh the joy of bladder relief, we reconvened in a small warehouse conference room that had been taken over by the police. Present was Larry, Tammy, Agent Romanova, Zerbrowski, Dolph, Marshal Faulk (the local head of the Federal Marshals and incidentally Larry’s and my boss), and me.

Marshal Faulk, was direct and to the point, as he asked the two of us. “Is this a mystical killing? Meaning was magic involved in the killing, not just who was killed.”

Larry and I gave each other a look, then we both glanced at Tammy and at Agent Romanova respectively. Seeing no arguments, we both answered at same time.

“Yes.”

A nod from Marshal Faulk at us. “Judge Clark is on his way. Based upon the severity of the crime scene I’m going to request an expedited, open Warrant of Execution, covering any and all involved in this mess.”

Zerbrowski and Dolph greeted this statement with nods of agreement and started bringing out some paperwork for the two of them, and Marshal Faulk, to fill out and sign so they could present it to the incoming judge.

Faulk turned to Larry and I. “I’m calling for additional Marshal support. Any suggestions?”

Yep, and that’s how Edward, I mean Marshal Ted Foster, got the call to come to St. Louis to play. And by play I mean Edwards use of the word. He’d be here in the morning.
So… just what is a Warrant of Execution? Warrants of Execution used to be local to just one state, meaning I couldn’t legally execute somebody in another state unless the state chose to recognize the court order. That got replaced with a Federal law after a Senator’s daughter got munched by a vampire. The local Washington D.C. vampire community promptly killed the perp, and literally delivered his head in a basket, but that one act really broke loose the Federal legislation involving warrants of execution. Hence vampire executioners like me got the crackerjack prize of being grandfathered into becoming Federal Marshals, Preternatural Branch, so long as we followed the rules. So, state lines are no longer an issue as Federal law trumps state law. Heck, at one point before I was a Marshal, back when I was simply a registered Vampire executioner, it was illegal for me to even have my vampire slaying kit in my car unless I had a signed Court Order of Execution with me, as in, on my person.

How times have changed. These days almost all Warrants of Execution are for a specific crime, and most explicitly name the person or persons to be executed. However, there is lots of legal wiggle room for the executioner as the order is always for the perps who did the crime, so if the executioner determines that another individual or group is responsible then the axe as it were can fall in another direction. Now there is an administrative review afterwards, but in most cases, and in mine every time, if there is reasonable doubt or sufficient cause, then the executioner is in the clear. The worse that can be done is that I can be suspended and/or have my badge taken away. How barbaric some say, and I tend to agree, which surprises most die hard liberals who tend to think I’m just a raving killer.

It used to be that only weres and vampires fell under Warrants of Execution without a trial. Witches and other magic users got a trial first. But there’s now an additional clause to the law, all thanks to a sorcerer summoned demons to kill his jury. So, accused of hostile magic gets you a trial. Mass murder with obvious magic usage can get a Warrant of Execution for whomever did the deed, even if the perps are not specifically known (which makes properly carrying out the Warrant… to be challenging, let’s say.) Using magic in self defense is still an evolving bit of legal defense; I’m proud to say that was partly my doing. Used to be there was no such thing. Unless you’re a Federal Marshal, that is. I really love that little job perk as being a Federal Marshal is a 24/7 kind of thing.

Dead people with vampire bites? Warrant of Execution for the unknown but possible identifiable perp (dental scans vs. bite marks, kids!) People torn apart by what looks like a were attack? Warrant of Execution for unknown put possible identifiable perp, let’s hear it for genetics! Usually it takes more then four dead bodies before they authorize an Warrant of Execution for an unnamed person or persons; thank God for civil liberties. And no, I’m not being sarcastic; the kind of authority that a Warrant grants a Marshal freaks me out, but… I understand exactly why these it’s necessary.

I’m a member of the Federal Marshals, Preternatural Branch, meaning I’m a killer, a legalized assassin. All Marshals of the Preternatural Branch are. Sometimes that killing is in active pursuit of a perp with an active order of execution…
I'd deputized Jamil and Jason. They stayed out of sight, but warned me that he'd smell them sooner or later. I'd already flashed my badge at mall security. I'd made the decision that we wouldn't call the police, and we wouldn't try to evacuate. I had a court order of execution. I didn't have to give him a warning. I didn't have to do anything but kill him.

It was mid-afternoon, so the food court wasn't too busy. That was good. There was a group of teenagers at the table nearest Van Anders. Why weren't they in school? At the table next-closest to him was a mother with a baby in a stroller and two toddlers. Two toddlers, neither of them in baby seats, but running free, while she tried to help the baby eat soft-serve yogurt.

