

Summary: We all want to know just why Anita is so powerful, don't we? This is the answer I came up with.

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Disclaimer: The wondrous Laurell K. Hamilton owns Anita, Jean- Claude, Asher, Damian and anyone else you might recognise. The plot I'll own up to, along with any characters you don't have the pleasure of knowing, such as Caspian and Morion. We all want to know just why Anita is so powerful, don't we? This is the answer I came up with.

1. [Chapter 1](#) by Jay

2. [Chapter 2](#) by Jay

3. [Chapter 3](#) by Jay

Chapter 1 by Jay

It had taken a week for us to persuade Asher back into our bed after Musette had left us. It had been mostly my doing, he did not believe Jean-Claude when he sought to speak for me. My comment about Asher being something Jean-Claude wouldn't compromise on hadn't particularly helped. In the end I had virtually tied him down and raped him, not something to be proud of. Well, I didn't tie him down, didn't need to. I'd stretched my tenuous control of the ardeur to its limits, and then infected him with it, deliberately. I hadn't even called Jean-Claude, or warned him of what I intended to do, just tore the clothes from Asher's body and forced myself on him. Afterwards we were both covered in blood, but he was hurt far more than I.

"Anita, what...why..." He couldn't bring himself to finish a question.

"I don't want you to leave, and I want you, yourself. Not because of the effects of you rolling my mind, nor from my link with Jean- Claude, but by myself, and for yourself. Would Jean-Claude ever have done this to you? Has your bite ever had this effect on your victims?"

"Non, and non. But you are like no other I have fed on. And you would not normally force yourself upon anyone. You do not even take Nathaniel, though he offers his bounty freely. Please, I will not speak of this to Jean-Claude, but I do not want you to take me to your bed from guilt, or pity." He wouldn't look me in the eye, scared of what I might do or say.

"Let me explain. I want you. Either sharing yourself with me and with Jean-Claude freely, or like this. It is the same to me. I will not allow you to leave. I will not cost Jean-Claude your presence, even if you will not grant him your touch." There was shocked comprehension in the eyes that finally met mine. He understood what I was capable of, at last. One reason I had been unable to shake Raina's munin was that in some ways her desires mirrored my own. I would never force anyone into anything that would be truly damaging, but I wasn't above rape. I used the ardeur to force Asher unwilling into my bed, but he had shared my bed before and wanted me, save that he wanted to know it was my desire for him, not that of Jean- Claude, nor that created by his bite. And now he knew that it was my desire in truth, for my Master of the City was strangely gentle when it came to those he loved, had always shielded Asher from his ardeur, and the obsession

our goldfinch's bite could create was never so vicious.

"Where and when do you want me then?"

"Waiting in Jean-Claude's bed, fully dressed for I wish to undress you myself, slowly, shortly before midnight tomorrow. I will bring him there."

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And I did. I ambushed Jean-Claude, telling him I had something special planned, and virtually dragging him back to his bedroom.

"Ma petite, what surprise can you possibly have for me in my...own... bedroom?" His laughing voice trailed off as he saw Asher lying on his back on his bed, his feet dangling off the side. The sheets tonight were blood red, and Asher wore a deep brown shirt trimmed with gold, black jeans and thigh high black leather boots. Jean- Claude turned to me. "How did you persuade him?" He had let me see the wonder he felt in his face and hear it in his voice.

"I fed the ardeur on him last night, as I feed it on you and Micah." It was truth, but not all the truth, I was learning how to lie without lying, a skill vampires mastered young, as they needed to, one I was too powerful to need, but had learned to spare my love's feelings. And Jean-Claude wanted this too much to taste the lie hiding behind the truth. His eyes, so full of need and desire, were for Asher, but he watched me also, as if waiting for the blow to fall, while I led him to the bed.

"You will not send us from your bed if we do this?"

"Not as long as I am with you both when you are together in this way." A little more convoluted and subtle than I would usually put it, but true - I didn't have to explicitly state that if Jean-Claude and Asher had sex and I wasn't there I'd dump them both. "Undress Asher for me, slowly. I want to watch as that beautiful body is revealed." I spoke truth, they both knew that I considered Asher's body beautiful, to me the scars were but another part of his beauty. As I had told Musette, if Asher is in the room and you are cataloguing the beautiful people he always makes the list. She protested that his beauty was marred by his scars, but I could not see that. Jean-Claude moved to obey, Asher lay quiet in his grasp, awaiting instructions and submitting passively to his attentions. I could see that they aroused him, and the sight aroused me, finally when Asher was unveiled in all his glory Jean-Claude knelt beside the bed, looking to me for instructions. He was being careful, he did not wish to risk losing this, losing Asher, or losing me over this.

I joined them, sitting on the bed and pulling Jean-Claude up to join me. I removed Jean-Claude's clothes myself, enjoying the chance to touch that beautiful pale body. Then I spoke.

"Undress me together, then Asher use your tongue on me while Jean- Claude tells me what he would wish to do with you." They exchanged a glance, somehow I knew they were deciding together what Jean-Claude would ask for, and I didn't mind. Then they moved to obey me, acting in concert and undressing me slowly. It wasn't until Asher had knelt, his head between my thighs that my black-haired lover spoke.

"I want to feel Asher inside me, taking me as I take you." He had chosen to sit behind me, caressing my back, so he didn't have to meet my eyes.

"Very well. Get some oil, or something and tell me how to prepare you." He moved to obey and I twisted so I was leaning back on one elbow onto a pile of pillows. When Jean-Claude came back he handed me the bottle and lay on his side, facing away from me. There was a slight stiffness in the line of his body that said he wasn't actually too happy about this. He wanted to do it, I could tell that, but this act hadn't been pleasant for him for a long time, not since before Julianna died.

"Warm the oil in your hands, then coat your fingers with it." Jean- Claude's voice was quiet, intimate, and for once I obeyed without bitching about it. He waited five minutes, then gave me my next instructions. "Slide one finger into me, slowly. Then add another and use them to stretch me, I'll tell you if it hurts." I made sure to be slow and careful about it, one good thing about Jean- Claude's request was that I didn't think Asher was comfortable actually having intercourse with me after what I'd done to him, not yet anyway. But he didn't have a problem using his tongue on me, and he was very good at it. "You can add another finger now." Jean-Claude's voice was thick with pleasure, I must have been doing something right. I obeyed, and he actually started pushing himself backwards, trying to fuck himself on my fingers.

"Stay still." He froze, and let me work at him a little more. "Do I need to add another finger now, or are you stretched enough for comfort?"

"You had best add another finger ma petite. Asher is hardly small." I had to agree with him there, I'd been adding more oil every time I added another finger, and I knew the sheets would be ruined. When I thought he was as stretched as he would get I pulled back. Asher had already brought me twice with his tongue, I'd held still so as not to hurt Jean-Claude when that happened.

"Asher, enough. How do you want to do this?" I addressed the question to both of them, but only Asher answered, I think Jean- Claude considered it to be addressed only to Asher, that or he didn't want to scare Asher off.

"We should start off on our sides. I'll spoon Jean-Claude and enter him, then you can guide him into you." His voice was quiet, but it was a good idea. I nodded and we did as suggested. We did enjoy ourselves, and afterwards there was no need to fear that Asher would leave us.

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I spent most of my spare time over the next month considering the prospect of taking the fourth mark. In the end my decision came down to one thing - Belle Morte had given me the first mark and I wanted to be free of her. I knew that it would hurt Jean-Claude that I would not take the fourth mark to be closer to him, but only to protect myself from Belle Morte, but I hadn't been able to bring myself to offer him blood again. I would do that first, then I would bring up the fourth mark, if and only if I felt able to offer Jean- Claude blood in the future.

That night when I needed to feed the ardeur I went to him. I'd managed to learn a bit of how to feed from a distance, if I fed that way I could do that twice to replace one feeding by contact. I couldn't let Asher take blood from me, I wasn't willing to risk losing myself that way, but if it was just Jean-Claude I'd let him feed as part of sex.

"Jean-Claude, I want it to be just us tonight." Asher wasn't there, but I didn't want to risk the possibility that he'd be invited in later.

"If that is what you prefer ma petite." We enjoyed ourselves greatly, then once I had fed my ardeur I pulled Jean-Claude's face to my neck.

"Go ahead my love, feed. I have fed my ardeur, I am not intoxicated. I've been thinking about this for a month and I am certain I wish to do this."

"If you are certain ma petite." There was such fear and uncertainty in his voice. I hastened to reassure him.

"Yes, I am certain, so long as we do it in the midst of sex." And I ran my fingers down his back, trailing them through the blood from the wounds I had inflicted in his flesh, then bringing them to my mouth to suck clean. He was still inside me, hardening again and he began to move ever so slowly, until I was ready to scream from all the teasing. That's when he bit me, and I let him into

my mind. My blood healed the injuries I had done to his back and I rolled us so he was beneath me, so I could be in control. His fangs were buried in my throat, but I took his wrists and pinned them beneath our bodies, pressing him down into the mattress so he couldn't move. I could feel his shock through the marks when he realised that I was physically stronger than him. He wasn't the only one shocked; I couldn't understand why I was able to pin Jean-Claude down like this. I shared his strength through the marks, but that only meant that I was stronger than a human, it shouldn't have made me stronger than him. I could feel his fear, he was letting me feel his fear and I pulled away from him in a blur of speed. It tore my neck, leaving a messy bite, rather than the neat clean bite I'd have been left with if I'd let him release me by himself, but I was swiftly on the other side of the bed from him.

"What just happened ma petite?"

"I don't know. I just wanted to be on top, to have control. When anything preternatural happens in bed I feel more comfortable if I'm on top, it makes me feel safe, if that makes any sense. I didn't expect to be able to pin you down like that."

"I understand that you feel safer if you aren't pinned down, I feel the same way. That is why I was so scared when you trapped me like that. I don't object to you being on top, just...give me some warning before you pin me down."

"Would it help if we decided on a safe word? So that if either of us does something the other isn't comfortable with we can stop it." I knew that I could bear to let him feed again. It wasn't entirely pleasant for me, but it pleased him so much.

"Please." I could tell that Jean-Claude was relieved at my suggestion, he'd wanted to make it himself but had been scared of how I'd react to the suggestion that our activities were so far beyond conventional as to need one.

"By the way, at least for the first few times I want to be on top, or with you on your knees when I let you feed from me. Do you have any suggestions for a safe word?"

"You would let me feed again?"

"I was the one who scared you, you didn't do anything wrong. And I did enjoy being close to you in that way. About the safe word, what do you think of using 'Musette'?"

"Agreed. Would you care to try that again?"

"The feeding? I'd rather not, I'm not sure I can afford to lose any more blood."

"No, I meant where you pin me down. I do trust you, and you seemed to be enjoying yourself until I panicked." He'd begun to crawl towards me across the bed, and ended with his head in my lap. I could feel the effort it took for him to make such an offer and I stroked his hair to soothe him.

"No, not now. Perhaps later. This isn't what I intended tonight."

"What then did you intend?" He sat up reluctantly, he didn't want to be separated from my touch, but he was used to pain from me and was not willing to be so vulnerable while I told him what I had intended.

"To find out whether I was willing to let you feed on me during sex, and then perhaps to ask to take the fourth mark."

"You...want to take the fourth mark?" I'd floored him.

"Yes. I want to be with you forever. The fourth mark will allow that."

"Now?" There was hope and fear in his voice.

"If you want." I'd thought perhaps what I just did would have put him off further intimacy, and anything that might give me more powers for a while.

"Yes, I want it. I don't want to risk you changing your mind. But please, do not hate me afterwards. This is your choice, I would never have asked it of you."

"I won't hate you. I promise." I needed to reassure him, so I did. He pulled me on top of him again, and opened a wound in his chest. He'd always remember me as dominant to him in this moment. Somewhere that thought pleased me, that he acknowledged my superiority. I leant down to drink from him, and he spoke.

"Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh, the two shall be as one. One flesh, one blood, one soul." As with Alejandro something, some barrier inside me broke. But this time it was different, I lifted my head as I crouched above my lover to look around. Everything was different, and Asher and Damian were staring at us in shock.

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The two onlooking vampires gasped in shock when they met my eyes, and Jean-Claude was frozen in fear beneath me. I stood up, careful not to scare him more, we were on the floor in a large white room, near a bed made up with white sheets. I grabbed one to cover my body with and tossed another to Jean-Claude, in the hope that it would calm him down.

"What's wrong? Why were you shocked by my eyes?" I spoke while I was wrapping the sheet around my body, I knew that the vampires weren't bothered by my nudity, for Damian it was as close as he was likely to get to being permitted to share my bed, but I was. Actually, judging from the speed with which Jean-Claude was wrapping himself in his sheet, he was as uncomfortable being naked as I was, for some reason. He normally didn't mind flaunting that beautiful body of his.

"They have...changed ma petite." Jean-Claude sounded uncertain, but the others seemed unwilling to speak. "They are stranger than any I have ever seen before. And you have changed in other ways as well, but the eyes are the most noticeable."

Looking around I spotted a mirror and walked over to it. My eyes were totally alien. I've often compared vampires' eyes to fire, when their power is upon them, or seen how lycanthropes' eyes bleed to their animal. My eyes...they weren't eyes, not really. They truly were fire, golden and red and even blue. I tried to close them, but I could still see, and now my eyes were voids filled with stars. I tried again, and this time I succeeded. Then I opened my eyes, once and they were star filled voids, twice and they returned to the flames. I studied myself critically. My lips were fuller and redder and when I opened my mouth I could see fangs top and bottom, my front teeth were sharper too, but the back ones were unchanged. And my skin was as pale as Jean-Claude's but opalescent rather than luminous. When I glanced down at my hands I saw that my nails were gone, to be replaced by claws, small claws, but still claws and I couldn't think why I hadn't noticed them before. I also wondered why I hadn't noticed that the wound in my throat had disappeared as if it had never been.

I shut my eyes fully, wishing only to look like myself again. I could feel some sort of magic flowing over my skin, and when I opened my eyes again and turned to my vampires I looked as human as I ever had. Jean-Claude was still on the floor, huddled in his sheet, somehow I knew that if I made any demands of him now he would submit. He looked almost like a little child, hiding in the bedclothes and hoping the monster wouldn't get him, but the monster already had - I was the

monster. Asher had moved to sit behind him, wrapping his arms protectively around the younger vampire, watching me distrustfully, while Damian stood watching me with pure worship in his eyes. I preferred Asher's attitude. Yet something inside me made me want to test Damian's devotion, to demand a display of loyalty and to claim Jean-Claude as mine again. I've learned to satisfy preternatural needs as soon as they rise, for the interest rate on such debts is horrendous. I walked to kneel beside Jean-Claude and laid a light kiss on his unresisting lips, then stood and held out my hand to Damian, watching Asher as I did so, he was the only threat here, not Jean-Claude and not Damian. My vampire servant came to me and knelt at my feet, kissing my outstretched hand, finally Asher lowered his eyes in an unspoken display of submission.

That was when our hosts walked in on us. Two humans, both men with brown hair and eyes, and six vampires, identical and wearing collars, plainly submissive to the humans, which was strange as they were all masters over a thousand years old and identical even in their abilities. But all eight of them had the same power signature radiating from them, the humans less strongly than the vampires. I had the strongest feeling that meant the humans outranked the vampires here. They all knelt to me and one of the humans spoke.

"Lady, if you will permit it my brother and I will take you to speak with our lord, Morion, he will explain what has happened and his toys can attend to the sorting of your pets." I didn't sense hostility from them, and neither did Jean-Claude, we were in unfamiliar territory, but we had no way to get back. I quickly concluded that I had no choice but to comply, and hope the vampires would play along.

"Very well. I will come with you." I left with a troubled glance at my vampires to hear Jean-Claude ask for some clothes before he moved.

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Morion looked like a normal man in his late thirties, but the power he gave off was incredible, more than I'd felt even from Mommy Dearest. It felt similar to that power as well, and the same thing that had made me want to claim Jean-Claude and display Damian's submission to me led me to drop the control I hold over my power, or at least over its display. When I felt my power rise around me I realised just how much it had changed since my encounter with the Mother of Darkness. And how much it had grown. Morion would win any combat between us, but only because he knew how to control his power, I did not know how to control any but the smallest fraction of mine. If I had the same expertise he had, or perhaps if I had even a fraction of his skill I would be victorious. Jean-Claude had good reason to fear me, hell so did the Council if they just knew it. Suddenly I had a feeling I knew why the Council had been killing necromancers for such a long time.

