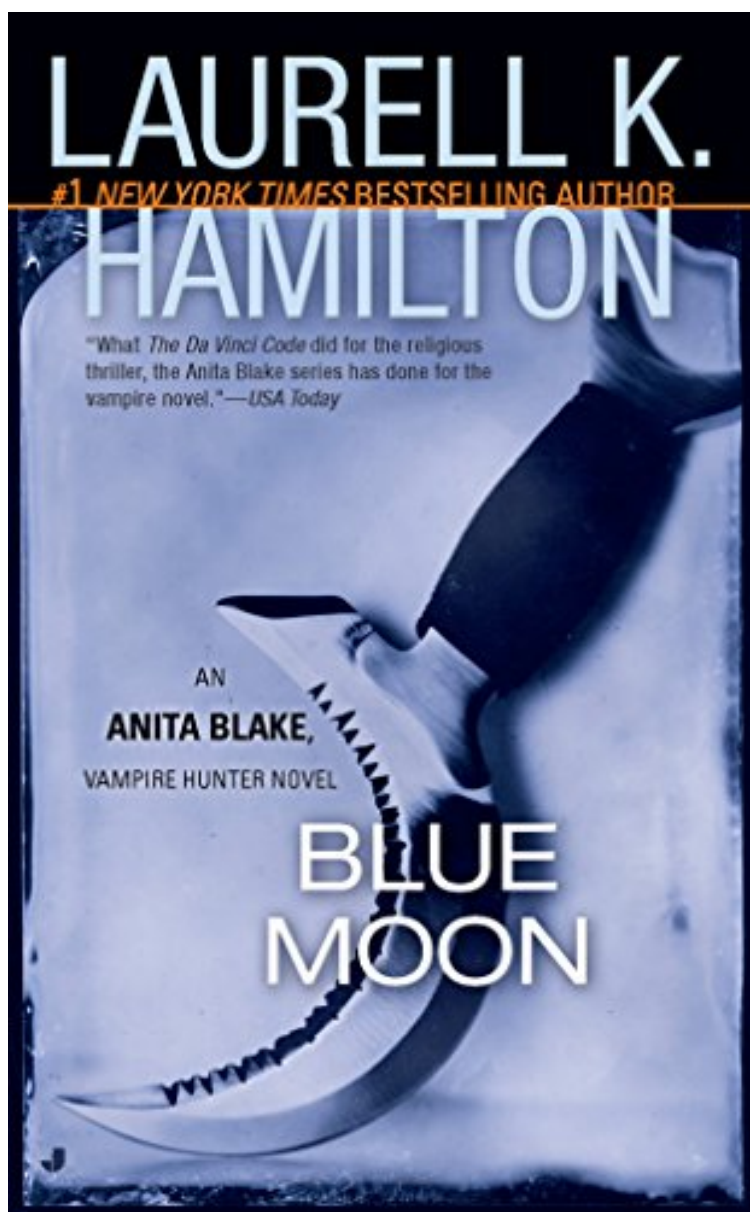


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# Blue Moon: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel



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**Par Laurell K. Hamilton : Blue Moon: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Blue Moon: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel:

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**Description :** Description du produit"Richard was an alpha werewolf. It was his only serious flaw. We'd broken up after I'd seen him eat somebody." Still, you never forget your ex-fianc. And when Richard calls Anita Blake at three in the morning, she knows it won't be good news. It seems Richard had gotten himself thrown in jail on a rape charge. But Anita knows that though he is a monster, Richard's no rapist. And it's up to her to prove his innocence--before the blue moon creates even bigger problems for Richard...

Prsentation de l'diteur The Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter backlist lights up the night. In her eighth adventure,

Anita Blake can't turn her back on a former lover during the full moon. Especially since he's behind bars-and he's a werewolf...From the Paperback edition..com Anita Blake makes a living raising the dead. She also executes rogue vampires and villains among the local were-folk. Marks bind her to Jean-Claude, the Master vampire of St. Louis and her lover, and to her ex-fianc, a powerful werewolf who heads up the local pack. Anita shares some of their magic, and her own power over the dead keeps growing. But so does the body count and the situations that force Anita to bend or break her own rules. In Blue Moon, Anita's ex Richard is jailed in Tennessee, accused of rape. When Anita arrives with a lawyer and an entourage of vampires and 'weres' supplied by Jean-Claude, it's clear that something is rotten in Myerton. The local cops are corrupt, and the trolls Richard was studying are threatened. But if she sticks around to investigate, the local Master vampire will attack her and her friends. The local werewolf clan isn't rushing to welcome her either, and her self-control is going to the, um, wolves. Blue Moon is the eighth book in Hamilton's Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter series; newcomers should start with earlier books. The protagonists' development and their relationships to each other and to the large cast of continuing secondary characters are what make these books so compelling. Be warned--there's steamy sex and graphic violence here, though Anita does reflect on her moral position. But if dark urban fantasy featuring those who hunt the night appeals, pounce on this series. --Nona Vero