Van Anders was still more than fifteen feet from the rampaging toddlers. The teenagers were frightfully close, but I couldn't figure out how to get them to move. I was working up my nerve to wind my way through the daytime moms and kids, when the teenagers got up, left their trash on the table, and walked away.

Van Anders was as isolated as I was going to get him here in the mall. I wasn't willing to let him escape again. He was too dangerous. I made the decision in that moment that I would endanger all these nice people. That the mother with her yogurt-smeared baby, and the two screaming toddlers were going to have to take their chances. I was fairly certain I could control the situation well enough to keep them out of it, but I wasn't completely certain. All I knew for sure was that I was going to take him, now. I wasn't going to wait.

I had my gun at my side, safety off, round-chambered long before I got to the table with the mother and her children. I had my federal marshal badge hanging out over the pocket of the large T-shirt, just in case some brave civilian decided to try and save Van Anders.

I had the gun up and pointed as I passed the woman's table. I think it was her soft gasp that made him turn. He saw the badge, and he smiled, taking another bite of his sandwich. He talked with his mouth full. "Are you going to warn me not to move, tell me to freeze?" He sounded Dutch.

"No," I said, and I shot him.

The bullet spun him out of his chair, and I fired again before he'd hit the ground. The first one had
been rushed; not lethal, but the second one was a solid body shot.

I fired into his body twice more before I got close enough to watch his mouth open and shut. Blood blossomed from his lips, and turned his blue shirt purple.

I circled wide, so I could get a clear head shot. He lay on his back and bled, and managed to cough blood, and clear his throat enough to say, "Police have to give warning. Can’t just shoot."

I let out all the breath in my body, and sighted on his forehead just above the eyes. "I'm not the police, Van Anders, I'm the executioner."

His eyes widened, and he said, "No."

I pulled the trigger and watched most of his face explode into an unrecognizable mess. His eyes had been bluer than in the photos.

…

…

END REFLECTION1

…and some times it’s a situation where I have an order, but anybody associated with those named in the Order of Execution can also get taken down. Which can so suck as senior vampires can force junior or newbie vampires to do exactly what they want. But wait, you say, it’s not their fault. Yep… Mox Nix. Completely sucks.

Sucks for them.

Sucks for me.

But… it would suck even worse for everybody if those like me didn’t do their job.

And even worse when folks don’t follow our instructions. Vampire and Were situations are not your standard SWAT situation. It took a while for experience to trickle down into formal procedures for local law enforcement. Rules that Marshals already knew. Why you ask? Answer is simple, because the Marshals that don’t are all dead.
The holy objects had blazed to life, so bright, white and blue like captive stars. They were ruining everyone's night vision. Made it hard to shoot. My cross was safely tucked away, for just that reason. By the thin flashlight beams and the incandescent flare of holy fire I saw what there was to see.

If I'd been there from the beginning, my mind would have been slow and taking it all in with that artificial sense that you have more time to do things, decide things, than you actually do. But sometimes when you step into the middle of it, you see things in strobe effect, an image here, there, but never the large picture, as if to see it all at once would overwhelm you. Hudson yelling, MP5 to his shoulder. Bodies on the ground between him and the big bed. A glimpse of pale, naked flesh on the bed--female. Two other vampires riding two of the men. One rode him to the floor, so he had to be lost to sight from Hudson and Killian's position. The other man was trapped against the wall, still firing his gun into the chest of the vamp, while the body bucked and wouldn't die. The vamp was pressed tight to the white glow of something that looked like a luminous rosary.

Mendez with his rifle, trying to find a shot in the mess. Stepping around giving his back to the bed, so he could pin the gun barrel against the back of the vamp's head. The vamp never lifted from Jung's neck. The gunshot, like all the others, was loud, but not nearly as loud as it could have been.

It was wrong, all wrong. No vamp, except the most powerful, could stand up to holy objects like this. Only revenants, mindless newbies would feed while you pushed a gun to their head and blew their brains out. You can't be ancient and a newbie, which meant, we were missing someone, someone that was standing right fucking here.

I dropped my shields, and I looked not toward the fighting, but away from it. Either he was better than I was, and he was invisible, which meant he was farther into the room, or he was hiding somewhere that the team hadn't gotten to yet, or both.

I found the energy of him in the far corner in plain sight. Even knowing he was there, I couldn't see him. Which meant either I was wrong, or he was good enough that he could stand wrapped in shadows and darkness and be invisible. The only other vamp I'd ever known that was that good had never been human. I think I could have stripped him of it using my necromancy, or Jean-Claude's marks, but I had the Mossberg in my hands. Why waste magic, when you've got technology?
I tightened my brace of the butt against my shoulder, sighted down the barrel, and pulled the trigger. The shot didn't kill him, but it brought him stumbling away from the wall. Suddenly everyone could see him. His hands were holding his stomach where I'd shot him. He looked surprised. Tall bastard, I'd been aiming for his chest.