"Relax Anita. I do not wish to challenge you. I brought you here because your full powers have manifested and you need someone to teach you, unless you want to risk destroying your planet?" Shit. I didn't realise I had that much power.

"No, I don't want that. How long will this take?"

"It doesn't matter, you will be able to return to the moment you left."

"I see." That was scary. "But I still want to know how long it will take, if nothing else so I know how much extra power my vampires will have when we get back."

"Of course. Full training takes between three and five hundred years. I had thought that while your pets are being processed and registered I could explain to you the basic history of our kind, and discuss which of my toys would make an appropriate gift for you."

"You don't need to give me anything." I really didn't want to risk having to give one of my

vampires up to him in exchange, besides the idea of owning someone else should have made me uneasy, God knows I fought hard enough against being Damian's master. And yet I liked the idea of having another pet, a properly trained pet.

"Yes, I do. It is tradition among our kind for a teacher to give a student a gift when he first starts teaching her. One of the final lessons is in making vampires and one of the products there is given to the teacher in return. I am perfectly willing to provide whatever you need while you are learning, but some of your lessons will involve improvements to my home, and storing some of your excess power, nothing permanent, but energy you are not using. I keep half of all the stored energy." I didn't really have a choice, so I agreed. Anyway if I didn't use the energy why let it go to waste?

"Now, about your toy. Can you tell me a little about vampires where you come from?"

"They're ruled by a council of seven powerful vampires, but the real ruler is the Mother of Darkness and she's in some sort of coma at the moment, has been for thousands of years. She's both a vampire and a shape shifter, and I think when I first encountered her it triggered some sort of changes in me. That's when I began wanting to own my vampires and mark them as mine."

"Ah yes, I see." We were interrupted by one of the vampires who'd come to my room bringing a sheet of paper and kneeling to offer it to me.

"Lady, could you please confirm these designations? And is it accurate to say that your dark-haired bed-slave chooses the clothes for all of your toys, and even for you on formal occasions?"

Bed-slave? I glanced at the paper to find that Jean-Claude and Asher had been listed as bed-slaves, and Damian as my personal attendant. There were also some short notes on what I preferred them to wear, although I generally liked anything they chose. "Why not, he's good at it. And I really can't be bothered with all the fuss about clothes he so adores." They both looked understanding at that comment. "I usually let him decorate as well." Then the vampire glanced at the paper in my hand. I could take a hint. "This is pretty much accurate, but they haven't mentioned that I prefer them to be wearing at least pants and some sort of top. They are mine and I don't want them displaying their bodies to others, not unless it is absolutely necessary."

"As you say lady. If I might presume, your two bed-slaves were most insolent, I would recommend that you beat them soundly."

"I will consider it." My voice was cold and I turned to Morion, ignoring the vampire. "We were discussing the vampires of my world were we not?"

"No child, we were discussing which of my toys I would give to you as a gift. I have one pet who was turned by a descendent of this Mother of Darkness, he is not a master, but he's been trained as a personal attendant rather than a bed-slave, would that suit you?"

I blinked once, there was no way I'd be sleeping with a stranger, but if he was just a servant I could accept him. "Very well." Then I considered the ardeur. "I feed on lust so I will need to visit areas where people are having sex, or displaying a lot of lust at least twice a day as only two of my usual pomme de sangs for that came with me. My bed-slave Jean-Claude will also need to do this."

"Very well. Now let me tell you about our kind, and their history on your world."

He then proceeded to explain how all of our kind were the offspring of demons who possessed humans to sire their children. They passed on to their children a great deal of power, more than they had actually, which manifested itself in small ways from birth, as one major power when we hit puberty and then as our full power after some sort of triggering event. For me that event had

been taking the fourth mark from Jean-Claude, but apparently it might have manifested spontaneously after my encounter with Mommy Dearest, I had been acting less human after that. On my world the manifestation at puberty had always been powerful necromancy, but our offspring and descendents did not hold our power and only developed the puberty manifestation, and not always that. The first vampires had been made by one of our kind, including the Mother of Darkness, and that was why they had killed all necromancers, because they feared that one of the Children of Demons would manifest from a necromancer and rule all the vampires again. Before we manifested our full power we could die as easily as any mortal, but afterwards we were impossible to kill. Jean-Claude should never have marked me, he should have let me die from Aubrey's blow. He would have been safer, even under Nikolaos.

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I walked into my new quarters, I'd been told that my 'bed-slaves' and 'personal attendant' would be waiting for me there. Damian was sitting on a couch in the entrance room, wearing loose black silk pants and a matching tunic. He was barefoot so he'd lifted his legs to curl in one corner reading a book. I only just had time to note how he was sitting before he put the book aside and stood. I only just had time to notice how he was sitting before he put the book aside and stood. Our hosts had approved of him, but they thought Jean-Claude and Asher were insolent and recommended that I punish them for their presumption. I just wished that I knew what they had done that was so presumptuous, after all they had survived being weak among the Council.

"Where are Jean-Claude and Asher?"

"They decided to wait for you in your bedroom." He led me to a door on the far side of the room and opened it for me.

The bedroom was beautifully decorated in black and red. The bed was large enough to hold my entire party, with blood red sheets. But by far the most beautiful things in the room were the two vampires sitting together on the bed. They were both wearing knee high black leather boots. Black linen pants and silk shirts, Asher's in dark brown and Jean-Claude's in crimson. Jean-Claude was leaning into Asher's embrace, his head resting on the elder vampire's shoulders.

"Asher, Jean-Claude, can you please explain why I have been advised to punish you both for insolence?" They both slid to their knees on the floor in front of the bed, bowing their heads to me. A part of me thought that was only right, but another, larger, part was disturbed by their submissiveness.

"We thought that you wished us to call ourselves your lovers ma petite. If you have changed your mind tell us and we will comply with your wishes." Jean-Claude's voice was utterly neutral, belying the fear I could feel through the marks. He couldn't hide his emotions from me any longer, not since I'd taken the fourth mark. But I could hide mine from him. I'd been getting little flashes of his experiences all night.

"I think of you both as my lovers, of course I want you to call yourselves that." They were considered to be insolent for stating the simple fact that they were my lovers? "Get up." I waited until they were standing before continuing. "Have you explored our new quarters?" There had been a door on each wall of the living room, and there were three doors on the far wall of my bedroom.

"Yes ma chérie." Neither of them raised their eyes to look directly at me. "We were also given a basic tour when we got here."

"Then show me around. I don't need to see whatever bedrooms you've chosen unless you want me to, but other than that show me everything."



"Neither of us have chosen bedrooms ma cherie. We were told not to until you had arrived and made your decision." Jean-Claude was very quiet, I wondered why he was letting Asher do the talking and realised how very scared he was, of this situation and of me. "Apparently it is customary for you to decide where we, Jean- Claude and I, sleep. You can require us to sleep with you or just in the same room. Or if you wish we can take rooms through here." Asher led me to the middle door at the back of the room, opening it to reveal a short hallway with two doors opening off it to either side and a fifth door at the end. I took a glance into each room: the one at the end was a bathroom, Asher explained that he and Jean-Claude were expected to share it: and the others were bedrooms, rather plain but apparently they would be decorated to their occupants' tastes tomorrow night.

"Just pick whichever room you prefer, once it's set up I won't come in without permission. I'm sorry but I cannot bring myself to sleep with you during your daytime slumber, one I might manage but not both. Not on a regular basis."

"If you wish it you can command us to share your bed on any occasion, and for any purpose even though you are generous enough to allow us privacy." A privacy I lacked with the only way to their bedrooms being through mine.

As we spoke we returned to my bedroom, Jean-Claude and Asher having chosen the two rooms nearest me, Asher to the right and Jean-Claude to the left. There were two more doors from my bedroom I needed to check out and Asher opened the one on the right to show a large, magnificent bathroom. It was tiled in black marble, the bath was sunken and deep enough for me to stand in and the water would still be up to my shoulders in the centre, it was also big enough for ten or more. There was also a separate shower cubicle, obviously one of my vampires had conveyed my complaints about not being able to shower at the Circus, because although their bathroom was equally magnificent it contained no shower.

The room opening to the left of Jean-Claude and Asher's quarters was almost bare, but the walls were five times as thick as in the other rooms and I could sense a lot of shielding on it.

"They said this would be your workroom when you were further along in your training." I couldn't understand Jean-Claude's silence, Asher had far more reason to fear me than he did, Jean-Claude had almost no reason to fear me that I knew of, yet I could taste a surprisingly strong fear of me, both physical and sexual.

"What about the rooms opening from the living room?"

Damian opened the door to the right showing a bedroom almost twice the size of Asher's and Jean-Claude's, with a door leading off to an adjoining bathroom. This one wasn't as fancy as the others but it did include a shower.

"The other door leads to an identical set of rooms. If you don't mind I'll take this bedroom." Damian was looking to me, but he also glanced at Jean-Claude and Asher, I think he knew how much smaller their rooms were and it conflicted with vampire protocol. I decided to give them the choice.

"Jean-Claude, Asher, do you mind?"

"Non." Jean-Claude seemed to realise that I wanted some sort of answer from him as well as from Asher.

"Of course not ma cherie, our rooms are further inside and so they are safer as no one can get to them without going through your room." Asher told me that the safety consideration outweighed the loss of face of having the smaller rooms. But still, we didn't need the other two bedrooms so why not enlarge my lovers' rooms? Of course even as they were their rooms were as big as Jean-

Claude's bedroom back at the Circus - mine had more floor space than the entire ground floor of my house. If I fed before I slept perhaps I wouldn't need to feed during the day, or on Jean-Claude tomorrow night. He was so scared of me at the moment that I called Asher to my bed instead.

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Afterwards he spoke to me about Jean-Claude, as concerned about him as I was.

"Anita, did Jean-Claude seem more...nervous around you than usual?"

"No." Asher seemed almost about to interrupt before I continued. "He seemed absolutely terrified of me. Did anything in particular happen to him while you were away from me?"

"He was considered more insolent than I, because he does not need to hide his face as I do mine." I wanted to protest that Asher didn't need to hide his face, but I also wanted him to keep speaking. "I mostly kept my head bowed and he did not, so they threatened him more, and one of the main threats was being whipped. He has more reason to fear that, it reminds him of painful history. And his explanations that you normally let him choose clothes for all three of us, and even for you on formal occasions greatly displeased our hosts. But we were separated for a while at times and something could have happened then."

I reached out for Jean-Claude, he was lying on his bed curled into a ball. He wasn't crying but he was certainly in pain. Hoping that he wouldn't detect me I slid a subtle strand of magic into him through the marks. I checked his physical condition first, then his memories of the day. There were fresh lash marks on his back. Nothing too severe, they wouldn't even scar a human, but still someone had touched what belonged to me! How had they presumed to think they could get away with it?

I moved on to the memories of the day. When the vampire sent to me had returned with the information that I wanted Jean-Claude to choose the clothes for the vampires, as well as any formalwear I needed the human processing them had been outraged, and he'd decided that if I wasn't likely to punish Jean-Claude for his presumption he would take it on himself to teach my lover his place. It was the bastard's comment that he was sure I'd thank him for it later that had made Jean-Claude fear me. But why did he believe it?

I probed deeper and discovered just how much damage Asher had done after he'd been scarred. No wonder Jean-Claude was insecure where I was concerned. He didn't think he was worthy of love, and I'd told him I'd tire of him at some point, just like all his masters had. After Belle Morte had sent Asher from her bed he'd approached Asher on his own, only to be verbally attacked, blamed for Julianna's death and told that he was worthless in so many words. I pulled out of him, he hadn't noticed that I was there, but one other thing had caught my attention, he considered me his master, and he had for some time, since we formed the Triumvirate. I should have worked that out earlier, he'd waited for my permission to sleep with Asher, who he loved, and put up with all the restrictions I forced upon him. You only do that for a superior. He hadn't minded too much because I wasn't a cruel master and I'd been lenient with him, but after what happened just before I took the fourth mark, he feared that would change.

"Asher, someone whipped him. The bastard said that I'd thank him for it later. You're all coming with me tomorrow night, and I intend to make sure that the piece of filth who hurt Jean-Claude is punished. No one touches what is mine!"

"Jean-Claude is yours?"

"The Triumvirate makes him mine. But yes, he thinks of me as his master. Asher, he doesn't think he's worthy of love. I want you to go to him, and hold him after you leave me. And if he is willing you may make love to him, with my permission. Go, now." He left me as I asked, and I knew he

went to comfort my other lover. I didn't mind, as long as Jean-Claude felt better. I slid into sleep swiftly after that.

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I hadn't actually needed to be shown where the nearest concentration of lust was the next day, I'd been able to sense it and feed from it without leaving my quarters, but I knew Jean-Claude would never be able to do that - I wasn't even sure how I'd been able to do it.

He was the first of my vampires to awake after I did, and he came out into my bedroom as soon as he was dressed. He didn't meet my eyes, just looked at the floor in front of my feet and kept his head bowed. He even knelt to me when he came into the room.

"Get up Jean-Claude." My voice was unintentionally harsh and he literally jumped to his feet, never once looking up, playing nervously with the cuffs of his shirt - red and lacy at the neck and cuffs, paired with black jeans too tight for anything underneath and black leather boots laced all the way up his thighs. He was all but shaking - what had happened to instil such terror in him? I'd never hurt him enough to justify this sort of reaction. I sighed, I had to get him calmed down a bit, or he'd be useless to me.

"Come here Jean-Claude." I forced my voice to be gentle and when he came to me I took him into my arms. I held him carefully, so as not to scare him even more. "You don't have to lie with me tonight unless you wish to Jean-Claude. I can feed on Damian, he has been longing for it for quite some time." That didn't seem to calm him, but it didn't increase the tension in his body either. "That is if that is acceptable to you?"

That got a reaction, sheer stark terror. "I would never presume to tell my master who she can claim to warm her bed ma petite." His voice, that wonderful touchable voice, offered nothing but fear.

"I do not wish to hurt you Jean-Claude. I know I don't say it enough, but I do love you. Did Asher explain last night that I gave him permission to make love to you if you were willing? That still applies, I suspect you will both need the comfort while I am learning how to use my new powers. I still love and want you both, but I expect I'll be busy a lot and I won't deny you each other, even if I cannot be present." Ah, that was what had scared him, he feared that I was going to tire of him and give him away, or that Asher had been lying to him about my permission.

"By vampire tradition you have the right to take your servant to your bed whether he is willing or not, you have the right to take any subordinate you choose to your bed regardless of their feelings in the matter. I am jealous of Damian to some extent, but when you first gained the ardeur and asked me who you had the right to feed on he should have been on the list." His voice was low but I recognised his words for the expression of gratitude they were.

"I see." He expected me to punish him for not telling me earlier, I could tell, but I wouldn't. "You need to feed, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then come with me." I decided that he could feed the ardeur first and led him to a discrete niche a few yards from the nearest concentration of lust. I hadn't exactly expected what I found there. I'd known there were vampires present, but I hadn't expected the area to be effectively a high class brothel - where the whores all had fangs. Jean-Claude glanced at me in fear when he realised what sort of place it was and I couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm only willing to share you with Asher because he was your lover for a long time and he does love you. I brought you here to feed your ardeur, nothing more. I'm afraid you'll have to wait for

blood until the others get up."

"Yes ma petite." He actually bit his lip before continuing. "Does it offend you that I use such a nickname for you?" He hadn't actually met my eyes since I'd returned from my meeting with Morion, but I'd at least got him looking at my face, now he was keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the ground.

"No, not anymore. I enjoy it." Why was he asking me this now? Oh, the human who'd had him beaten had also objected to my lover having a nickname for me. "Just feed, Asher will be waking up soon and I want us to be back by then."

"As you wish." I did the exact same thing, I'd satiated myself earlier, but I wanted to store up as much lust as I could, while I could. Then I led him back to my quarters and told him to go and take a bath or something - I sent Asher to join him once he was awake, even if they couldn't do anything. I on the other hand spent my time practising my Kenpo and Judo, at least as much as I could. Morion had told me that I could request anything I wished while I was here, I fully intended to ask for a teacher in Kenpo, and then other martial arts as I mastered my old ones. I would also learn how to use a sword, or more than one sword. Although, I could probably learn that from Damian, or one of my other vampires. One thing I really hated was not having my weapons, I'd been transported here naked, and none of us had felt a thing. At least I hadn't and I assumed the vampires hadn't either, I'd have to ask them.