Extrait Acknowledgments TO MY HUSBAND, Gary, who first took me into the hills of Tennessee. To my writing group, the Alternate Historians: Tom Drennan, N. L. Drew, Deborah Millitello, Rett MacPherson, Marella Sands, Sharon Shinn, and Mark Sumner, and our newest member, W. Augustus Elliot, who missed the critique of this book by a few months. Heres to the best writing group Ive ever been a part of. Here is the correct address to get messages to me online: laurellk@ricia.com. It was edited by an overzealous copyeditor in the acknowledgments of the last book. Table of Contents

1 I WAS DREAMING of cool flesh and sheets the color of fresh blood. The phone shattered the dream, leaving only fragments, a glimpse of midnight blue eyes, hands gliding down my body, his hair flung across my face in a sweet, scented cloud. I woke in my own house, miles from Jean-Claude with the feel of his body clinging to me. I fumbled the phone from the bedside table and mumbled, Hello. Anita, is that you? It was Daniel Zeeman, Richards baby brother. Daniel was twenty-four and cute as a bug's ear. Baby didnt really cover it. Richard had been my fianc once upon a time until I chose Jean-Claude over him. Sleeping with the other man put a real crimp in our social plans. Not that I blamed Richard. No, I blamed myself. It was one of the few things Richard and I still shared. I squinted at the glowing dial of the bedside clock. 3:10 A.M. Daniel, whats wrong? No one calls at ten after the witching hour with good news. He took a deep breath, as if preparing himself for the next line. Richards in jail. I sat up, sheets sliding in a bundle to my lap. What did you say? I was suddenly wide awake, heart thudding, adrenaline pumping. Richard is in jail, he repeated. I didnt make him say it again, though I wanted to. What for? I asked. Attempted rape, he said. What? I said. Daniel repeated it. It didnt make any more sense the second time I heard it. Richard is like the ultimate Boy Scout, I said. Id believe murder before Id believe rape. I guess thats a compliment, he said. You know what I meant, Daniel. Richard wouldnt do something like that. I agree, he said. Is he in Saint Louis? I asked. No, hes still in Tennessee. He finished up his requirements for his masters degree and got arrested that night. Tell me what happened. I dont exactly know, he said. What do you mean? I asked. They wont let me see him, Daniel said. Why not? Mom got in to see him, but they wouldnt let all of us in. Has he got a lawyer? I asked. He says he doesnt need one. He says he didnt do it. Prison is full of people who didnt do it, Daniel. He needs a lawyer. Its his word against the womans. If shes local and he isnt, hes in trouble. Hes in trouble, Daniel said. Shit, I said. Theres more bad news, he said. I threw the covers back and stood, clutching the phone. Tell me. Theres going to be a blue moon this month. He said it very quietly, no explanation, but I understood. Richard was an alpha werewolf. He was head of the local pack. It was his only serious flaw. Wed broken up after Id seen him eat somebody. What Id seen had sent me running to Jean-Claudes arms. Id run from the werewolf to the vampire. Jean-Claude was Master of the City of Saint Louis. He was definitely not the more human of the two. I know there isnt a lot to choose from between a bloodsucker and a flesh-eater, but at least after Jean-Claude finished feeding, there werent chunks between his fangs. A small distinction but a real one. A blue moon meant a second full moon this month. The moon doesnt actually turn blue most of the time, but it is where the old saying comes from once in a blue moon. It happens about every three years or so. It was August, and the second full moon was only five days away. Richards control was very good, but Id never heard of any werewolf, even an Ulfric, a pack leader, who could fight the change on the night of the full moon. No matter what flavor of animal you changed into, a lycanthrope was a lycanthrope. The full moon ruled them. We have to get him out of jail before the full moon, Daniel said. Yeah, I said. Richard was

hiding what he was. He taught junior high science. If they found out he was a werewolf, hed lose his job. It was illegal to discriminate on the basis of a disease, especially one as difficult to catch as lycanthropy, but they do it. No one wanted a monster teaching their kiddies. Not to mention that the only person in Richards family who knew his secret was Daniel. Mom and Pop Zeeman didnt know. Give me a number to contact you at, I said. He did. Youll come down then, he said. Yeah. He sighed. Thanks. Mom is raising hell, but its not helping. We need someone here who understands the legal system. Ill have a friend call you with the name of a good local lawyer before I get there. You may be able to arrange bail by the time I arrive. If hell see the lawyer, Daniel said. Is he being stupid? I asked. He thinks that having the truth on his side is enough.