I hit him again, and there was an echo, two echoes. His body slammed back against the wall. I yelled into the mike, "I want to see the wall through his chest."

No one argued. Derry had moved over to help Mendez. I was betting that Hudson had sent him, while I was concentrating on vampire stuff. Hudson, Killian, and I shot the master vampire, until there was a pale smear of wall through his chest. He slid down the wall like a broken puppet, painting the wall dark with blood. Hudson and Killian stopped firing, but I didn't. I put a shot into the head, and had a second shot in before they joined me, but they did join me. With three of us, it didn't take long to explode most of his head like a melon thrown against a wall. When most of his head was gone from his shoulders, I lowered my gun enough to look around and see how everyone else was doing.

Now that the master was dead, the newbie vamps were cringing away from the holy objects, just like they're supposed to. Well, the one vamp that was still alive cringed. She pressed her bloody face against the corner behind the bed, her small hands held out as if to ward it off. At first it looked like she was wearing red gloves, then the lights shone in the blood, and you knew it wasn't opera-length gloves, it was blood all the way to her elbows. Even knowing that, even having Melbourne motionless on the floor in front of her, still Mendez didn't shoot her. Jung was leaning against the wall, like he'd fall down if he didn't concentrate. His neck was torn up, but the blood wasn't gushing out. She'd missed the jugular. Let's hear it for inexperience.

I said, "Shoot her."

The vampire made mewling sounds, like a frightened child. Her voice came high and piteous, "Please, please, don't hurt me, don't hurt me. He made me. He made me."

"Shoot her, Mendez," I said into the mike.

"She's begging for her life," he said, and his voice didn't sound good.

"Shit," I said and started across the room. Something grabbed my ankle. Reflex pointed the shotgun downward. One of the "dead" vampires hissed up at me, with a hole in its forehead, but it still had my ankle, and it was still going to bite me. From less than two feet away, the sawed-off would have been better, but there was no time. I emptied my gun into its head and back, until it let
go of me and blood and other things leaked out of the body. "Hudson, dead is at least half their brains spilled, and daylight through their chests."

He didn't argue, just stepped up close to the other vamp and started pegging away at it. I guess making invisible vampires visible had earned me some credits with the sergeant.

I peeled shotgun shells out of the stock holder and fed them into the gun, as I walked toward Mendez and the vampire. She was still crying, still begging. "They made us do it, they made us do it."

The woman on the bed was naked, and her eyes had started to glaze. Shit. But the room had to be secured before we could see to the victim. Secured in my line of work meant something different than for most officers of the law. Secured meant that everything in the room that wasn't on my side was dead.

Killian was moving up by the bed to check on our victim. I hoped he could help her, because it seemed worse to lose people who were trying to save someone that didn't get saved. Jung was trying to hold pressure on his own neck wound. Melbourne's body lay on its side, one hand outstretched toward the cringing vampire. Melbourne wasn't moving, but the vampire still was: That seemed wrong to me. But I knew just how to fix it.

I had the shotgun reloaded, but I let it swing down at my side. At this range the sawed-off was quicker, no wasted ammo.

Mendez had glanced away from the vamp to me, then farther back to his sergeant. "I can't shoot someone who's begging for her life."

"It's okay, Mendez, I can."

"No," he said, and looked at me, his eyes showed too much white. "No."

"Step back, Mendez," Hudson said.

"Sir..."
"Step back and let Marshal Blake do her job."

"Sir... it's not right."

"Are you refusing a direct order, Mendez?"

"No, sir, but--"

"Then step back, and let the marshal do her job."

Mendez still hesitated.

"Now, Mendez!"

He moved back, but I didn't trust him at my back. He wasn't bespelled, she hadn't tricked him with her eyes. It was much simpler than that. Police are trained to save lives, not take them. If she'd attacked him, Mendez would have fired. If she'd attacked someone else, he'd have fired. If she'd looked like a raving monster, he'd have fired. But she didn't look like a monster as she cringed in the corner, hands as small as my own held up trying to stop what was coming. Her body pressed into the corner, like a child's last refuge before the beating begins, when you run out of places to hide and you are literally cornered, and there's nothing you can do. No word, no action, no thing that will stop it.

"Go stand by your sergeant," I said.

He stared at me, and his breathing was way too fast.

"Mendez," Hudson said, "I want you here, now."

Mendez obeyed that voice, as he'd been trained to, but he kept glancing back at me and the vampire in the corner.

She glanced past her arm, and because I didn't have a holy item in sight, she was able to give me
her eyes. They were pale in the uncertain light, pale and frightened. "Please," she said, "please don't hurt me. He made us do such terrible things. I didn't want to, but the blood, I had to have it." She raised her delicate oval face to me. "I had to have it." The lower half of her face was a crimson mask.