Damian was awake. I walked out to the corridor, as promised there were three humans waiting for my vampires to awaken.

"Come in. My pets will feed in the living room. Do not presume to expect more pleasure from this than they offer through their bite." I sent a call for Damian and Jean-Claude along our links, I knew Jean-Claude would bring Asher along with him. When they arrived I continued. "Feed and send them away. I expect you to have finished by the time I return."

I needed to clean up after practising, so I took a shower and actually washed my hair, to give them time to feed. The humans were gone when I returned and I had time to notice what my vampires were wearing. Jean-Claude and Asher had dressed identically in blood red silk, loose pants of heavy silk and shirts of very light thin silk, both barefoot they curled together on the floor in front of the couch. Damian was wearing tailored black wool, pants and a vest with no shirt. He too was barefoot, but he sat on the couch until I entered, then he stood.

"Jean-Claude, Asher, Damian, we need to talk." I sat on the couch and pulled Jean-Claude up onto my lap, inviting the other two to sit on either side of me. It should have felt ridiculous, holding a Master Vampire so much larger than me on my lap like a child, but somehow it felt right. Asher was the only one who didn't sense the same thing, for although Jean-Claude was still scared he relaxed a little at the feel of my arms around him. "Did any of you sense anything when we were brought here?"

They hadn't, now I had to explain a few things. "Apparently my father was possessed by a demon when he sired me, and that demon passed its power on to me. That's why I'm such a powerful necromancer. When I took the fourth mark it forced my full powers to manifest and that's why we're here, or at least why I'm here, Morion didn't explain you three properly. My powers would have manifested anyway after my contact with the Mother of Darkness." I spoke to the fear in Jean-Claude, that this was his fault. "We're stuck here until I can learn to control my powers, and that will take between three and five hundred years. But we will return only moments after we left. So you will gain additional powers in that time, more than you would normally. I'm afraid that you will all be considered my property here, we need to at least put on a show in front of people here, but I'll try to treat you as equals as much as possible when we're in private."

Asher wasn't particularly happy about that, although the others agreed quickly, but finally he

nodded. "I understand putting on a show to impress or deceive possible enemies, do you really think it is necessary here?"

"You saw how those vampires that took you three to be processed were treated, Master Vampires more than a thousand years old and they were called toys. I don't think I can keep you all safe otherwise. There are more of my kind here, and unless you three belong to me you will not be safe. And I'm getting another vampire tonight, one of the Sweet Dark's line. He might be able to tell you things about her.

"Do any of you have any questions?"

"Why were we brought here with you? I could understand Jean-Claude being brought, he was with you when you manifested, but..."

"According to legends that were old when I was first brought over any vampire that is linked to one of the Demonkin goes with them anywhere they travel, even to other worlds." For some reason Damian seemed to have gained in confidence and interrupted Asher while he was speaking. "That explains me, but I'm not sure about you."

"That could be it, but I'll ask Morion tonight anyway. The three of you are coming with me, I think we can get away with making up our own protocol. Any ideas?"

"I should act as your servant, stand to one side of your chair and wait for your commands."

"That deals with you. What about you two?"

"Belle Morte always had her favourite bed toys from among the weaker vampires sitting at her feet on formal occasions."

"You always hated that Jean-Claude." Asher had a faint edge of surprise to his voice at what Jean-Claude was suggesting. I actually approved, but I'd let them argue it out themselves.

"Yes, but if it is necessary to put on the right sort of show I will do it. And what alternatives are there?"

"None." Asher was reluctant to admit it, but he finally agreed.

"Then it's decided. You two will sit at my feet and Damian will stand at my side. Oh and Damian, you'll be the one sharing my bed after this." I let them go about their own business, Asher and Jean-Claude wanted to play chess while Damian returned to his book, a vampire story by Brian Lumley, I suppose it was fun because the vampires there are so different.

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Morion sent humans to guide us to his quarters about dusk on this planet. My vampires followed me at a respectful distance, and once I was invited to sit Jean-Claude and Asher settled themselves at my feet. Damian stood attentively at my side, only waiting my command.

"Hello Anita. I thought that today I could answer any questions you have since yesterday, and give you my gift, then we can discuss how you wish to train, and anything you wish to occupy your time."

"Fine. But there's something else. Last night the man who processed Jean-Claude had Jean-Claude whipped. I want to see him punished for that. No one touches what belongs to me!" I knew he would understand if I put it that way, I wasn't so sure that he would understand if I explained that it had hurt and scared my lover, and I wanted to make him feel as safe as he made

me feel.

"Then how would you wish to see him punished?"

"With the whip he used on Jean-Claude. Twenty lashes." A human could probably survive that many lashes, but he'd be regretting his actions for a long time. I brushed the surface of Jean-Claude's mind, to find adoration for me bubbling there, and gratitude that his master cared enough to protect him.

"That sounds reasonable. Do you know his name?"

"I'm sure my pet can pick out his face and scent." A dismissal of the subject, and Jean-Claude recognised my warning not to fail him in this.

"I'll have someone bring in pictures for him to look over. Now, my gift to you." A dark vampire about my height with black hair and dark amber skin came into the room. His eyes matched his hair and his bone structure told me that he was from Africa, one of the darker tribes. He came and knelt to me. "This is Caspian. No one expects you to be able to truly claim him yet, but you need some link so you can sense him better. Let him take blood from your wrist and send your power into him with your blood."

I held out my hand, offering him my wrist. As he bit into me I could feel his fangs, both top and bottom. He was shape shifter, leopard as well as vampire. I had another addition to my pard, not alpha, but perhaps enough to act as an enforcer if necessary. He only took a mouthful of my blood, but it was enough to give me a bond with him. As he drew back one of the vampires from last night came in with the pictures, giving them to Jean-Claude, who went through them.

"What questions do you want to ask, Anita?"

"I'd like my quarters altered a little..."

"I'm sorry, we won't do that for you, you have to do it yourself when you learn how to. That is why the quarters are awkward, to give you some motivation to change them. As you probably noticed you don't need to eat, so your quarters include all the basic necessities. There is sufficient rock around them for you to carve out additional rooms as required." Fine, how hard could it be to break down a few walls? I'd learn that as soon as possible.

"I also wanted a teacher in martial arts, one who can teach Kenpo and is a black belt in Judo. Any other qualifications would be helpful, I want to learn more about fighting while I am here, I don't really want to reveal what I am when I get back home."

"I believe I can find someone qualified for that. Do you have any more requests?"

"No," I'd do without my weapons, I could always use these new powers of mine, and some old ones instead. "but why were these vampires brought along and no others?"

"I have set spells on your planet and others, they bring any Demonkin who manifests here, and also bring any vampires or other semi-immortals who they have a link to." I wondered if he defined semi-immortals the same way I did, but Jean-Claude spoke up before I could say anything more.

"I found him, ma petite." And he handed a picture of a man with light brown hair and grey eyes up to me. I passed it over to Morion.

"This is the one."

"When we've finished discussing this you can watch as he's punished. Now, the first thing you need to learn is how to limit the power you use to what you need. Then I'll teach you how to siphon energy off into objects. What do you want to learn after that?"

"What I need to know to alter my quarters to my preferences, then my necromancy, Jean-Claude can teach me what he knows of controlling the ardeur without your help."

"Very well, do you know much about your necromancy?"

"No, I just used Vaudun ritual and sex to work magic by instinct almost." I laughed ruefully at my ignorance.

"Then I shall teach you as if you knew nothing. Caspian can guide you anywhere you wish to go. If you do not object I thought I could teach you for the two hours just before midnight, followed by an hour to break then another two hours. When I find a teacher of martial arts for you it would be best if you decide the timing of lessons for yourself."

"Fine." I'd only be spending four hours a day on lessons, but I could always practise control of the ardeur and what Marianne had taught me in between. I just hoped I didn't end up raising anyone who died nearby. "Now, what was that you said about watching the punishment of your arrogant human?"

"Of course. Caspian take them to the Whipping Room. That is unless you wanted to punish him yourself Anita?"

"I don't know how to use a whip, I'll just watch. Thank you for your hospitality." And I left, taking my entourage with me.

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The human had been stripped to the waist and tied to a whipping triangle in a small, white tiled room. His arms were stretched above his head and spread wide, the muscles in his back taut. I stalked over to stand in front of him, bringing Jean-Claude with me, leaving the rest of my vampires over by the door.

"What is your name?"

"Kevar."

"Do you know why this is happening?"

"Because I disciplined your arrogant whore. What did he tell you? What lies did he come up with?"

"He told me nothing. You presumed to lay hands on what is mine. Did you really think I would permit that?" I turned my back on him. "Come, my raven." I wasn't entirely sure where that pet name came from, but Jean-Claude was so happy that I'd finally chosen a pet name for him. I never thought such a small thing could mean so much to him or I'd have found a nickname for him sooner. We stalked back to where we could watch, and not get any of his blood on us. It was a vampire wielding the whip, nearly three thousand years old and a master, he'd probably had a lot of experience I guess. I nodded to him.

"Go ahead. But I want to see blood as soon as possible, leave him with scars to remind him that it is best not to touch what belongs to me, to any of my kind."

"Yes Demonkin." He bowed to me and began to turn to his work, almost reluctantly as if...

"Did you want to say something to me?"

"Forgive my presumption Demonkin, but it is most impressive and very rare that you are so willing to protect what is yours. Most of the Demonkin would feel that so long as their bed-slaves can serve them, and no permanent damage is done it does not matter if humans beat them. That is why he thought he would be permitted to abuse your raven. He was always permitted to abuse any vampires he thought too cocky, meaning not absolutely broken, before." I got the idea this one had been on the end of the human's whip a time or two himself.

"No one touches what belongs to me but me. I think I got more of the possessive instincts than most of my kind." I made a joke of it, shocked that the rest of my kind did not feel that they were obliged to protect what was theirs. "Now, I want to hear him screaming."

He obeyed with gusto, breaking the skin on the first lash, a line of blood from left shoulder to right hip, the second following just a second after, falling barely half an inch from the first cut. He switched arms for the third lash, crossing from the right shoulder to the left hip, and that was the first time the mortal screamed. When he'd meted out five lashes he stopped and took a step back.

"I'm afraid I've been ordered not to cripple him Demonkin, how am I doing so far?"

I walked forward to trail my fingers in Kevlar's wounds, licking the blood from my fingers, and determinedly not thinking of how it must have felt for Jean-Claude when he was the one under the lash. "Very well. Finish the beating and I will be satisfied."

"As you wish Demonkin." He returned to his work, varying the frequency and placement so Kevlar never knew when or where he would be hit. I smiled to see it and watched as the full twenty lashes were administered despite that Kevlar was unconscious for the last five. After I thanked him, and took my vampires back to my quarters.

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"Caspian, that's your quarters." I waved vaguely at the door to the left as I walked in. "Get yourself settled, I won't require you for the rest of the night. But never come into my bedroom without a specific invitation. Jean-Claude, Asher, feel free to enjoy yourselves together. Damian you'll be attending me tonight." Caspian went into his quarters while the other vampires followed me into my bedroom, Jean-Claude and Asher hesitated there after the door was closed. I didn't think vampires would be able to hear through the walls, but I checked just in case. "Will he be able to hear anything in here?"

"No, ma cherie. Did you mean it when you said we could lie together tonight?"

"If you both want to Asher, yes. Jean-Claude, are you alright?" He finally looked up at me, smiling in adoration.

"Yes, ma petite. You claimed me, and you protected me." That seemed to be all that mattered to him. It wasn't an attitude I could understand, but I certainly enjoyed the benefits of it in him.

"And it does not upset you that I take Damian to my bed tonight?"

"So long as you still favour me. He is your servant, even by vampire law I do not have any right to complain if you take him to your bed. Belle Morte would never have forbidden Asher to lie with Julianna." His voice was soft, but he still met my eyes.

"Might we go ma cherie?" Asher seemed to be impatient, not that I could blame him.

"Enjoy yourselves." I turned to Damian as they left and pulled him to the bed. "Undress me."

I was wearing blue jeans and a red T-shirt, but before he could get them off Damian knelt to unlace my black trainers. He bowed to the floor and kissed my feet before he continued, I wondered if that was something he'd been trained to do, or if he actually wanted to do it. I realised that there was one thing I hadn't made clear to him.

"Damian, if there's something you don't want to do you don't have to do it. Just tell me. And you can do anything you want as long as you please me."

"Yes, Anita. I didn't think you'd force me into anything." He smiled up from where he knelt at my feet. He was behaving more assertively than Jean-Claude was at the moment, and even Asher seemed to be submitting to me more than my vampire servant was. Not much more, but still...of course we'd been in public most of the time since I'd explained the situation and then Asher would have wanted to get Jean-Claude alone. I brushed Jean-Claude's mind with my own to find him just lying on the bed with Asher, both still fully clothed, doing nothing more than kissing. Not that I was much further along, and I pulled Damian to his feet, encouraging him to hurry, which he did, most obligingly.

Once I was naked he knelt between my legs still fully clothed and began kissing his way down my body, until he reached my sex. This time as he brought me I let the illusion I had woven around me fall, and shredded the sheets with my claws. I pulled him to lie beside me and used my claws to cut the clothes from his body, careful not to cut him, I could taste the desire this act aroused and once I could reach his organ I impaled myself on him, riding him for a while until he suddenly rolled us over so he was on top and could thrust into me, hard. I think I lost track of the time then, because when I next noticed things I had shredded his back right down to the bone - and he was smiling!

"Did I please you master?" It felt right that he call me master, the feel of his blood covering me was wondrous, but somewhere deep inside something was screaming that this was wrong.

"Yes, but I hurt you. I am sorry."

"Do not be, it isn't serious, I'm sure you can heal me and I've had far worse. I enjoyed it while you made the marks." Yes, I understood about that, and I sent my power into him to heal his wounds.

"You can stay with me if you want." I crawled over to a fresh area of the bed before lying down to go to sleep and he joined me, spooning his body around mine. I'd managed to grow used to waking up with a corpse on occasion, as long as I wasn't trapped by the corpse in question it didn't bother me.

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I must have reached out for Jean-Claude's mind as I fell to sleep, for in my dream I was an observer in his body, feeling as he did, and acting only as he chose. Asher was taking him, very much in the dominant position, and they had their teeth buried in each other's throats. Jean-Claude released Asher first after he reached orgasm and lay limp as his lover continued to thrust into him and drink from him.

"Jean-Claude?" Asher shook his lover gently to get his attention after he'd satisfied himself.

"Yes, Asher?" My consort smiled up at his lover, just waiting for his desires to make themselves known.

"Are you alright?" I looked through Jean-Claude's memories, and even my own from when I was with both of them to realise this was not his usual behaviour when he was taken. Normally he

encouraged Asher, rather than just passively submitting to his attentions.

"Yes Asher, but things have changed now. Anita is more powerful than I am, and you know the Council's training took a stronger hold on me than it did on you." He'd been slightly less powerful than Asher when they travelled together with Julianna, so the training the Council had given them had made him less assertive with Asher in private - in public they pretended he was the master among them, a game.

"I don't understand why though mon corbeau," Asher used the same nickname for Jean-Claude that I did? No wonder he was so happy about it. "you are a *sourdre de sang*, and I am not. You should be more assertive than I am, even with Anita, one of the Demonkin."

"You know almost nothing of the Demonkin, and you are linked to her much more loosely than I am. Belle Morte used to tell me stories of the Demonkin, to be more precise their social structure as they interact with vampires. They were old when she heard them, and she didn't know why she felt compelled to pass them on to me, but I think they were accurate. A Demonkin has one primary consort, who belongs to her totally, and this consort is always a *sourdre de sang* or equivalent power. The other consorts can be vampires, but are not always and have a little more autonomy. And then there are the servants. Personal attendants, such as Damian share their master's bed from time to time, but not as often as consorts and bed-slaves, they have the most autonomy of any linked to the Demonkin. The more closely anyone is linked to one of the Demonkin the more submissive they are to those also linked, but less closely so, to the Demonkin. With one exception, the lesser attendants. They have nothing to do with consorts, consorts ignore them, and despite being the least closely linked of all are submissive to personal attendants. They never share their master's bed either. We aren't consorts yet, but as a *sourdre de sang* I think I inherited instincts for being with one of the Demonkin that you don't have."

"You do know this is just a pretence so we won't be molested while Anita is learning what she has to know, don't you?" Asher sounded as if he truly believed that, I didn't, even though I wanted to.