I nodded and braced the shotgun in my arms, using my hip and arm instead of my shoulder for the brace point. "I know," I said.

"Don't," she said, and held out her hands.

I fired into her face from less than two feet away. Her face vanished in a spray of blood and thicker things. Her body sat up very straight for long enough that I pulled the trigger into the middle of her chest. She was tiny, not much meat on her, I got daylight with just one shot.

Mendez's voice came over the mike, "We're supposed to be the good guys."

"Shut up, Mendez," Jung said in a voice that was choked and thicker than it should have been.

…

…

"How could you look her in the eyes and do that?"

I turned and found Mendez by me. He'd taken off his mask and helmet, though I was betting that was against the rules until we left the building. I covered my mike with my hand, because no one should learn about someone's death by accident. "She tore Melbourne's throat out."

"She said the other vampire made her do it, is that true?"

"Maybe," I said.

"Then how could you just shoot her?"

"Because she was guilty."
“And who died and made you judge, jury, and ex--” He stopped in mid-sentence.


... 

... 

A lot of the regular cops felt that the special branch Federal Marshals were just killers, which was correct. Some thought we were just legal serial killers, which was frustrating but not entirely false based upon some of the Marshals I knew of and I’m not talking Edward.

Those… recollections had been… vivid I sent Illyana a telepathic question. (Did… you just read my mind?)

(Yes… sorry… your thoughts about Orders of Execution were quite loud, likewise your reminiscing about kills.)

Irritation from me. (I’d appreciate you asking next time.)

She did not sound very contrite. (I’ll try.)

(Try?)

(Try. It… doesn’t quite work like that. Sometimes a… companion’s emotional or mental state can trigger recalls I guess.)

I liked that she wasn’t using the word familiars any more. (Guess?)

(Crap… you know more about this then I do. Again, I’ll try.) A tone of respect in her thoughts. (The first was a good kill by the way. The second… well… I....)
(Understand?)

(Um… no actually.)

(No?)

(No.)

(No, I don’t… see the problem with shooting her.)

Ohhhh. That… was a reminder that she wasn’t… Human. At least mentally. Really need to remember that regardless of the yummy packaging.

Ah… Yummy? Ah crap. I use yummy to describe her. So ignoring that for now.

And her answer really bothered me as that sense of puzzlement was… disturbing.

Dolph got done signing the paper work and asked a question. “So Anita, what about the Fey?”

Oh-boy. Time to fess up. I reluctantly confessed that… “There are some Fey in St. Louis and… I kind of know how to contact them.”

The details were complicated. Which was how Tammy, Agent Romanova, and I ended up driving around St. Louis in Tammy’s Toyota Camry in the late afternoon.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

: One aspect of Anita, in the official writings, is all kinds of internal and external dialog about her relationships. Having been very emotionally scarred by her ex-fiancé and his family, not to mention the whole trauma of her mothers death and dealing with her father’s new wife and resultant siblings (who were all so blonde… so blonde); all combined with her nescient necromantic powers (which did not cause happy family times). I do find it interesting that the Author has never really explored Anita’s family dynamics except in reflections, yet perspective must always be kept in mind, meaning how we remember things happening, and the actions of others, are not always how others remember things.

And no, I’m not ‘going anywhere’ with the above thoughts, just… noshing as it were upon the nuances of character.

Part 35a: Driving in the hood part 1… (a bit later)

The radio was now softly playing Crossroads by Don McLean. Nice song, it didn’t really mean that much to me, I’ll confess that it did speak to more then a few things in my past but I’m quite happy now. However, I could feel Illyana’s irritation at the song.

...
...

But I'm all tied up on the inside,

No one knows quite what I've got;

And I know that on the outside

What I used to be, I'm not... anymore.

You know I've heard about people like me,

But I never made the connection.

They walk one road to set them free

And find they've gone the wrong direction.

But there's no need for turning back

'Cause all roads lead to where I stand.
And I believe I'll walk them all

No matter what I may have planned…

Can you remember who I was? Can you still feel it?

Can you find my pain? Can you heal it?

…

…

So… Tammy pissed at Agent Romanova. Agent Romanova pissed at Tammy. Leaving me the (supposed) adult in the car, a situation that is so not my norm as I’m usually the one taking pokes at people; combined with an inability to intervene very much as I was busy.

So, how the hell did this happen?

BEGIN ANITA REFLECTION1 (Back in the meeting room)

I explained that I could find the Fey, assuming that they cooperated, but I couldn’t actually explain how. I could navigate there, but… I didn’t know where there was.

Clear?

No?

Tough.