"No, it isn't. Or it won't end that way. Anita might try to treat us as equals, we might want, or you might want, to try and remain independent, but by the time we return to St. Louis you will have accepted your place as one of her consorts or personal attendants." Jean-Claude spoke with quiet certainty. He already had accepted that he'd be my primary consort, he just hoped another *sourdre de sang* didn't catch my attention, or he might lose that place. Asher was absolutely horrified at the idea, but Jean-Claude pulled him into a kiss and distracted him into sex before he could come to me and argue about it. "I'm not entirely sure our master realises this herself yet. Please, let her learn about this at her own pace, and come to terms with it the same way. She will not be too cruel a master, that I know."

I didn't really want to learn any more, but I stayed in Jean- Claude's mind as he slid beneath Asher to arouse him with his mouth, then turned and offered himself to the golden haired vampire. I didn't manage to return to normal sleep until he came, from Asher's touch.

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I woke up covered by dried blood, Damian's blood. We were lying on our sides and I was spooning him, pressed up against his cold back. It must have looked strange, but it felt natural, would have even before this happened, he'd been submissive to me for a while. I uncurled from around him and sat up, reaching out to feed the *ardeur* automatically. Suddenly I caught sight of the sheets I'd shredded last night and it just hit me all at once what I was, what I'd become.

Oh God. I really was a monster. Even now I couldn't bring myself to regret anything I'd done, but I knew I was truly damned. I collapsed in tears, crying for myself, for becoming one of the monsters in a way I'd never imagined possible, but mostly for Jean-Claude, too scared of me to say

anything against me, for Asher, dragged into this against his will and trying desperately to retain his freedom, and for Damian, who worshipped me and could never refuse me anything. And I couldn't even die or free them from me. They wouldn't be able to go back until I did, if I didn't keep them they would end up belonging to someone else, someone who would treat them worse than I would.

I finally came out of it to feel Jean-Claude's arms around me, trying to comfort me even though he didn't know why I was upset. When my tears stopped I sat up, putting a slight distance between us.

"What is wrong ma petite? Have you been hurt?" His voice was gentle, he had never known me to cry except when something terrible, emotionally, had happened for me.

"After what I've done to you, how can you care if I'm hurt?"

"I don't understand master. You protected me, and punished the one who hurt me. You care for me and I adore you. Why shouldn't I care if you're hurt?" He was genuinely mystified. I'd always thought he'd recovered from the abuse he'd suffered, at least in part, that he'd become independent and self-reliant. After all, he always had an agenda, he always manipulated people into doing what he wanted and he'd fought so hard for independence, for his own territory where he would be safe. And now he was willing to give that all up, to belong to me, body and mind and soul, just because of what I was. He seemed perfectly content with the idea of being dependent on me for everything and submissive to me in every way. There and then I silently vowed to treat him as much as I could the way I would one of my leopards, to encourage him to express his own opinions and never to force him to do anything against his will.

"I've enslaved you, you fought so hard against being enslaved, worked for so long to be free, and now it doesn't bother you?"

"You are Demonkin and I am a sordre de sang, it is in my nature to submit to you without question." He was so accepting of the fact that he would be owned, and probably abused. How could he react that way? I never could have done the same. I remembered how Richard had hurt his wolves when he'd been fighting against what he was and decided to

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 2 by Jay

Jean-Claude knelt as soon as the door was shut behind him, waiting for me to walk over to him and fasten his collar around his neck. I pulled his head up for a kiss as I bent to him, then pulled him to his feet by the hair and pushed him towards the bed. I followed him and stripped him slowly, kissing him the while, and then pushed him down onto the bed.

"What would you have of me ma petite?" He didn't look directly at me, but glanced from beneath lowered eyelids.

"To know what you desire my raven. I would never ask you to do something you found displeasing, and you have always pleased me."

"I...it is presumptuous...I would ask that you mark me so I always wear your scent." Jean-Claude refused to look at me, he seemed to be ashamed of his request, hunching his shoulders and hiding his face with his hair. I quickly moved to pull it out of the way and tilted his chin to force him to look at me.

"No, it is not presumptuous. I asked a question and you answered it. I didn't expect you to answer in quite that way, but I am more than willing to grant your request." I cleaned him as I spoke and sat by him to pet my lover. "Do you want dominance games tonight, or would you rather I was gentle?" I asked the question to distract my raven as I scoured all trace of any other's scent from him.

"Please, I am yours, be gentle." He smiled as he replied in gentle mockery of so many cheap paperback romances.

"Do you remember how I marked Nathaniel with my scent?"

He bit his lip, looking adorably unsure of himself. There's something about the way Jean-Claude looks when he feels insecure, or uncertain that tugs at my heartstrings. "Was that what you did after he used his tongue on you?"



"Yes, I'll try not to threaten you, if at any time you feel uncomfortable use our safe word, or if your mouth is otherwise occupied pinch my hip." I swung one leg to kneel over him as I spoke. "Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes, ma petite." I'd never put him in a position where he would have difficulty speaking when I pinned him down before so I added an extra precaution this time and made sure he understood. He put one hand on my hip as I moved down centring myself above his mouth. I bound my scent to him once I'd taken my pleasure then I turned to exploring his body with my hands and encouraging him to do likewise. He'd asked me to be gentle, so I moved slowly, very slowly and let him initiate the next level of intimacy. At least that was the plan, I quickly realised he wasn't going to make any advances himself and moved on to kissing and finally full intercourse, where we lay on our sides, facing each other, as close to equality as we would get.

When we finally disengaged Jean-Claude moved to lick me clean, but I stopped him and held him to me, cuddling with him for the remainder of the night. "I'll stay until noon." I whispered the words to him just before he died.

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I did plan to stay until noon, but reality intruded. My cell phone rang around ten and when I answered it was Zerbrowski.

"Anita, we've got a murder and we need your expertise. There's a body in the alley behind Guilty Pleasures, it's a vamp kill and I want you to check it out." Dolph was still suspended, trying to sort out his feelings about vampires and his son's choice of fiancée. I'd actually spoken to him, offering to talk to Darrin about what becoming a vampire really involved, and I'd volunteered Damian's services as well. I had the feeling that his fiancée had glossed over the less pleasant aspects of being a vampire, such as belonging totally to the master who you were descended from, or who the vampire who turned you belonged to. If he was absolutely insistent on becoming a vampire I was considering offering to have Damian turn Darrin   that way he'd belong to me, and I could keep him safe. I'm not an abusive master; at least I don't think so.

I considered my options and decided to wake Jean-Claude temporarily with a burst of power to explain things. He blinked, coming awake slowly and I saw the moment that he drew his first breath. I could see that he was confused, and I could not blame him. He would be able to stay awake after this if he wished to, but if he did not wish to I would return him to his daylight slumber.

"Ma petite? What..." I could taste his confusion and could not blame him for it, nor for the fear in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, but there's been a murder, and I need to go to the scene. I didn't want you to wake up without me by your side."

"Thank you, master." He lifted a hand to his collar and looked up at me with a question in his eyes. I kissed his lips lightly, then unbuckled his collar.

"I can return you to your daylight slumber, or you can remain awake, I leave the choice to you."

"I'd rather not return to sleep. Perhaps I can please you if you return soon enough?" There was a hopeful lilt in Jean-Claude's voice and I responded to it with a smile.

"Yes, if I can return before noon I will let you do as you wish with me for an hour." A slight widening of his eyes was the only indication that I'd surprised him. My hand was still resting against his face and he turned to nuzzle at it happily.

"I will not disappoint you ma petite." It was a vow and I was surprised at just how strongly he felt about it.

"You could not beautiful one. I wish I could stay here longer, but there is a corpse waiting for me. It was found behind Guilty Pleasures, and it's a vamp kill, so you should prepare yourself for a challenge." I stepped back and dressed with a thought.

"The police would not approve of your informing me of that fact. I am grateful Anita." And I could feel his gratitude and determination to make what he had planned special for me 💎💎 and his surprise that I would tell him. But my first loyalty is to my people now, not to the mortal police, and Jean-Claude, more than anyone else, is mine.

"Know that you have my support in all ways. You should be able to win with that, even against a council member." With that last piece of reassurance I left him.

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I didn't bother to use my car to get to Guilty Pleasures, it'd take me longer to park than it would to get there, instead I teleported to somewhere discrete and walked on scene, pulling on surgical gloves as I did.

"Hi, Zerbrowski. Where's the corpse?" He was wearing a dark green suit with a yellow shirt, and a blue tie, the colours should have looked good together, but somehow he managed to find the shades that clashed worst.

"Just over here." The woman's body had been dumped among the trash, an indication what the vampires who did this thought of her, and she was spread out exposed like some sort of whore. I could count seven bites on her body, one on the underside of her right breast, one either side of her neck, one on the inside of her right thigh, one behind her left knee, and her left leg had been positioned to display it and the last two on each arm. I knelt to measure the bites, there were four different sizes there, but none of the bites sized the same were of the same style. The bites on the neck and behind the knee were all neat, but whoever'd bitten the breast had nearly torn it off her body to get to the blood. The bite at the groin had nearly taken a piece of flesh out with it and the left elbow had been crushed by the large mouth of the vampire there. The right wrist had been cut open first 💎💎 perhaps by an older vampire teaching a new and reluctant one.

"Anita? What do you think?" Zerbrowski had been hovering while I measured the bites and he began to question me as soon as I stood up.

"It's a challenge to Jean-Claude. This was a group kill, probably seven of them, but I don't think the master in question was powerful enough to make her rise as a revenant. I'll find out if there's any new masters in town and try to locate them when I meet up with Jean- Claude."

"You can't get a civilian involved in this, especially not the obvious suspect. And why do you think this is a challenge?"

"Group kill, dumped outside of one of his first businesses, in his city, and I know he hasn't given

any masters permission to enter his territory lately. Do you know who she is?"

"They left her ID beside her, she's called Rosanna Walt. How do you know so much about Jean-Claude's business?"

"I thought you knew that we're lovers. And I'm a very powerful necromancer; I help him with power plays if it's necessary. He'd have warned me if he thought there was a threat in town, and any master who could compel this would be a threat that we might have to deal with.

"Do you want me to help with my contacts among the undead or not?"

"What are you going to tell him? And are you sure he had nothing to do with this?"

"He was in bed with me from three in the morning last night and I was planning to tell him that I think a new master has come here without his permission, and I want to locate this visitor."



"He'll accept that?"

"You know that he'll learn about the body from the people who work here anyway, but yes, he'll help me without knowing everything about my reasons. I'm too powerful for him not to."

"If you can pull it off then do it. But we'll need more than that to get a warrant for them."

"I know, but it will give you a starting point won't it?"

"Yeah. And we need to interview everyone who was here last night, can you do anything about that?"

"I'll see to it, call the Circus just after dusk and the arrangements will have been made." Finally I was able to get away, mourning the fact that my raven would have to fight again   " at least if I didn't get myself an execution warrant for the intruder first.

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When I got back Jean-Claude was waiting for me in the bathroom, kneeling naked save for his cuffs and a silver chain around his waist beside the bath, filled with hot water. He held his collar out to me and I fastened it around his neck, then I sat on the edge of the bath and stroked his hair gently before I spoke, from the heat of his body he had fed before my return.

"I am sorry love, but there is something we need to deal with before we do anything else. The kill at Guilty Pleasures was a group kill, seven vampires were involved. One of them I think was new and I would spare that one if we can, but there must be a new master in town, without your permission and we need to locate him before we play, so I can give Zerrowski a starting point. And you need to make arrangements for the police to talk to everyone who was working there last night."

"I can do that after you leave ma petite. Will you not at least bathe with me before we must search for our unwelcome guest?"

"Of course I will my raven. I am sorry, love, to have disappointed you." I stripped quickly and stepped into the tub then pulled him down to join me. "What did you have planned for me? Or would you rather keep it a secret and show me later?"

"I wanted to show you the pleasures I could offer you using vampire tricks. You forbade them before, and you have never asked me to show them to you, but you gave me permission to do whatever I wished, and I do want to show you this." He refused to look at my face after he had

spoken ♦♦“ while he wears his collar he rarely looks me in the eyes and his behaviour is much more subservient than otherwise. Instead he busied himself with his hair.

"Turn around, and let me wash your hair for you." I didn't continue until he had obeyed. "If we have time then you are welcome to show me whatever you like. I am glad you feel confident enough to ask, and in truth I never thought to ask myself." I'd been kissing and nuzzling at him while I spoke as well as lathering up the shampoo, scented with exotic spices. "Rinse your hair, then you can start on mine." I added as an afterthought. I twisted in the tub while he was beneath the surface and he began washing my hair as soon as he emerged from below the water. This had become a form of foreplay for us, so it was no surprise that we coupled briefly in the water before we got out and down to business.

We sat together, our bodies touching and I linked with Jean-Claude to amplify and direct his awareness of the city. I projected a map of the city into our minds and we could sense where all the vampires were. Those who'd been granted permission to enter the city, or live in it, had seen Jean-Claude at least once and we could recognise their power signatures, even weakened by their daylight slumber. We could also catch another signature of an aware vampire, one that should not have been there, for no vampire we had allowed in our city was strong enough to wake so early, not even Asher. And the power signature was not one we recognised. We narrowed the area down to the very house that...he had taken as a dwelling place and scanned it to find six other vampires present.

We broke the link, and I wrote down the information we had obtained. Glancing at my consort I could see he was weakened by the effort expended. I fed power back into him and offered him my wrist. "If you feel the need to feed again do so my raven."

"Non, ma petite, your power is enough to sustain me." He didn't look at me but he leaned towards me, tilting his neck to expose his throat in invitation. It wasn't quite noon, so...

"If you want to you can show me what vampire powers can add to sex now."

"Yes, please." And he proceeded to give me a very effective demonstration of why he was so desired among vampires.

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It was only as full moon approached that I even thought about Richard, about what I should tell him. I'd been able to avoid him since I got back from Morion's home, but I wouldn't be able to any longer ♦♦“ the pard had made a habit of meeting up with the pack during full moon and I couldn't exactly break it now. Oh we shifted at my house while the pack shifted at their lupanar, but we ran in the same woods and we always seemed to meet up sometime during the night. And there were my duties as Bolverk to consider, I'd been lucky that Richard hadn't called a pack meeting that needed my presence yet, but it would come and I should give Richard some advanced warning of my changes.

I had to tell him, but there was no way I'd tell him in person ♦♦“ he was far too volatile for that. I rang him; half hoping he wouldn't be in so I could just leave a message on the answering machine. My half formed prayers were answered, but this was too important to risk the chance that he would just erase the message without listening to it, he'd gotten better about it, but he still did it sometimes. And so as I spoke I wove a thread of magic down the phone line with my voice and into the tape ♦♦“ Richard would listen to the message, and understand it, he would think about it rationally, rather than merely react to it.

"Richard, it's Anita. I took the fourth mark about three weeks back and since then I've been able to change at will into both a leopard and a wolf. I don't think it's tied to the moon. We can discuss it more after the full moon." Blunt and to the point, but it gave the relevant information without

revealing anything too incriminating. I did not intend to make Richard one of my consorts or attendants. I'd grant him immortality if necessary, although I rather thought that even with only three marks he would be immortal from his link to Jean-Claude and to me now, but I would not tie myself to him so intimately, any more than I already had that was.

I sighed and dismissed the subject mentally, planning what I needed for the full moon and for the pard when they gathered. There were plenty of deer in the woods for when we hunted and Caspian was already in a coffin in the basement, with Damian. I'd have to explain about that to the rest of the pard ♦♦♦ Micah had made such a racket when he learned about it. Still we had come up with a plan, and the beauty of it was that we wouldn't have to lie at all. Caspian was of the line of the Sweet Dark, and it was too dangerous to risk letting too many people know that ♦♦♦ and that line was the only one with vampires who could shapeshift, the way some legends said they could. Of course it was possible, even likely, that people would notice Caspian was never around at full moon, but they weren't likely to put things together and realise that he was a shapeshifter as well as a vampire ♦♦♦ after all that's impossible. But if he spent too much time among the pard he'd run the risk of being found out.

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I'd grown comfortable with casual nudity during the three hundred years I spent learning to control my powers, something that had relieved my leopards greatly, so I was curled on the sofa barely dressed in a short nightgown when Caspian and Damian came up from the basement as dusk fell. Damian was fully dressed, in tailored wool pants, a silk shirt open at the neck and a pair of suede boots, all black, but Caspian was only wearing a white linen wrap around his waist, vaguely reminiscent of ancient Egyptian cultures to my eyes.

"Damian, you look delicious. Something special?" He'd asked my permission to accept the overtures that a human woman had made to him and I wasn't sure whether he had a date with her tonight or not. I'd checked that Rachel wasn't one of the fanatics that hated vampires or a criminal, she turned out to be 'clean', but still I'd told Damian that while he was free to court her ♦♦♦ or perhaps to let her court him, he had to let me meet her and give final approval before he lay with her.

"Rachel wanted to go to the opera with me. There's a production of 'Carmen' on tonight. Will this be acceptable do you think?" He was nervous if he was asking me for fashion advice. I never acquired a taste for dressing my followers up the way Jean-Claude does with Jason and anyone else he can, and I really don't have much of a sense of fashion.

"I can't think why not. The standards of dress for theatres and that sort of thing have been relaxed quite a lot and you look gorgeous, but if you're worried you could always add a jacket."

"Yes, I will thank you." Damian turned to go back down to the basement for a jacket before I called him back.

"What time do you have to leave? Do you have time to feed before you go?"

"Yes, I'm meeting her in an hour. She said she was thinking about letting me feed on her afterwards, but I'm not sure. I thought perhaps I could feed on Nathaniel, to help him with his control tonight." Damian looked back at me with an appeal in his eyes ♦♦♦ Nathaniel is equal in status to him, or slightly lower when measured by Demonkin law, but he is my pomme de sang and has been for a while ♦♦♦ I'd staked a claim on him that I hadn't really on Damian and that confuses things. It will settle down eventually, when we've all had time to adjust to the changes in our lives, but until then we'll get awkward moments.

"If he agrees, then of course you can." Damian left immediately. "Caspian, you should ask Zane or Cherry to let you feed on them. Or will you be satisfied with the meat we hunt down after we



shift?" I knew that in animal form vampires of the Sweet Dark's line could eat solid food ♦♦♦ although only meat, but I wasn't sure whether this was supplementary to the blood they needed, or could replace it.

"It would be better if I could feed first, that way I have more control over the change. And I'd need a lot more meat if I didn't feed first than I do when I have fed before I shift."

"Then go ask one of them." With that I dismissed him and returned to waiting for the rest of the pard to show up. Merle, Micah and Noah were already here, they lived with me, just like Zane, Cherry, Nathaniel and my guards did, but Jason would deliver Gregory and Vivian before he took Stephen to the lupanar. Elizabeth and Caleb would probably show up as late as they could, and more likely than not together, while Gina and Violet usually arrived with Matthew, who, like Elizabeth, had refused my protection at first when the council arrived and took over the Circus.

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The explanation of who and what Caspian was went off as smoothly as we could have expected. The more submissive members of our pard accepted what we told them without any question. Merle and Noah understood the tactical uses of hiding the identity of our new pard member, just as my guards did. But Caleb and Elizabeth were ready to kick up a fuss, until I made an issue of being an autocratic ruler, the sort my nature called for me to be. I lit a ball of red flame resting on my hand before I spoke.

"Elizabeth, Caleb, what am I to you?" They hesitated, but acknowledged me as their Nimir-Ra.

"Whose will rules here, mine or yours?"

"Yours does." Elizabeth had learned her place when I shot her for neglecting her duty to Nathaniel, and Caleb had been a little scared of me since I'd almost eaten him ♦♦♦♦♦ literally ♦♦♦♦♦ under the combined influence of Belle Morte, the ardeur and Richard's Hunger.

"Good. You understand that much at least. It is my will, mine and that of my consort in the pard, your Nimir-Raj, that Caleb only join us on full moons, that no one but the pard know that he is shapeshifter as well as vampire. And to make sure of that I bind you to silence on this matter." And with those final words I locked a spell around all of my pard, binding their silence about Caspian as fully as I had bound their silence on my other abilities.

"Come, let us hunt, and enjoy the night." And then I stepped out of my nightgown, tossing it through to my bedroom and shapeshifted, to my leopard form, my coat near white save for my black markings, eyes as grey as steel, no colour to me at all in this form. I even created the goop that all the weres give off when they shapeshift, maintaining the illusion that I was just a panwere ♦♦♦♦♦ although that was hardly inconsequential. The rest of my people followed my example, shifting to animal form, some removing their clothes first, as in the way Caspian pulled off his wrap, others just shifting in whatever they were wearing. It didn't matter, they all kept clothes here in case they needed them, and in other places, as we were as likely to shift back to human with the wolves as alone here.

And then we led them out on the hunt, my mate and I. we easily caught the scent of the deer, and without words formed a strategy to hunt at least one down, if not more. Our methods owed more than a little to the tactics of the wolves I freely admit, but still modified, for we are built more for speed than endurance, not as the wolves are. And we had the trees as another route for us to travel, difficult thought it could be at times. I decided to hunt from above, the highway of the trees, while my leopards sought out the prey on the ground. In the end the deer, an older stag, one that hadn't been able to keep his herd passed beneath me while running from the others and I leapt down to tear out his throat. The others backed off, letting me take the choicest portions, but I didn't take more than a few token bites, then I let the others feed.

We met up with the wolves a couple of hours later and joined them as they hunted in the woods. It is harder for the pack to find enough prey to satisfy them than for our smaller pard and so we added our skills to theirs. We do not always hunt on full moons, more often we buy cattle and have them delivered to the lupanar so we can feed without the need to hunt our meal down. It is the only way to conserve the prey for us to hunt for all time.

We ran together for the rest of the night and when we tired we made our way back to my house and slept in a pile of bodies out in the back ♦♦“ at least most of my pard did. Caspian returned to the basement so he'd be safe and although I lay on the inside of the pile, protected by my people, wrong though that felt, I didn't sleep, staying on watch instead.

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"Anita. I need to talk to you." Richard didn't even wait for me to greet him, he just walked straight into my home and began talking. "You had seven new leopards in your pard last night, I didn't recognise any of them and I need to know."

"Why? You aren't involved in pard business; they belong to me, not to you."

"You'd worry if there were as many new alphas joining the wolves as there already are; why shouldn't I worry when there's six new alphas in your pard? And I didn't see you at all last night. I know you can't shift, but you normally spend at least some of the full moon night with us."

"Actually you did see me, I was one of the alphas you didn't recognise ♦♦“ the white one if you want to know. As for the rest: do you want the truth, or the official story? If I tell you the truth I'll have to put a spell on you that'll stop you ever telling anyone else without my permission."

"Who knows the truth?" Richard sounded suspicious, as if he thought that he was the only one who'd have to be bound not to repeat the truth if he wanted to know it.

"Jean-Claude, Asher, Damian, Nathaniel, Micah and the people who are here as a result of the truth know all of it, some of the vampires and some of my pard know some of the truth, but everyone who knows any of the truth is bound not to repeat it without my permission." He hesitated, obviously considering the prospect.

"Go ahead, put the spell on me. I want to know." Mentioning that Jean-Claude knew just what I was had probably been the deciding factor in his decision to know the truth, or perhaps I was being unfair to him. I cast the spells to ensure no one else heard what I was to say and that he would never repeat it as I explained the official story.

"First, as far as anyone outside of our secret is concerned when I took the fourth mark from Jean-Claude I became a pan-were. I was infected by Gabriel and Raina before I took the marks, and when I took the first mark it delayed the activation of my lycanthropy until I took the fourth mark. I believe that sounds plausible?" I made the last sentence into a question and he agreed, that yes, it did sound plausible.

"Now, as to the truth, I'm one of the creatures that created vampires, we're called the Demonkin. We created them to serve us, to be our slaves and we can bond anyone to us. The other new leopards in my pard are bonded to me, the five females, alphas, as guards, and the male as a lesser attendant. Oh, and the male, Caspian is also a vampire of the Sweet Dark's line, whereas my guards were created by me, they don't have the same weaknesses as normal weres, but they're under orders to pretend that they do. When I came into my powers I was taken somewhere else to be trained in them, that's where I got the new people. Jean-Claude is bonded to me as my primary consort, Asher, Micah and one of the new vampires, Donne, are my consorts, and Nathaniel and Damian are my personal attendants. Consorts, and attendants are

those who serve me most closely, akin to an entourage, and they are my slaves, totally. My guards are still slaves if I'm honest, but slaves with more rights and privileges. But they all agreed to this beforehand. I won't force this on anyone, and I'm trying to hide what I am as much as I can."

All he said to me was "I'm glad we broke up when we did. I couldn't stand to tie myself to such a monster." He didn't seem to care about the differentiation among my entourage, which was just as well, as I had no intention of explaining it to him.

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My phone rang just after Richard had walked out on me again. I was tempted to let one of my leopards pick it up, but decided against it. I knew for a fact that there'd been another kill by the same group of vamps the night before the full moon, and there'd probably be another from last night. I expected the police to be ringing to call me out to another crime scene. I was wrong.

"Anita Blake. Unless this is about murder you can just hang up now." Yes, I was cranky from Richard's rejection.

"Better. We've got evidence on the vamps you fingered for us. All you need to do is come down here and collect the warrants, and then you can go and kill them."

"I'm glad you've managed to get the evidence. They didn't outright challenge Jean-Claude yet, or I'd've told you, but I was a bit worried."

"About Count Dracula? You always were protective I guess. Do you want any help with this? You did say that there's seven of them, didn't you?"

"Yes, but it's daylight at the moment, I can manage myself. The building we found them in doesn't have any special security measures, so I shouldn't have any problems."

"Right, well get down here as quick as you can to pick up the warrant. I'd've had it delivered except you take the night off on full moon, and I wasn't sure when you'd get it." It sounded a little like an accusation and I couldn't resist the urge to counter it.

"Well, I've adopted the local wereleopard group. I'm not a wereleopard, but some necromancers can call an animal the way most master vampires can, and my animal is a leopard. They need me. I'll be there in half an hour, at the most." That was a bit fast, but I thought I could get away with it. I actually spent most of that half hour making sure my leopards would be safe in my absence, then teleported the jeep as close to RPIT headquarters as I could get away with.



"Stay in the car Ruth, you won't be accompanying me to deal with the intruders. I'd rather the police didn't even know that you're here." Ruth was the best shot, but she was also one of the more submissive of my guards, and she obeyed without question.

"Yes, my queen." I'd built a couple of minor spells into the brooches my guards wore, and she activated one of them now, a notice- me-not thing. People would see her; they just wouldn't remember seeing her, because it wouldn't register. I also made a habit of boosting the energy in the brooches ♦♦♦ "ruby on a silver background ♦♦♦" once a week. After all I boosted the power in the bracers I gave my consorts and personal attendants at least that often, through sex with everyone but Donne ♦♦♦ with him I took time to boost the energy as a separate project.

I went through to the station; Dolph was back at work, but only under probationary terms. I hadn't seen him at any of the crime scenes I'd been invited to, I had the feeling that he'd become more an administrator than a real policeman, but only until he got his issues with vampires sorted out.

"Hello, Detective Perry. Sergeant Zerbrowski said you had an execution warrant for me?"

"Yes Ms. Blake. Sergeant Zerbroski has them in his office. I'll take you to him." And with those words the tall detective took me through to see Zerbrowski.

"Here's the papers Blake   " now go and kill those bastards."

"I will, but could you tell Dolph that if his son wants I'd be willing to talk to him about his decision, and so would some of the vampires I know. If he insists on being turned I can get Damian to bring him over, that way Darrin will be mine to protect and safe from vampire politics."

"Sure, do you think it will help?"

"I don't know, but it's worth a try." With those words I left to deal with the intruders.

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It was near four in the afternoon, and the master of the kiss was older than Jean-Claude, by more than a thousand years. I'd been able to tell his age from the power traces left on his meal. He wasn't a sourdre de sang, so I could have left it to Jean-Claude to kill him, my raven would have won, but it was much easier to bring him to human justice, and kill the arrogant bastard myself.

I wasn't surprised to see two of them awake and waiting for me, I'd been obvious enough.

"Anita Blake. Are you here to fight me on your whore of a master's behalf? Or to make arrangements for him to fight me, and settle this challenge?" The vampire who spoke looked like the model of a Roman general, and might well have been one in life. He was six feet tall with dark brown hair and eyes, and a beaky nose, but somehow on him it looked right. His companion was about a thousand years older, he looked like some sort of toy, delicately built, and beautiful, although not the way my men are, he seemed fragile and breakable. His eyes were grey and his hair a very pale blond, falling to his waist.

"Neither. You could not defeat Jean-Claude, he is a sourdre de sang, but I am here to enact human justice, which by council decree rules vampires in America." They attacked then, and I let them. Rather than use my powers I fought them barehanded, but with all the strength and speed I possessed. I killed them easily enough, tore them apart. The challenge lay in recreating them, so that they seemed to have died in a way that a human could have killed them, as I decided to try to piece together their bodies rather than destroy them completely and create a new pair of bodies from scratch. But I left that until I had dealt with the others.

As for the others, all save the youngest, a girl who was barely out of adolescence and had not been dead a month, I killed them using the injections Edward had introduced me to. And the single vampire I showed mercy to I woke using my powers.

"You are part of a kiss that has broken human law and invaded my lover Jean-Claude's territory. Tell me, and I will know if you lie, did you ever choose to be involved in the killings?"

"No!" She was sobbing, in fear of me. "I...the first time I'd just risen, I was so hungry and he smelled so good, but he was already dying. I tried to refuse, but my master starved me unless I fed with him and his other slaves, and sometimes he would force me."

"Very well. You have one day to get out of the city. Take any money you have, or that they had and leave now. It isn't dark outside, but there's a basement and you can get to it safely enough. Hide there until the police have confirmed that I've executed the kiss." She fled, without questioning my actions and I created a body to replace her before I reported the execution to the police. They were oh so impressed that I slaughtered a kiss of seven by myself, even though I

underplayed it by pretending that only the master had been awake.

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I went to Jean-Claude when I could get away from the police, congratulating me on killing all seven of the monsters without getting a scratch on me. On reflection I should have pretended that I'd been hurt at least a little or that they were all still trapped in their daylight slumber. But I hadn't thought of that in time, and so I had to endure their fussing, until I could get away.

"Anita." He was waiting for me in the living room and he pulled me into an embrace, nuzzling at my neck. "Did you have to kill them all?"

"No, my raven. The youngest one only fed because she had been starved and I just told her to leave your territory. But I created a body to make the police think all of the kiss had been killed. It was a nice diversion I must admit."

"I am glad it pleased you." He paused to kiss me hungrily, then looked at me afterwards to check I wasn't angry before continuing. "Did you find out who the master was?"

"No, but he about two thousand years old, and had a companion three thousand years old. He had dark brown hair and eyes, and he was six feet tall, with a beaky nose. His companion was beautiful, but very feminine, grey eyes and long, very pale blond hair. Do you recognise them from the description?"

"Yes, the master is, no, was called Quintus, and his companion was called Thornegar. Might I ask what happened?"

"Well, Quintus asked if I was there to arrange for him to fight you, or to fight him on your behalf. I told him that I was there to enact justice under human law, then I tore him and Thornegar to bits." I pulled him down to sit beside me on the couch as I spoke, and he wrapped himself around me, pressing up against me in ways that made me think of other things than the execution I was describing. I was tempted to forget about telling my lover what had happened, and besides there was little more to tell, but he had asked, and he asked so little of me. "I used an injection that Edward had taught me to kill the rest, except for the youngest one. Instead I woke her, and asked her about her actions. When she told me she was forced I sent her down to the basement, to hide until the police had collected the bodies. Then I made the two vampires I tore apart look as if their deaths had been within a human's power and created a body to replace hers."

"You are merciful ma petite." He kissed my neck, letting me know that he was not adverse to the idea of taking pleasure with me.

"She was forced. Human law doesn't really consider just how much control a powerful enough master can have over the vampires who serve him. And they aren't going to know any difference between her body and the body I created in her stead." I didn't want Jean-Claude to be surprised by an intrusion into his territory again. Tempting as the idea of enjoying his beautiful body was that took precedence. "I'm going to weave a sensory net over the city and tie it into your bracers. You'll be alerted whenever a strange vampire enters your territory. I could tie it directly into your mind if you'd rather, but it might be easier for you if it's filtered through the bracers."

"What would be the difference ma petite?" He sat back a little, resigned to the delay in his wishes.

"Through the bracers you'd be alerted with full information whenever a new vampire entered the city, and it would monitor their positions, giving you the information whenever you queried the spell, until you told it not to. Direct to your mind it would be a constant awareness of every vampire in the city."