Those were the rules, and not my rules I’d add.

Oh, and no guys as well.

Why?

Rules again and no, I don’t know why, but I suspected my vampire and were significant others were the reason (they are guys after all); but I didn’t explain the full nuances of that thought as most of my guys are not known to the people here; no reason to give folks even more reasons to label me a slut. So that’s why Larry got left behind, which the police really wanted anyway as they had a great deal of concern about the dead. He got to dress up with SWAT and wait to see if the dead got all feisty when the sun went down, which not of us magical types expected to happen but I
understood their apprehension (and no, nothing did happen so… kudos to us magical types for being right).

So… I was paired with Tammy, and Agent Romanova got to go along because she was kind of Tammy’s partner, plus I think Dolph was annoyed at both Tammy and Romanova and the punishment was obviously to stick them together, unfortunately with me (sigh…). I rather felt that it was total malarkey

Yeah! I used malarkey!

Tammy, of course, was annoyed that Romanova was going with us and asked for a few private words with Dolph. Meaning we chilled for a few more minutes while Dolph and Tammy spoke outside the room. Zerbrowski took the opportunity to chat up Agent Romanova, my boss joined in as well as the three of them conversed while Larry just listened (my boss had not met her before).

Hmmmm, my back was to the wall of the connecting corridor and I could distinctly hear Dolph state, rather loudly, in answer to an unheard question from Tammy, about a ten thousand round purchase order for silver grade ammo having been gifted to the department, handgun and shotgun. Must have been one of Illyana’s grants that so gave her access. I’m very pleased that the Feds did not skimp on the high end ammo, but local police spending does not usually budget for silver ammo (lots of cops bought a few rounds of it on their own dime). But heck, empty a few magazines and the price really start to add up. Not to mention that you want to shoot what is currently loaded, seconds count and switching ammo is a good way to get dead so… packing a default load of silver means that silver gets fired even when it’s not needed. And yes I have silver handgun ammo, plus shotgun, and rifle; solid shot, frangible, and hollow points, as well as copper jacketed lead rounds; if I think weres or vampires are involved then heck yeah my default load is silver. But why do I have lead you might ask? Humans and animals for one, plus there are various magical creatures that just don’t care about silver, demons for one, like… like a certain redhead at the other side of the room.

That’s when I realized I was looking at her red hair again. Crud, the bio/chem gear has covered it up, but now it was so just… there. I really needed somebody to talk to about this. So I pretended to fiddle with my phone as I sent to Jean-Claude. (Jean-Claude… are you there?)

(Yes Ma Petite?)

I got straight to the point. (She now has red hair.) Along with an image of her.

(A most interesting coloration, most flame like.) Was his observation. (But the choice of color is
not what troubles you my love, is it?)

(No… it’s why she changed it. Last night I said be less blonde.)

Jean-Claude observed that… (Red is very much not blonde.)

(Yeah… no shit… What’s bugging me is why did she do it?)

(You have not asked…?)

(No. We’re in public and… I have… concerns that it might be a ploy to throw me off my game.)

A hint of concern from him. (Do you really think that Ma Petite?)

I nibbled my lower lip as I pretended to look at the cute cat video playing on my phone. (Not really… but. It bugs me.)

A gentle question from him. (Why?)

Answered with a sigh from me. (Because I like it.)

(And this is bad?)

(It shows she knows how to push my buttons.)

A sense of disagreement from him. (Does it?)

(How would it not?)
(Did you not say to be less blonde my love?)

(Yeah... but... that was... I was trying to verbalize... issues.)

(And now you fear she's manipulating you?)

(Yeah... kind of. Verbalizing it sounds... silly.)

(And if she had chosen brunette or black?)

A flash of irritation. (That... would have pissed me off.)

(Why?) Rather rhetorical from him as I'm sure he knew the answer.

(Because... it would make me think she was trying to replace me.)

(Yet was to not be blonde your... heartfelt desire Ma Petite?)

(I know, I know. I just didn't... think she'd actually do something.)

(Because...)

(She’s... for her to change... implies... I'm not sure.)

(Do not your men grow their hair long Ma Petite as you do prefer long hair on your men. Even us vampires lacking long hair expend energy to grow the length as it pleases you.)

Yeah... Jean-Claude had pointed that out to me quite some time ago when I had noticed that his hair was getting longer. That was back when he and Richard were competing to woo me. And yes... all my guys have long, longish, or if you’re Nathanael, crazy long hair. Heck, with Nathanial I love to wrap around myself in his hair when I’m in bed after...
Sigh… (Yeah.)

(What can I say Ma Petite, pleasing you ranks high on our priorities. With the connections now shared between us and her, and the affects upon her that she has shown so far, I do not find it surprising that she might wish you to look upon her and be pleased rather then annoyed at what you behold.)

(Stop making sense, you’re making it sound so rational.)

Jean-Clause switched tacks. (Explainable yes, but rational? I ask you… what would a teenager think?)

(She’d be really pleased with herself… or…) I thought upon a boy I once knew in high school.

(Or?)

(She’d be massively second guessing herself about what she’s done to her hair.)

(I am old Ma Petite and much that is present today I wish I could have experienced as a child, but this teenage angst is one I am gratefully to have missed.)

I suppressed a laugh. (Please… the image of her being an angsty teenager is one I don’t need.)

(We must think upon such things Ma Petite, do not relationship difficulties cause conflict? Adults frequently misjudge, and do not the young, lacking experience and wisdom of experience, do worse?)

Conflicts? We had certainly had them. (Yeah…) I reflected upon more then a few fights my guys had had with each other. And… I with them.

END ANITA REFLECTION1 (Back in the meeting room)
Crap, it suddenly occurred to me, as amusing as it was at hearing Tammy being annoyed, guess I was having some Schadenfreude at Tammy’s expense, but Tammy had no idea just what was sitting in the back of her car. A something that was Vampire Council grade powerful. A something that really was a demon, dragoon, the true Master of Egypt, Hell Lord, and… crap, likely a few other things as well. And all things aren’t known for putting up with a bitchy detective.

(Crap, please don’t kill her.)

I could feel an irritated sigh on the link. (Why do people always assume I’m going to kill somebody just because they annoy me?)

(Ahhh, because that tends to be the norm here?)

(Grrrrrr. I’m not going to kill her, plus you’d be annoyed if I did as that would upset Marshal Kirkland which would then upset you.)

(Good… um… by people do you mean here or is that a common behavioral assumption for you?)

No response back, but I got the impression that it was not just us who reacted that way.

BEGIN ANITA REFLECTION2 (Back in the meeting room)

That’s when Tammy and Dolph came back in the room, with Tammy looking both annoyed and resigned. A final thought from Jean-Claude as I stood up and put my phone away.

(Remember Ma Petite, you are the femme plus âgéée.)

(Yeah, yeah, yeah, it’s not like I’m her mother…) His comment did trigger a reflection about my maternal grandmother, she’d taught me how to (mostly) control my power when it had manifested. Mom had not had abilities like mine, but Nanna had; though they were much weaker. She was the
reason that Dad had really emphasized raising me Christian rather then as a Vaudun (i.e. Voodoo). Hmmm… I thought again upon last night and the conversations I had had with her.

(I’ll work on it.) I sent, with that we closed the connection.

Finally, times, and daylights, a wasting. Larry tossed his keys to Tammy (he had driven Tammy’s car here) and the four of us decamped as Larry went down with us to get his vampire slaying kit from the car (a red Toyota Camry).

I passed on a thought to Illyana as we left the building. (Tammy appears to be in one of her bitchy moods, with you as the focus. I’ll be… busy as we try to get to the Fey and won’t really be able to engage with her.)

(Not an issue, she’s been snipping at me ever since I met her, although rather extra today.)

After a quick hug between Tammy and Larry, Larry went back inside with his weapons bag. Illyana… Agent Romanova was in the back seat, I was riding shotgun, and Tammy was driving. She turned the key and… the radio blasted forth, apparently Larry had been rocking a bit as he drove here and had forgotten to turn down the volume. Regretfully, the radio station was playing Meredith Brooks’ song Bitch and we got an earful of the chorus before Tammy turned it down (the sound blast had startled her and it had taken a few seconds get to the volume knob). Heck it had startled all of us.

...

I’m a bitch, I’m a lover
I’m a child, I’m a mother
I’m a sinner, I’m a saint
I do not feel ashamed
I’m your hell, I’m your dream
I’m nothing in between
...

“Sorry…” Mumbled Tammy as she turned it way down. “Larry likes to play it loud when he’s alone.”
Just shrug from Agent Romanova that communicated annoyance. Which earned her frown from Tammy before Tammy turned to me. “So… where do we go?”

My answer was correct, but described the problem. “I really don’t know, drive in the direction of downtown, but avoid the highway.”

Tammy put the car in gear. “Okay… don’t tell me.”

“It’s not like that detective Reynolds.” Was my formal reply. If I’d been just with her then I’d have used her first name, but I wouldn’t have done that with another unknown officer in the car, and of course Tammy just jumps to a conclusion that puts me in a negative light. “I don’t know where we’re going. But I do know how to get there… kind of.”

A sideways glance from Tammy as we exit the parking lot. “Kind of…?”

I explained as best as I could. “I can tell when to turn left or right or to stop, but… other then that I don’t know. And the reason I know is because the Fey gave it to me as a gift when I first tried to meet with them.”