"Then I would prefer to access the spell through my bracers, if they can hold it."

"Oh, there's enough power floating about unused for that not to be a problem."

"Thank you Demonkin." He whispered the last word, dropping his eyes in submission and sliding from the couch to kneel on the floor at my feet, with his hands in my lap, looking very much the suppliant.

"Not here, in your bedroom. And I want to speak to you about the way you just behaved."

He swallowed, looking nervous. "There wasn't anyone around to see, and it got you to suggest we go somewhere more private did it not?"

"There is that." I laughed; I hadn't expected that he'd use my edict about his behaviour outside of his bedroom that way. Still I couldn't let it go totally unpunished, but I could settle for something light. Once we got to the bedroom I put his collar around his throat and set up the sensory net as I described  then I left him. I returned an hour later, smelling of Damian, when I felt the first stirrings of panic edging his mind.

"Don't try to manipulate me like that again my raven. Now, we can enjoy ourselves together, that is if you are still willing?"

"Oui, ma petite." He pressed himself against my body and kissed me deeply, hungrily, before backing down and submitting to me in actions. It was most pleasant as he tried to atone for his earlier error.

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Dolph approached me about a week later, in response to the offer I'd made through Zerbrowski.

"Anita. You told Zerbrowski that you'd be willing to talk to my son about the downside of being a vampire." He hadn't actually met me in person, I wasn't too sure I wanted him to, there was too great a chance that I'd lose my temper and hurt him with the way he'd been acting lately.

"Yes, I realise he might be reluctant to believe me, so I can also have my vampire servant talk to him about it as well. Damian has nothing but praise for me, after all I've never hurt him, but he's got plenty of horrible things to say about his first master. And if your son refuses to change his mind I can have Damian bring him over. That will mean that Damian becomes Darrin's master, but he's not strong enough to be independent, so I'll be Darrin's true master. I'm powerful enough that no one messes with people under my protection, at least not unless it's a challenge to me, and Darrin isn't close enough to me for that."

"You make it sound as if you'll own him."

"Effectively I will. Damian will have to be there when he wakes for the first time, or I will, to make sure he doesn't kill anyone. I know they've got counsellors now, but I'd feel better being there myself. One of the drawbacks to being a vampire is that weak vampires, new vampires, unless they belong to someone powerful, with a dangerous reputation, are anyone's meat who wants them."

"And who do new vampires belong to?" Dolph's voice had gone low and dangerous, it almost sounded as if he wanted to threaten me.

"The vamp who made them, or their master. If your son's fiancée is in St. Louis then she's not a master, and from what you've said about her it doesn't sound as if she's all that old herself. If

she's one of the new vamps turned by Malcolm's church chances are she belongs to Malcolm, but doesn't know that herself."

"How can she not understand what it means to be a vampire when she is one? And yes, the little bitch is a member of the Church of Eternal Life."

"Because no one ever told her exactly what being a vampire entails, the Church glosses over the less pleasant aspects, the stuff that's bad publicity. Malcolm's of the Traveler's line, they tend to be more manipulative than the other lines, not that any line is straightforward, but the Traveler's line are more likely to see their followers as somehow less than them, animals, or chess pieces. If Darrin lets Damian bring him over he'll be of Belle Morte's line, one of the more pleasant lines, and the reason that vampires have a reputation for extraordinary beauty. I am a good master, I protect my people with everything I have, and I don't abuse them. I punish them if they defy me, the way a parent would punish an errant child, but I don't abuse them."

"You think of your people as children? And who exactly are your people?"

"No, I don't think of them as children, but that was the best comparison I could think of. My people are anyone who relies on me to protect them, the leopards, my vampire servant, and through him any vampires he brings over from when he became mine, some of the wolves. You get the picture."

"Yes. I'll get Darrin to ring you and arrange for you to meet with him. Thank you." He sounded as if it was a great relief to him not to have to worry that his son might get into trouble of the sort he'd seen so many vampires in.

"You're welcome." He was under orders to attend therapy, to work out his issues. If he absolutely couldn't he'd be transferred somewhere else, and I had the feeling that the news I'd just given him would help a lot ♦♦♦ he was certainly sounding a lot less hostile to me now.

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I arranged to meet with my architect at the Circus of the Damned shortly after Dolph phoned me. I'd actually gone to my land the night the purchase was finalised and excavated a fifteen by twenty metre hole, ten metres deep, piling the stone up in blocks of one metre length, half a metre depth, and three quarters of a metre width. If it was necessary I could always reduce the size of the blocks, making them smaller, but still as perfectly fitted ♦♦♦ the way I'd cut them you'd be able to fit them together without using any mortar, and ideally I'd prefer to have my home built the way Aztec homes had been, massive blocks, perfectly fitted together, with no need for mortar. But the fact of the matter was that there was no one with those skills, and so I'd have to settle for the closest I could get to that. When I thought about it, considering the depths to which I'd excavated it would be perfectly possible to put an apartment, perhaps even on two levels beneath the car park, and I'd given my architect instructions to design one if at all possible. He'd visited the site almost immediately after I'd prepared it, and based his designs on that, and my orders to use the stones cut as much as possible.

"I've got the preliminary drawings. I understand you wanted it to be as much as possible built in the style of an old Roman villa?"

"Yes, or at least around a central courtyard, although the car park should be roofed over, and perhaps a shallow layer of dirt, a foot or so used to cover it."

"Very well." He made a note in response to that. "I take it you want some sort of garden in there then?"

"Yes, some sort of low growing plant we can walk on to suppress weeds, and plants, preferably

scented, that flower by night, including some sort of climber that I can train to grow up the walls of the courtyard. But I can get a gardener in for that. What else do you need to know?"

"You said that you wanted it as much as possible to be made from the excavated stone; do you really want walls that thick?"

"No, I suppose not. Figure on stones of the dimensions 75cm by 50cm by 25cm for the outer walls and get back to me with a rough estimate of how many will be required. I'll make sure there are that many stones available of the correct size. And for the internal walls wherever possible work on the basis of having stones of dimensions 25cm by 15cm by 10cm. Again I'll provide as many as possible. Where you can use stones leave the walls bare. Consult with Eve regarding the security system to be installed, and don't bother trying to work out how to hide the wires. I'll have my own people install everything electrical after the structural work has been done," actually I intended to install it myself by use of magic and integrate magical defences and amenities at the same time, "but make sure that any other equipment Eve instructs you to install is ready, including places to put cameras and such."

"I think I can manage that. You've set me quite a challenge. Now, I know you want stone on the surface, but what about the car park, and the apartment beneath for your vampire? Can I use modern materials for that?"

"The car park can be made of whatever you want, but you'll have to ask Damian about the apartment, he'll be living there after all. Of course the roof will have to be slate, and the floors, at least except for those at ground level should be of high quality wood, seasoned oak, or perhaps some other more exotic hardwood, but with a long life expectancy so to speak."



"I can manage that. Do you want to look at the preliminary drawings or not?"

"Jean-Claude recommended you, that means I trust your judgement. But defer to Eve on security issues. I've told her to work exclusively with you on this."

"As you wish. Can I talk to Damian now?"

"Yes, Caspian can show you where he is." The old vampire had been waiting, in case I wanted or needed anything and immediately led the human out.

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Dolph had actually gone through Bert and booked an appointment for his son and his fiancée to meet with me and discuss his choice about becoming a vampire, but I'd insisted that it take place somewhere more neutral. And somewhere, incidentally that I could bring vampires to serve as examples of the downside to being a vampire. That pretty much ruled out the Circus or my home   or any of Jean- Claude's businesses, so I rented a hotel room for the night and invited them to meet me there.

I'd rushed through my animating appointments, teleporting to get to the cemeteries in time, and then teleporting to the hotel, making sure that no one noticed, or remembered how my car had appeared out of nowhere and disappeared equally mysteriously. Jean-Claude had told me that Damian and any other vampires he was willing to lend to me for this discussion would be waiting for me, and they were. He'd given me Willy, who could tell Darrin how terrible his life under Nikolaos had been, and Hannah, who'd moved here for the protection Jean-Claude offered. She was older than Willy, but not by much, only ten years or so, still she could probably tell more tales of the abusive vampire social system than he could.

Darrin's fiancée was pretty, but not beautiful, more a girl next door, or all American look, blonde with blue eyes, five foot seven in height and athletic. I could tell she was barely five years dead,



and I knew she was one of Malcolm's followers, just from the way she held herself.

"Anita, I don't think you know my fiancée, this is Christine Summers. Who are your friends?" Darrin started the conversation, and waited for me to respond.

"These are Damian, my vampire servant, Willy, and Hannah. I brought them here to show you the downside of life as a vampire, something I'm not entirely sure your fiancée knows about herself. The Church of Eternal Life creates an artificial environment in which vampires can exist, and Malcolm rarely uses the power he has over his flock, so you do not entirely realise it is there. But the fact is that if he wanted to he could override your will with his own, I have seen it happen before. Belle Morte once managed to do that to me and I am only linked to one of her line ♦♦“ well he was of her line at the time. It was a partial success for her at best, but the fact remains that a master has certain powers over vampires descended from him; it is his power that keeps the hearts of any lesser vampires bound to him beating. If you do decide that you want to be a vampire I want you to consider the possibility of letting Damian bring you over. My magic interfered with his links to anyone else, and now that is what keeps his heart beating, no one else can control him. And so you would belong to me. I assure you that I am not a cruel master. All I would expect of you would be that you obey the law, but if you did break it I would kill you without hesitation. And Christine, I am considering negotiating for you with Malcolm, for Dolph's sake, tell me in about a week if you cannot bear that. Now, my companions can tell you better than I of the harshness, and cruelty inherent in being a weak vampire."

They told their own horror stories, Damian's by far the worst, and he was the most reluctant to speak, only really opening up when he was curled in my arms, body pressed against mine, and when the vampires were finished Christine told me that she would be happy to belong to me if I thought I could protect her from that. Darrin decided that he still needed to think a bit more about his decision, but he'd come to me if that was his choice. Then, after all the others had gone I lay with Damian and offered him the comfort of my body.

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[Back to index](#)

Chapter 3 by Jay

"I don't know how you did it, but I've got to thank you. Darrin's decided he doesn't want to be a vampire after all, or at least not yet." Dolph couldn't get through to me, so he left a message, and I knew just how grateful he was. Finding out that his son didn't want to die and become a vampire after all made everything else seem so much better in comparison ♦♦“ and when it came to grandchildren he could always hope Darrin would divorce Christine and find someone else. The assurance that his son was staying human combined with the therapy he'd been ordered to take seemed to help him get his issues under control, and we even managed to resume our earlier friendship, albeit tinged with some wariness on my part. He'd changed towards me before, and I knew he could change again, probably would when he learned what I was.

My architect got back to me, telling me that we'd need about 4000 of the larger sized stones as I'd outlined to him, and the rest could be cut down into the smaller size again as we'd discussed. He told me that this scheme gave the same thickness to the walls of the inner courtyard as to the outermost walls, and that left about 700 000 of the smaller sized stones. I prepared the stones overnight, and then all I had to do was wait for the builders to actually put them together. It took no more than six months, and then I fitted my home with all the wiring it needed, using the diagram drawn out by a qualified electrician as a guide, and added the dimensionally shifted area that was my true home.

Nathaniel settled almost perfectly into his position as one of my personal attendants, he was willing to spend as long as he needed to holding and reassuring one of my consorts if they needed it, well except for Micah, but then Micah would never go to him or Damian, no matter how great his need. Not that they needed it comfort often, only after they'd argued with me, chafing at my dominance, and that didn't happen often enough to be a true concern. Donne, on the rare

occasions he questioned my judgement always directed his doubts about Jean-Claude's ability to lead and guide the city, by his lights that was my place, not my primary consort's. Jean-Claude would sometimes try to manipulate me, and always got a short lecture and the knowledge that I wouldn't take him to my bed for at least three days for his pains, and he had some fights with Asher. Asher was the most defiant of my consorts, ready to shout at me whenever he thought I was behaving unjustly, and he would sometimes be right, but he always needed comfort after he'd yelled at me. I wasn't entirely sure what stories explained how often Nathaniel was with one of my vampire consorts in privacy. And he was able to reprimand my consorts discretely if he had to, on one occasion when Micah and Jean-Claude were sniping at each other he silenced them simply by pointing out that they were embarrassing me. He was among the best of my retinue at hiding his true status, carefully submissive among outsiders, although he did gain a little status among the pard, and he had requested my permission to accept the overtures Detective Arnet made to him ♦♦" which permission I gave willingly.

The sensory net I'd set up for Jean-Claude worked perfectly, and by linking it through his bracers he wasn't overwhelmed by knowing exactly what every vampire in the city was doing. More than one intruder got a surprise to see the Master of the City stroll up to them casually when they hadn't even warned him of their arrival. But it only lasted a year before the council contacted us, requesting permission to send a delegation to St. Louis.

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"We need to work out how we're going to greet our guests." I'd created a council room in my dimensionally shifted quarters where we gathered to discuss the upcoming visit. Apparently all seven council members would be sending representatives, including the Earthmover's replacement, a master of his line about two thousand years old called Beresmenes. But three of them would be coming themselves, the Traveler, Morte d'Amour and Belle Morte. I'd only invited people who already knew about what I was to this council, I had thought about calling all the leaders of the weres, but decided against it. Donne and Caspian weren't necessary for the council, they didn't even think it their place to attend, and neither Nathaniel nor Damian thought they had anything to contribute, but Asher, Jean-Claude and Micah all were there, all wearing their collars. Richard was sitting opposite me, trying his best not to look at my consorts, obviously uncomfortable at their behaviour ♦♦" well Asher and Jean-Claude's behaviour anyway; my vampires were curled up against me, with eyes cast down submissively.

"Do you really have to hide what you are Anita?" Micah might have agreed to wear his collar but he wasn't comfortable with it and he resented the fact that I wanted to pretend to be human, after all he didn't, he couldn't.

"From the humans, yes for now I do. They'd be scared of what I am, and there aren't any laws about my kind. If I don't hide what I am the humans might attack me, and I'd be forced to conquer them all. I don't want to do that. But I can let the council know what I am, you are right. Jean-Claude, Asher how would they react to one of the Demonkin?"

"By our law there is only one way to deal with one of the Demonkin. Comply with their every wish, and hope they do not demand anything too terrible. It is the only practical way to work. And if there is a representative of all seven council members then they will probably be able to answer whatever terms you choose to dictate almost immediately." It was Jean-Claude who answered, Asher hadn't learned as much about my kind as he had before they left Belle Morte for the first time.

"Kind of like the way normal vampires feel about masters then?" It was a joke, but there was a strong element of bitter truth to it, and I could taste that bitterness in Asher's agreement.

"Or those who do not have the council's favour feel about those who do."

"Could we get away with only greeting the council members initially even if I wasn't Demonkin?" Richard didn't seem too happy at being left out of the conversation, but he seemed to recognise that this was a vampire matter, not something for shapeshifters, not really and his part would come once we'd worked out what would normally happen if I was human.

"Yes, I think we could. But...you won't be able to hide what you are from them, they will know that you are far from a normal necromancer." Jean-Claude sounded tentative, nervous at the idea of seeming to contradict me.

"I realise that. But I'd rather just deal with the council members first, perhaps that way I won't have to meet with the representatives personally. I'll declare myself as Demonkin when they arrive. Richard, will you stand by me as an ally?"

"Of course. What do you need?" Helping his allies and friends was a strong, a very strong, instinct for Richard.

"You at my side when I meet with the council members, and with as many of your pack as you feel comfortable bringing."

"Agreed, but I'm your ally, not your servant."

"I'll create a lesser throne for you. But greater than the thrones our visitors will sit on. Now, we need to discuss what will make the strongest impression." And we began to decide just how we would present ourselves.

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Jean-Claude curled at my feet, with my other consorts, but he was the only one close enough to rest his head on my lap. Richard sat to my right hand in a throne made of onyx, the same size as mine, but less ornate. He'd been persuaded into dark green leather by the simple fact that my consorts were all too plainly dressed as sex toys. They were wearing loose trousers in heavy silk brocade and thin silk shirts which exposed their bracers and collars. Jean-Claude was wearing crimson while the others were all in black, and leashes were fastened to their collars, and left lying loose. I was wearing my Demonkin form and clothed in nothing but my power, forming a layer of flames around my body. There was no conventional way we could have redecorated the room in time so I'd used my power instead, sending all of Jean-Claude's efforts at decoration into suspension to be replaced by my throne room. My throne was on a slight dais, raised above the rest of the room, while Richard's was not so the height difference was less noticeable. I'd sheathed the entire room in black marble and created my own throne out of a single ruby. The three thrones I'd prepared for our council visitors were smaller than mine or Richard's and made of white marble and white velvet cushions littered the floor in front of them, so any companions they chose to bring could be seated, as my consorts were, save that my consorts sat, or rather lounged, on red velvet cushions.

Damian, Nathaniel and Casper guided our guests in, all of them had dressed in white, a dramatic contrast to the black leather my personal attendants were wearing and the loose red cotton tunic and trousers Caspian had chosen as giving good range of movement. The Traveler's body this time was a darkly handsome man heavily muscled and dark enough in life to still be a light coffee colour. He'd only brought Balthasar as his companion and they were wearing matching white linen suits, surprisingly modern. Belle Morte had chosen a white silk dress that wouldn't have looked out of place at the French court four hundred years ago and her hair was styled to match. She had brought two snow leopards, lycanthropes in animal form and two male vampires, master vampires. From Jean-Claude's memories I knew that the seven hundred year old with clear grey eyes and ash blond hair was called Giacomo while the bulky dark haired vampire with black eyes was Arturo, and they were both dressed to match Belle Morte. Morte d'Amour looked ordinary, even in his white tux, with brown hair and eyes. But the two vampires with him and

Belle Morte's leopards were the only of the close attendants not offended by the seating arrangement ♦♦ "everyone else but the servants who followed and stood waiting, holding packages, was adverse to sitting on the floor at their masters' feet.

"Demonkin, might I introduce the Traveler, Belle Morte and Morte d'Amour of the council." Damian made the announcement as the more senior of my personal attendants while our guests seated themselves and then he and Nathaniel came to kneel to my left while Caspian stood behind them and to the left of my throne. I just leaned back and waited for my guests to speak petting my consorts while I waited, finally the Traveler as the most powerful council member present spoke.

"Lady, our apologies for our presumption, but we were unaware that you had manifested. The gifts that we brought are not worthy of you, and we had planned to offer separate gifts to each of your triumvirate. Shall we offer all gifts now to you?"

"No, only those you had planned to offer me. Give those gifts intended for my primary consort and my ally, the Ulfric of the Thronnos Roke clan, directly to them."

"As you wish Lady." The Traveler nodded to his human servant, Belle Morte let her hand fall to touch Giacomo's shoulder and Morte d'Amour leaned down to whisper an instruction to one of his vampires. Each of the three stood and collected wrapped packages from the servant at the back then brought them forward. Giacomo knelt to lay a wrapped picture in front of Jean-Claude, who smiled at him as he backed away and opened it. Balthasar knelt before me to present a delicate red glass vase and a box from a jeweller, one of the designers, containing a choker made of rubies set in white gold. The gift presented to Richard was a book, near five hundred years old, containing hand written observations of trolls, in Old High German, accompanied by a second book which was a printed translation.

"I appreciate your gifts. You have the right to hunt in my territory, but my gifts for you will ensure you have no need to." Caspian lifted a box from behind the throne and walked over to hand an amulet to each vampire. "So long as you remain within my territory you can draw all the energy you need from me through this, it will also feed the ardeur for you and your line Belle Morte. I will not force any of my followers into anyone's bed."

"Thank you Demonkin. We came here because there were reports of an unexplainable rise in Jean-Claude and Asher's power level, and an unprecedented leap in Jean-Claude's ability to sense his city. Naturally we understand that now, but what do you wish of us?" Well, I hadn't expected that, despite what Jean-Claude had told me. Considering how little I wanted they should accept my terms easily enough.

"No vampire is to stop or trouble me or mine anywhere we choose to travel. I am Master of St. Louis and vampires will know and accept that, but as far as humans are concerned Jean-Claude remains in that position ♦♦ "and he will continue to deputise for me for most purposes. The council will not trouble me nor will I trouble you."

They exchanged glances, united by their fear of me. "That is a most generous offer, we will have to allow the whole council to vote on it, but I cannot envisage it being refused."

"Naturally not. But this agreement will only last for a period of one century, after that I will visit you and we shall renegotiate our agreement. I doubt it shall be much different, but I might have chosen to live in a different city. If you have nothing more you wish to discuss you may leave."

They recognised the dismissal and rose to depart. Morte d'Amour asked a final question before he left.

"Might we still remain within your city to visit?"

"Of course. And if you return to make any more visits, bring the amulets to me and I will reactivate them. But I expect a response to my offer from the full council within a month."

"Naturally. I had thought that if it does not offend you we could send the representatives of the other council members back with the information so you need not be troubled with meeting functionaries."

"It does not offend me in the least. And if you really wish to socialise with me you can reach me through the Circus and Jean- Claude."

"And if I wish to speak with Jean-Claude alone, and not through you?" Belle Morte couldn't keep her hatred of me out of her voice, not that I could blame her for it.

"Then contact me, and I will consider your request." They finally left, and I had a chance to look at the portrait Belle Morte had given to Jean-Claude. It was of the same series as the pictures of Asher as Hephaestus, and of Asher as Cupid and Jean-Claude as Psyche, and depicted Asher as Hades offering a pomegranate to Jean- Claude as Persephone.

"What do you want to do with it my raven?"

"If Belle Morte does not see it on the walls she might be offended, and there is no reason to offend her is there?"

"No, but I take it you don't particularly want it displayed?"

"Non."

"Then we'll put it on the room you'll meet with Belle Morte in if you do meet her. Richard what do you think of your gift?"

"Incredible. I love it."

"Thank you for co-operating. From now on my retinue can act as such while inside the private areas of the Circus, but I don't think we need this anymore." And I restored the prior décor with a thought before we separated.

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The representatives of the other council members didn't stay, instead they were sent back to tell their masters who and what I was, and to convey my terms, but the Traveler visited me and offered to see about getting my kind the same legal status as vampires. I accepted willingly, and I found out just why he used the bodies of other vampires 💎💎" his own was near ruined, by the effects of a miscast spell, but he had been able to share others' bodies even then, and since then he raised it to an art. He had hoped I'd be able to do something to help him regain his own body, to restore it to how it was originally. I agreed and told him to come visit me with his body once my kind had legal protection in America.

Belle Morte also approached me, she wanted to speak to Jean-Claude alone, or at least without me present. I could understand that in a way, she felt threatened by me 💎💎" and any way she knew that no one could touch Jean-Claude sexually but me and mine, so I let my raven make the decision himself. He agreed to speak with her in private, but only in the Circus, where he'd be near to me. They met in the room we'd put Belle Morte's picture in, Jean-Claude wearing his collar with an open-necked shirt to emphasise who he belonged to and stayed there for about an hour until Belle left.

Jean-Claude refused to look at me after Belle Morte left, he kept his eyes cast down and head bowed ♦♦“ reverting to his behaviour when he first learned what I am. All I could think of to do was hold him, so that was what I did. I led him back to the bedroom and pulled him to lie with me, holding his head against my shoulder. I held him and whispered reassurances of my love for him, and of how greatly I desired him until he got up confidence enough to initiate sex. He enjoyed it well enough, even though he focused himself on my desires and pleasure, I could tell that from my link to him. And yet there was something anxious about his actions, almost desperate.

"Did I please you Demonkin?" The fear and desperation in his voice were even more apparent, and I could not understand why.

"Of course you pleased me. You always do. Why are you so nervous now?" He didn't answer, just tried to slide down my body to arouse me again with his mouth and tongue. I pulled him up and repeated the question. "I asked you why you're so nervous, and uncertain of your skills. I want you to answer me." He began to tremble at my words but he did answer in a quiet voice.

"Belle Morte said that Demonkin like to dominate their lovers, to be in charge and I'm scared that my fears have kept me from pleasing you, I saw how you were with Nathaniel."

"Love, I do enjoy dominating my lovers, but it doesn't have to be physical the way it is with Nathaniel. I dominate him that way because he enjoys it, and it does make a change. You always submit to me and place my pleasure first. I promise you that you do satisfy me, in every way."

"Truly?" It was a measure of how much Belle Morte had scared him that he questioned me, and I vowed that she would never be welcome in my lands again. Later I told her that, and sent her, just her without her retinue, back to Paris by my magic. But at that moment all I could do was comfort my beautiful raven, and I did, with words and with my body.

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Only a month after the council left my raven was captured. He'd had to visit Richard to negotiate for the continued support of the wolves, for the pomme de sangs and the other services they offered. Richard had become much more insistent on such things since he'd learned what I am, and I didn't care to make an issue of it. He'd assured me that he had facilities if Jean-Claude needed to stay with him during the day, and my raven had promised to contact me if he thought they were inadequate. Obviously they had failed to consider the possibility of anyone breaking into Richard's house, because he rang me in a panic when he got back the next day, reporting that he had been broken into, Jean-Claude was almost the only thing missing, and he had no idea what to say to the cops. He could hardly tell them that he'd had the Master of the City in the basement, could he?

As a matter of fact he could ♦♦“ but not the cops who'd responded to his alarm. I told him to contact Dolph, and to tell him what had happened. I hadn't been paying attention to my link to Jean-Claude, and although I could trace it through the past as far as I wanted to, theoretically locating him at any given time it had become confused, and seemed to echo equally strongly from about ten different locations ♦♦“ constantly changing locations at that. This confusion had started just a block away from Richard's house. I could locate his bracers easily enough, they weren't affected by whatever was confusing my sense of him, but I didn't have any history record for them, and to make matters worse they were three miles apart ♦♦“ both in skips somewhere. That worried me, because there were only two ways the bastards could have got them off my raven's wrists ♦♦“ cutting his hands off, or simply crushing them, hopefully the latter which would heal much easier. I picked them up using magic but I didn't see any point in sharing that information with the police. I did prepare a map and set a spell to plot the locations I sensed Jean-Claude's presence ♦♦“ perhaps there'd be an obvious focal point of the readings. That didn't work either, so all we really had to rely on was the pure police work Dolph and the RPIT team were doing.

At least almost all we had to rely on. There was only one thing that could give the sort of confused location crowd I was sensing from Jean-Claude ♦♦♦ a demon collar. They were the product of a sorcerer and a necromancer working together and bound a minor demon into the collar, to control a master vampire. It took someone with a touch of necromancy (albeit not enough even to be an animator) or empathy to use it, and it had to be activated by the murder of a vampire descended from the master you wanted to enslave and abuse. I reported this to Dolph, explaining that I had a link with Jean- Claude, and I recognised the effects because I'd found out about the demon collars by accident when I was trying to create something that would provide Jean-Claude with extra reserves if he needed them as a Christmas gift. It gave them at least a starting point, and helped eased my frustration at finding my magic useless. And I couldn't even devote too much time to helping in more mundane ways; I was too occupied in maintaining the pretence that Jean-Claude was still Master of the City for humans and learning how to control it directly with vampires, rather than through Jean-Claude as I had planned. The only thing I could do was make sure no vampire broke the law, or distracted RPIT from finding the bastards who'd stolen my consort, and that I did ensure, mostly by terrorising them.

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"Anita, we've got one of them. At least we think he's one of them. Can you come down here and try to help us get a confession?"

"Definitely. What do you want me to do?"

"We need to find out the name of his group and where they're keeping your lover. He's a member of HAV, but I have a feeling he's part of a splinter group. You need to find out as much as you can about that. We've just brought him in for questioning, he isn't a suspect at the moment, but he hasn't called for a lawyer yet, probably thinks it'd make him look guilty."

"Right. What did you get him on?"

"We traced him as having access to one of the important parts of that collar you described ♦♦♦ the focus jewel ♦♦♦ it fits the description you gave us, but no one knew what it was, except very few empaths, telepaths or clairvoyants could stand to be near it for long. It was part of a private collection, and our 'witness' bought it when the owner died. We have Mirandised him, so we can use anything you get out of him."

"Right. I'll be down there in ten minutes." This time I hung up on Dolph, to keep my promise ♦♦♦ teleporting to the RPIT headquarters more or less, only staying far enough away to make it appear as if I'd been driving there.

"Hello, Detective Perry. Dolph said he wanted me to help question a witness?"

"Yes, he's just down the corridor, interview room 3. Good luck."

"Thanks." Dolph and Zerbrowski were waiting there with a blond, blue- eyed man, five foot seven, the perfect WASP to be honest.

"Mr. Winton, this is our preternatural expert Ms. Blake."

"I know who the bitch is. She's the traitor who's been screwing a fucking vampire."

"Well, yes. Vampires are perfect slaves if you can convince them you're strong enough. Of course there are shortcuts." I used just a little bit of magic to encourage him to open up to me and forget there were two policemen in the same room.

"But it's almost impossible to get them nowadays. It took Adam's Sons nearly a year to get the parts together for one bonding collar. I'm not entirely sure it's working right even now. The slut tries to pretend he doesn't want it, but once you get past his inhibitions he's quite a firecracker."

"I know. Still did you have to take that one? I spent four years teaching him his place and training him up to my tastes, and now I've lost that investment of time."

"I'm afraid so, it's the principle of the thing you see, proving we can take and break their so-called 'Master of the City'. It's just an excuse for a monster to swan around with real people and pretend he's one of us."

"They were created to be slaves did you know? And when their owners died is it any wonder they became parasites? How did you manage to get the entire bonding collar together? Isn't there something special about the leather?"

"Yeah. We had to kill one of the vampires that creature had infected, and tan the skin for the leather. It took about six or seven layers stitched together to get it thick enough. I didn't know they were designed as slaves, doesn't surprise me though. Hey, if you want I could show you where we've got your pet, you can at least use him."

"No." I let my voice go cold, I was tired of dealing with the bastard who'd helped kidnap and rape my raven. "He belongs to me, I gave him my protection. That means it is my duty to prevent the sort of thing you did to him from happening, or failing that to avenge him. Dolph, have you got enough?"

"Yes, to book him, but we still need to know where they've got Jean- Claude hidden."

"If he isn't willing to tell you then you can always let him go on the basis on insufficient evidence. I promise that I'll get back to you with the location within twenty-four hours, and there'll be no evidence that any crime was committed."

"I'll tell you!" Mr. Winton apparently recognised what I was, at least in part. It was an effective little game. Except it wasn't a game, I would have done anything to get my lover back.

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"What were you thinking of Anita? You as good as said you were going to torture him to get information!" Dolph waited until there wasn't any chance of being overheard before he began shouting at me.

"I hinted at it yes, to encourage him to tell you what you needed to know, all I explicitly said was that if you let him go I could find out where they were keeping Jean-Claude within twenty-four hours and there wouldn't be any evidence of a crime being committed. For all you know that could mean that I intended to have him followed." They looked disbelieving so I elaborated. "It didn't of course, not exactly. I also learned how to use my magic to follow a signal from something I'd prepared properly, and I intended to plant one of the signalling devices on him, then check, or have my people check places where he spent more than an hour."

"And there wouldn't have been any evidence?" Zerbrowski sounded curious, rather than condemning what was after all illegal.

"No, the devices I created fall to dust within at most two days of when they were created."

"I don't want to know any more. You haven't actually done anything, but try not to let anyone realise what you're capable of. And what was that about vampires making perfect slaves if you're strong enough?"

"In some ways it's the truth. Weak vampires are slaves, owned by whatever master claims them. And if you have the right sort of magic then you can control vampires. I needed to convince him I had similar views to his, and so I spun a web of half truths and lies to get him to open up to me. It worked didn't it?" There was pain in my voice, that I'd had to talk of my raven as if he were nothing more than an animal, or a toy, in order to rescue him from those human bastards.

"You spent four years training Count Dracula eh?" Zerbrowski sounded amused by the thought, and I had to admit it was a bit funny, at least from their point of view, the Executioner claiming to have trained the Master of the City.

"Well, yes. Training him not to assume he has the right to make decisions for me, to actually show his emotions to me ♦♦" and to fasten his seatbelt when he's in my car!"

"I don't...think that's...what...he thought you...meant." Zerbrowski got out through his laughter.

"I know it isn't, but it does make what I told him the truth if you look at it the right way. What are you going to do about getting my lover out of there?"

"We can get everything together to raid them in about six hours. Will your lover be awake by then?" That would be four in the afternoon.

"Yes, even naturally. The demon collar they put on him will keep him awake no matter what. He'll need to feed and I'm the only person who knows how to get it off his neck."

"Right. Then meet us here at half past three. You won't be involved in the raid itself, you'll come in afterwards to keep him calm and take care of him."