Tammy had a touch of disbelief in her voice. “And you didn’t take note of where you ended up?”

Part of me so wanted to say yes Tammy, I didn’t because I’m stupid and such an obvious idea is beyond a dumb slut like me, but I instead went with the adult response. “I tried and no… I wasn’t able to. If they decided to meet us then you’ll understand. If not then we’ll never find the place. And once found we’ll have no idea where we are.”

“Ohay…” Was Tammy’s reply.

Gads, even when I play nice there is just tension between the two of us, not that I like Tammy very much, but she is married to Larry so… I endure. “Just go straight for now.” I closed my eyes and concentrated upon the chant I had been given when I had first set out to meet the Fey; which was part of a kidnapping case I’d been involved with.

Tammy suddenly declared her irritation at something Romanova was doing. “Are you eating that
bagel?"

A muffled “Da?” Then a swallow. “Is problem?”

Apparently Agent Romanova had retrieved what was left of her bagel from her oversized bag.

Tammy followed up on her complaint. “After what we’ve just got done dealing with?”

“A m hungry.”

“That’s... gross.”

A grumbled reply. “Так говорит сука.”

“What? I don’t speak Russian.”

“I said... why problem?”

I don’t know what she’d said in Russian, but I’m rather certain it was not that.

“We just got done spending hours moving heaps of bodies, and don’t get me started about all the blood and other ick.”

Some more chewing sounds, then. “Again yes…”

“I just can’t believe your eating after that.”

More chewing sounds, then. “Finished am I.” Followed by what I think was some tea being drunk from her thermos.
Tammy was not impressed. “Unbelievable.”

I made a request. “Detective Reynolds could you please slightly turn up the volume and hit the scan button on the radio. It helps, and no I don’t know why. Suffice it to say the Fey like music.” And maybe it would get Tammy to tone it down a bit.

She did as I asked (wow, that was a first…) Now it Hazy Shade of Winter by the Bangles was playing.

*Time, time, time*
*See what’s become of me*
*While I looked around*
*For my possibilities*
*I was so hard to please*

*Look around*
*Leaves are brown*
*And the sky*
*Is a Hazy Shade of Winter*

...  
...

That’s when Agent Romanova commented. “Beguilement maze.”

My eyes were closed, but my hearing was just fine as Tammy replied. “Come again?”

“Beguilement maze. Fey hide love to. Concealed they are so navigate a maze we do to get to them.”

Agreement in Tammy’s voice. “I… agree. I’ve heard of such things. Nice to see you’re better at magic then processing a crime scene, and hopefully dyeing hair. It would be a shame if it ran and faded. Hope you didn’t pick a cheap band.”
I find Tammy’s bitch side to manifest way too often around me, and her tendency to disregard my statements if it doesn’t match her perceptions (I can’t prove it, but I’m convinced she was the source of the rumor that I had had an abortion back when she first got pregnant, so the catty commend about hair dye was so on the mark coming from her.) I think Tammy was one of those women who work fine with men, but just can’t work well with other women. But… Tammy was right in that Illyana had shown that she had shown no real knowledge of police procedures in the work we had just done.

Agent Romanova gave a resigned sigh. “First Bagel… now hair? Odd you complain now, before you wanted how I did it.”

“Not any more, but… why did you do it? Did you get too drunk to notice what you were doing?”

“Drunk yes… but… wanted to…”

“To what?”

She sounded hesitant. “Maybe just want to… attempt different, make change. Be… other then am. Is that wrong?”

“You are what you are, changing your hair won’t change that. Won’t change just how little a cop you really are.”

And the hesitancy vanished. “Correct you must be detective. Focus magic is, as said before. But you much more experienced, and older then I.”

“Not that much older, but how odd that you know so little… even though all of the Marshals I’ve worked with all know such procedures, some better the others.”

“Turn left…” I said. Great… I guess no stopping Tammy getting her bitch on.

You could almost hear the shrug from Romanova. “Not job. Magic and… other things job are.”
“Like killing?” And Tammy showed some claws.

A bit of a sneer in Romanova’s voice. “Da... as you say. Detective Reynolds, remind me again what husband does?”

A hiss of anger from Tammy. “Leave my husband out of this.”

“Why? In part do what he does, yet shit I get from you. What reason am so blessed?”

Tammy got right to the point. “Because of how you feel. Evil, cruel, and yes I’ll say it, only practitioners of black magic feel like you do. Crap, you feel almost like…”

“Like what detective Reynolds?”

“Kind of like a... demon.”

A pause, then Romanova’s comment was slightly confusing at first, sounded sarcastic. “Good thing arson this is not.”

“What?”

“Smoke. Oh dear... smell smoky you do. Arsonist you must be.”

Tammy was not buying. “That makes no sense.”

Romanova clarified. “Escape from burning building and see what you smell like.”

“Turn right.” Unlike Tammy I was focused on what we were trying to do. “Detective Reynolds, please remember on why we are here.”

“I am.” Bitched Tammy. “The only reason she’s here is that Russia bought her way onto the
squad. Which leaves me, and others, asking why? Why is she really here? Why did she show up just days before that horror at the warehouse was found. What’s the real reason you’re here Agent Romanova? And just what were you really doing the night before last. Did you by chance visit a certain warehouse? Maybe that’s why you didn’t find it so horrifying and gross.”

I was growing annoyed. “Turn left.”

The sarcasm just dripped off of Illyana’s voice. “Superior detective skills have trapped me detective Reynolds. I... how you say to move without moving... teleport, da, that is the word. I teleported from apartment, met with mysterious people and due to magic going wrong, engaged in massive orgy with... one, two, three...”

I think she was counting on her fingers, like she couldn’t quite remember. “four... Seven, it was seven others. Not voluntary by me, or them, but really good sex none the less, as you say, rocked my world. Causing me to make them familiars, seven in all, as demonic hell lord am I visiting this dimension. Then teleported back to my apartment, called in sick because... well... night rough. Just lazed about recovering, apart from leaving once, get sandwich at the Quizxons down block, good sandwich, should have such in Russia. Oh, I am also reason the great pyramid in Egypt blew up, likewise secretly the ruler of the vampire and were of Egypt.”

Tammy was not pleased. “Bitch...”

Illyana replied back in kind. I think she said witch, but the accent made it sound like “Vitch.”

Wow, complete truth I think, don’t know about the sandwich, and of course she’s not believed. “Left again.”

END ANITA REFLECTION2 (Back in the meeting room)

Part 35c: Driving in the hood part 3... (a bit later)

After some silence, and a few more driving directions from me, Tammy came up with a new complaint. “Would you drop the fake Russian accent. No ones buying it.”
“Russian I am.”

“Sure, but you sound like Natasha Fatale from Bullwinkle the moose. The only thing that could make this worse is if you started complaining about squirrel.”

Illyana dropped the over done accent, but there was still a touch of that eastern European accent. “Fine…” Then a question. “Squirrel?”

Tammy sounded triumphant. “I knew that accent was fake!”

We had arrived (thank God, both for because that meant I could get Tammy to shut up and because the Fey had apparently agreed to meet with us). I opened my eyes as I said. “And… Stop. Figuratively and literally. It’s a reference to a cartoon called Bullwinkle the moose and Rocky the squirrel.”

We were… Somewhere. Everything was fuzzy outside of the car. The only thing that was clear was a plot of land with very green grass and a large dark wooden door in a stone wall on the other side of the plot of land.

“Where the heck are we?” Asked Tammy as she and Agent Romanova looked around.

“Somewhere in the city, no idea where.” Was my answer. “A place where the Fey congregate. I learned about it from a case a few years back.”

And now Tammy understood what I’d tried to explain. “But we were just… just… Crap, where were we?. So this is what you meant.”

Having Tammy and Agent Romanova in the same space was just not working. Yeah I get that Tammy was reacting to the bad vibs from Illyana, after all I had rather reacted badly myself the first time I’d met her, but this behavior was extreme even for Tammy. “Agent Romanova, do you mind waiting here while detective Reynolds and I attempt to speak to the Fey?”

A shrug from her. “Is okay, perhaps is best. Not being around detective Reynolds would be nice. I will sit here, wherever here is… and wait.”
She pulled out a graphic novel of all things out of her bag, something called the Umbrella Academy, and got comfy.

Tammy shook her head in disbelief. “A comic book? Geeze, just how old are you?”


Tammy and I got out of the car after Tammy had first, reluctantly, given the keys to Agent Romanova.

Agent Romanova stated. “Be carful detective as to what you eat or drink. Fey are not to be trusted. Not knowing the consequences is not considered lying by the Fey.”

“No warning for Marshal Blake?”

“No, is she not… girlfriend of the Master of the City? Stupid the Fey are not.”

“Okay… thanks for the reminder.”

Romanova then asked a question of Tammy as we started to walk towards the gate.

“Oh, detective. A white witch you are, right?”

Tammy answered with a touch of suspicion. “Yes, a Christen witch.”

Such a simple question she asked. “So… how does one such as you know what a demon feels like?”

And Tammy didn’t have an answer as she opened her mouth, then… closed it. Hmmm, why… indeed was my sudden thought.
And that’s how I found myself walking across the grass with Tammy. We were about halfway to the door when I stopped as we were far enough away from the car as I asked.

“What the hell is wrong with you detective Reynolds?”

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