"As long as I can do that it should be fine. And he'll need someone who can touch him without getting automatically attacked during his daytime slumber to take him home."

"What do you mean?"

"That cursed thing will have kept him continually conscious since they put it on him, as soon as I take it off he'll collapse into normal daylight slumber, I suspect that for the next week at the very least he'll have the same sleeping pattern as one of the new dead."

"You mean he won't be waking until dusk?"

"If we get him back, no. We can cope, we have been for the past two weeks, but you'll have to wait to get a statement from him."

"Right. Do you want to go back home and get some sleep?"

"Yes, I need it. You woke me up after I'd barely been asleep an hour." And with that I left.

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I knelt beside Jean-Claude as he cowered in a corner away from the humans. I knew the only reason he was still awake was the collar around his neck and so I couldn't take it off until I'd fed him at least. When he saw me he broke into a smile and spoke in a whisper.

"Master, I knew you'd come for me." His voice was hoarse, from screaming?

I pulled his bracers from my pocket and, hiding what I was doing from the camera the perverts had set up to record their abuse of Jean-Claude, and Dolph, with my body, returned the solid

bands of sapphire to his wrists. He smiled weakly at me, grateful for the power inherent in my gifts, and already stronger for it. I pulled him up against me.

"Did they break your hands to get these off?" I touched the bracers lightly and he nodded against my shoulder. I scanned him gently with my power to find that as I'd expected he hadn't fed since he'd been captured. "They didn't let you feed did they?" A rhetorical question, more for the record than anything else. I met Dolph's eyes as I pressed Jean-Claude's head into my throat. "Drink and grow strong. He'll collapse as soon as I get that cursed thing off him and I want to make sure he will wake up with nightfall."

When Jean-Claude stopped feeding I unfastened the collar, letting my magic seep into it and break the link to my raven the demon trapped inside the focus jewel had created, and let it drop to the floor as I caught the unconscious body of my vampire in my arms.

"Go ahead, ask."

"Why did he call you master? I thought he was Master of the City?"

"The council declared that I am Master of the City, not he, as we formed a triumvirate with the local Ulfric, and I am powerful enough to dominate him if I wished to. All the vampires know this, so any challenges come to me, not to him. A lot of Masters of the City use stalking horses to avoid being challenged themselves, I'm using Jean-Claude as a stalking horse against something that scares me even more."

"I saw how protective you've gotten of him, what sort of creatures are you so afraid of that you'll let him face them instead?"

"Reporters." I kept an absolutely straight face but Dolph burst out into laughter. I couldn't blame him, I'd faced Master Vampires fearlessly, even when I thought I was human, but put me against a reporter and I'm useless.

"I can't really blame you there." He finally admitted his own fear of the press, all cops hate and fear the media, who can sometimes make or break a case, or career. "He needs to make a statement. I want him down at the station as soon after it's dark as possible."

"I'll be with him when he gives his statement, and if you can manage to make the case in court without his testimony do it."

"The videos will probably be enough for some of it, but why don't you want him to testify?"

"It would be a media circus, I don't want him hurt as he would be if he had to go through that."

"He'll almost certainly need to be present I'm afraid."

"One of the main charges should be ritual murder. That thing wouldn't have worked if someone hadn't been killed to make it, and another to make it work, and if whoever fixed it on Jean-Claude's neck didn't have magic of their own ♦♦♦ a little bit of necromancy, or telepathy, or empathy. I'll testify about this nasty piece of work."

"I want Adam's Sons destroyed for this, their reputation so bad that no one will join them."

"Vindictive."

"They hurt Jean-Claude; no one hurts what's mine. Can I take him with me now?"

"He's yours?" Dolph sounded shocked by my casual declaration of ownership but he gathered

himself together enough to answer my question. "Yes, but you can't let him wash until we've done a rape kit at the station."

"Then can you get someone to do the rape kit here while he's out. I'll make sure he doesn't react. I know that he'll want to bathe when he wakes up, he spends hours in the bath even under ordinary circumstances." A long suffering sigh and eye roll made Dolph laugh again as I continued. "It's the only thing I can't trust his word on."

"All right, I'm not sure I'd want to have to deal with a conscious master vampire for this, it's rather unpleasant and undignified."

"I was thinking more along the lines of it being traumatic for him." I watched over my consort while the police poked and prodded at him, making sure he would never know what they had been doing to his unconscious body. I could spare him that much at least, and when they were finished I took him back to the Circus.

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Half an hour before dusk I had Jason and Stephen run a bath, as hot as they could stand it, and watched as they began to bathe my raven, cleaning the scent of those humans from him. I'd already removed much of the scent with magic, almost all of it, but I knew he would feel better to be cleaned by water as well.

"Wash his hair as well." It was tangled and semen had dried in it, it would take a long time, or magic to untangle it. In truth I would prefer to take the time to brush it out myself, but I wasn't sure I had that option.

By the time Jean-Claude woke the werewolves had cleaned him totally from head to toe and run another bath to soak with him in. There was a degree of panic in my consort's eyes when he realised that two men were holding and touching him. He calmed when he realised who was touching him and that he was under my eyes, relaxing and submitting passively to their attentions.

"Feed on both of them, you need the energy."

"Yes Anita." He fed on Stephen first, and then on Jason. Both wolves lay limp in the bath after he had sated himself as much as he could.

"You'll need to feed again later tonight. For now let's put these somewhere they can sleep it off." I dried and dressed him with a thought, including drying and detangling his hair, as I picked up Stephen and he took Jason. He was looking at me nervously, as if he was unsure of his place.

"Where should we put them?"

"Jason's bedroom will do. Then we're coming back here." We'd reached Jean-Claude's bedroom by this point. I suddenly realised just why my primary consort was so uncertain 💎💎“ he thought I would be ashamed of him, and no longer want him because he'd been raped. I put Stephen down and took Jason from my consort, putting him down as well just long enough to sink my teeth into my raven's neck, where it met his left shoulder. "You are mine and mine alone. What those humans did to you means nothing, and I will show you that once we've put the wolves to bed."

"Yes Anita." He smiled at me gratefully as he bent to pick Jason back up and he ran back to his bedroom once we'd put them together. I followed a bit more slowly and found him lying naked on his bed, legs spread and arms stretched above his head, which was thrown back and to one side, exposing his throat, and highlighting the bite I'd left there. He was also displaying his

arousal for me, and that, combined with his total submission aroused me enough that I slid right onto him.

At first I moved above him, emphasising my superior position, but all I could do with my hands like that was clutch his shoulders, and I wanted to scratch, to feel his flesh part beneath my nails ❖❖“ it was the only way I could let go to any degree without risking damaging him. I rolled us so he was on top and growled a single order into his ears. "Fuck me hard." He obeyed and I felt his skin part beneath my nails, tearing into his flesh as I came around him.

"You can get dressed now." I didn't bother to check how much damage I'd done to him ❖❖“ it would serve him as a reminder that he belonged to me, and whatever those mortals had done to him didn't matter. "We need to go to RPIT headquarters so you can give a statement. He obeyed quietly and we set off, I could feel that the marks I'd left on him made him feel better, and that was all that mattered. The fact that he was moving stiffly was irrelevant.

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My consort sat beside me in my car, playing with his bracers as I drove us to RPIT headquarters. His head was bowed and he was biting his lip lightly, to show so many signs of emotion he had to be truly upset.

"What is wrong my raven?"

"They all know what happened, how weak I am. And my weakness reflects badly on you."

"No one can hold you responsible for what those bastards did to you. They turned to dark magic, evil magic, hell, they murdered two of your line to power that cursed thing they put around your neck. I am so sorry that I didn't protect you better. I won't let anyone rape you ever again." And with those words I bound a spell into his bones to ensure that no one ever could.

"Thank you ma petite." I knew he felt what I'd done, and I could taste his gratitude. Then he took a deep breath squaring his shoulders. "We should not keep your police friends waiting should we, ma petite?" And he opened the door of the car getting out.

"No, we shouldn't. But I'm not going to let them question you alone." I got out locking the door behind me and walked around the car to join my lover, putting one arm around his waist. We walked into the station like that, and my hands on his body distracted my raven from realising how many people were surreptitiously watching him. "Can someone find Dolph, we'll be waiting in the interview room." I assumed that someone would comply, and sure enough I was just getting my raven settled when Dolph and Zerbrowski arrived.

"We have to record this, for the records." Zerbrowski explained while he was setting up a tape recorder and microphone.



"As you wish." My raven spoke quietly, waiting for instructions I would suppose. He sat forward in the chair, carefully not leaning against the back, but at the same time he was leaning into my touch, desperate for the reassurance that I offered.

"Okay." Dolph gave the date, who was present and what was happening before he began to ask questions. "Jean-Claude, could you tell us in your own words exactly how you were caught?"

"I was visiting a friend and did not have time to return to my home, and so I had to spend the day with him. I must have been in my daylight slumber when they arrived as the first I was aware of it I was standing and strangling someone."

"You were strangling someone?" Dolph was obviously angry, but trying to hide it, my raven's

confession had just given him an excuse to let his prejudices free.

"Older vampires react instinctively to attack in their sleep by defending themselves   " lethally. Jean-Claude had no control over his reaction, and he wouldn't have reacted that way if he hadn't been attacked."

"Right. Did you kill him Jean-Claude?"

"No, what brought me back to awareness was someone fastening that collar around my neck. And it...punished me I suppose. I collapsed in pain, and every time I tried to defend myself against them it hurt me more. I...couldn't stop them putting me into a body bag and taking me out to their van." My raven was shaking very slightly at the knowledge of his helplessness. I tightened the arm I had around his waist to comfort him and he smiled gratefully at me, resting his head on my shoulder.

"They used magic designed to control vampires on you. You were as helpless to fight them as Damian is to fight me." Or as helpless as he is to fight me, but I didn't mention that.

"Why is Damian helpless to fight you Anita?"

"Because of an accident when our triumvirate was experimenting with calling power and controlling it. It isn't relevant."

"No, it isn't. What happened next Jean-Claude?"

"They took me out of the body bag in the van, and one of them tried to take these off my wrists."

"Let the record show that the witness touched the bracers he wears on his wrists at this point." Dolph explained my raven's actions for the tape recorder. "Do you know why?"

"He seemed to know that Anita could use them to track me, and the collar didn't confuse their signal as it did my link to her."

"You say he tried to take them off your wrists, do you know why he failed?"



"Anita made these for me as a gift, they supply me with extra power if I need it. One unexpected effect is that she's the only one who can take them on and off normally."

"But obviously they were removed from your wrists, how?"

"He...crushed my hands, and then he pulled them off over the broken bones and torn flesh. That collar increased the rate of my healing, but it made me exhausted and stopped me using any other powers.

"When they got me back to their hideout they chained me in the room you found me in and began to play with me. Some of them just raped me, others preferred more elaborate games. I...they wouldn't give me blood, so I fed on their lust in an attempt to survive until Anita came for me."

"You fed on their lust, can you expand on that?" Dolph actually sounded curious, but then he'd sounded detached as he asked every single question. He was probably afraid that sympathy would make my raven break down.

"I'm an incubus. It is a power that some vampires who descend from Belle Morte's line have   " we can, and must, feed on lust as well as on blood. If we cannot have one then we must have more of the other."

"Right. That could cause a problem. Is there anything else you want to add? The videos give us quite enough detail of what they did and said to you."

"No."

"In that case Anita I'd like to talk to you for a moment. Alone."

"Very well. Stay here Jean-Claude." I left him reluctantly and kept a link with him so I knew what was happening.

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"Could you explain something to me Jean-Claude?" Zerbrowski spoke quietly to my consort once Dolph had led me away.

"I will try if it is permissible but some things must stay amongst vampires alone."

"What happened to you? You're moving, and sitting as if something happened to your back and there's that bite on your neck."

He reached to my mind for permission before speaking. "I needed reassuring that I belong to Anita and she will protect me before I came here. I'm not sure what you want to know."

"Then just tell me everything that happened since you woke up."

"I was in a hot bath with two of my wolves washing me when I woke up. They let me feed from both of them   "I'm going to need more blood than usual for the next few days, even with these." I knew that he dropped his eyes and bit his lip for a second before continuing. "It didn't...hurt your case that my master wanted me clean and marked only with her scent, did it?"

"Nope, Anita insisted that we do a rape kit on you there and then." Zerbrowski reassured Jean-Claude. "What happened after you fed?"

"Anita came to me, she told me that I am hers alone and bit me, then we had sex. She tends to scratch at the best of times, you know that from Jason, when she needed to remind me who I belong to..."

"Slavery is illegal. So is domestic abuse, if she's hurting you there are people you can go to, people who'll help you get away from her."

"But I don't want to get away from her. I love her, and she really doesn't hurt me that badly. I didn't notice until after, and I'll heal the next time I feed. If she was a less powerful necromancer I'd already be healed, but because she's so powerful injuries from her heal almost human slow, at least for vampires. Werewolves heal a bit faster, but still slower than normal."

"Let me see your back. I want to check how much damage she's done." It was an order and I knew that Jean-Claude would respond to that.

I was glad that Zerbrowski cared enough to make sure my raven wasn't hurt too badly, but I could feel his unease, edging to fear as he pulled his jacket and shirt off, kneeling to show his back to Zerbrowski.

"Dolph I'm glad you're finding the rest of the bastards who did that to Jean-Claude, but I don't need to know their names, or all the details you've been giving me. I know you brought me here so Zerbrowski could check up on Jean-Claude and I appreciate it that you're concerned about him, but he's scared and I need to go to him." I didn't wait for a response, just returned to the

interview room to find Zerbrowski crouched behind my consort, reaching out as if to touch him but hesitating.

"Molesting my vampire Zerbrowski?" I didn't try to hide my amusement as he pulled back quickly. Jean-Claude just bowed his head and whispered my name, trembling. I moved over and crouched in front of him, stroking the hair falling around him away from his face. "I'm not angry at you or anything my raven. I was only teasing Zerbrowski, nothing more."

"Look at his back Anita. Do you know what you did to him?" I was a bit puzzled, but that vanished when I saw how much damage I'd done to his back ❖❖ "I could see the bone in places!

"I hadn't realised, why didn't you tell me Jean-Claude?"

"I thought it was punishment for the carelessness that caused me to be captured." He sounded so accepting of that, he assumed that he deserved to be punished because he was kidnapped and raped. "I should have told you when I found out Richard's house didn't have enough security against being broken into. Then I'd have been at the Circus and safe."

"No, it wasn't your fault. I didn't think about protection from humans breaking in, only about protection from the sun. Drink." And I pulled him to me, so he could feed from my blood. "I would never punish you for being captured." His injured back healed quickly, but there was a slightly lost look in his eyes when he lifted his head.

"What is going on here?" Dolph had just arrived. Quite a bit behind me, but then he is human.

"She's just fixed the damage she did to his back. It was horrible. I can't believe how much damage you did to him ❖❖ that isn't love!" Zerbrowski sounded outraged. I stood and moved to my seat.

"Jean-Claude, get up and put something on, then sit down. Zerbrowski that only difference between what I did to Jean-Claude today and what I did to Jason before you hauled him in at Dolph's insistence about a year and a half ago is that I didn't switch to scratching myself up when I realised what I was doing." While I was speaking Jean-Claude had stood and pulled his shirt and jacket on before bringing a chair to sit beside me and lean up against me, pressed up against my body. "It was entirely consensual, I assure you, and I know Jean-Claude will have said the same thing."

"I did. Anita has never abused me, she has hurt me but that is different from abuse. I needed to be reassured that I am hers and under her protection, this does that for me." As soon as he'd finished speaking Jean-Claude buried his face in the crook of my shoulder. I stroked his hair to soothe him as Dolph and Zerbrowski gaped.

"How can hurting him make him feel under your protection?"

"If I hurt him no one else is allowed to. It's a vampire thing." I shrugged with my free shoulder, careful not to disturb Jean-Claude and turned my attention to him. "Do you need something from me my raven?" He lifted his head just enough to speak.

"To be marked as yours, something permanent. These are good," he touched his bracers looking down sadly, "but they can be removed, and they aren't recognisable as marking me as yours."

"Here, for now." I bit him on the neck to renew the mark I'd healed with my blood. "We'll discuss what you'd like later. Is there anything else you need us for?" I directed the last question to Dolph and Zerbrowski.

"No, you can both go." Dolph admitted it reluctantly and I took my raven with me as we left.

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[Back to index](#)

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