It sounded like something Richard would say. There was more than one reason why wed broken up. He clung to ideals that hadnt even worked when they were in vogue. Truth, justice, and the American way certainly didnt work within the legal system. Money, power, and luck were what worked. Or having someone on your side that was part of the system. I was a vampire executioner. I was licensed to hunt and kill vampires once a court order of execution had been issued. I was licensed in three states. Tennessee was not one of them. But cops, as a general rule, would treat an executioner better than a civilian. We risked our lives and usually had a higher kill count than they did. Of course, the kills being vamps, some people didnt count them as real kills. Had to be human for it to count. When can you get here? Daniel asked. Ive got some things to clear up here, but Ill see you today before noon. I hope you can talk some sense into Richard. Id met their mother more than once so I said, Im surprised that Charlotte cant talk sense to him. Where do you think he gets this truth will set you free bit? Daniel asked. Great, I said. Ill be there, Daniel. Ive got to go. He hung up suddenly as if afraid of being caught. His mom had probably come into the room. The Zeemans had four sons and a daughter. The sons were all six feet or above. The daughter was five nine. They were all over twenty-one. And they were all scared of their mother. Not literally scared, but Charlotte Zeeman wore the pants in the family. One family dinner and I knew that. I hung up the phone, turned on the lamp, and started to pack. It occurred to me while I was throwing things into a suitcase to wonder why the hell I was doing this. I could say that it was because Richard was the other third of a triumvirate of power that Jean-Claude had forged between the three of us. Master vampire, Ulfric, or wolf king, and necromancer. I was the necromancer. We were bound so tightly together that sometimes we invaded each others dreams by accident. Sometimes not so accidentally. But I wasnt riding to the rescue because Richard was our third. I could admit to myself, if to no one else, that I still loved Richard. Not the same way I loved Jean-Claude, but it was just as real. He was in trouble, and I would help him if I could. Simple. Complicated. Hurtful. I wondered what Jean-Claude would think of me dropping everything to go rescue Richard. It didnt really matter. I was going, and that was that. But I did spare a thought for how that might make my vampire lover feel. His heart didnt always beat, but it could still break. Love sucks. Sometimes it feels good. Sometimes its just another way to bleed. 2 I MADE PHONE calls. My friend Catherine Maison-Gillette was an attorney. Shed been with me on more than one occasion when I had to make a statement to the police about a dead body that I helped make dead. So far, no jail time. Hell, no trial. How did I accomplish this? I lied. Bob, Catherines husband, answered on the fifth ring, voice so heavy with sleep it was almost unintelligible. Only the bass growl let me know which of them it was. Neither of them woke gracefully. Bob, this is Anita. I need to speak with Catherine. Its business. You at a police station? he asked. See, Bob knew me. No, I dont need a lawyer for me this time. He didnt ask questions. He just said, Heres Catherine. If you think I have no curiosity at all, youre wrong, but Catherine will fill me in after you hang up. Thanks, Bob, I said. Anita, whats wrong? Catherines voice sounded normal. She was a criminal attorney with a private firm. She was wakened a lot at odd hours. She didnt like it, but she recovered well. I told her the bad news. She knew Richard. Liked him a lot. Didnt understand why in hell Id dumped him for Jean-Claude. Since I couldnt tell her about Richard being a werewolf, it was sort of hard to explain. Heck, even if I could have mentioned the werewolf part, it was hard to explain. Carl Belisarius, she said when I was finished. Hes one of the best criminal attorneys in that state. I know him personally. Hes not as careful about his clients as I am. Hes got some clients that are known criminal figures, but hes good. Can you contact him and get him started? I asked. You need Richards permission for this, Anita. I cant talk Richard into taking on a new attorney until I see him. Time is always precious on a crime, Catherine. Can Belisarius at least start the wheels in motion? Do you know if Richard has an attorney now? Daniel mentioned something about him refusing to see his lawyer, so I assume so. Give me Daniels number, and Ill see what I can do, she said. Thanks, Catherine, really. She sighed. I know youd go to this much trouble for any of your friends. Youre just that loyal. But are you sure your motives are just friendly in this? What are you asking me? You still love him, dont you? No comment, I said. Catherine

gave a soft laugh. No comment. You're not the one under suspicion here. Says you, I said. Fine, I'll do what I can on this end. Let me know when you get there. Will do, I said. I hung up and called my main job.

Vampire killing was only a sideline. I raised the dead for Animators Inc., the first animating firm in the country. We were also the most profitable. Part of that was due to our boss, Bert Vaughn. He could make a dollar sit up and sing. He didn't like that my helping the police on preternatural crimes was taking more and more of my time. He wouldn't like me going out of town for an indefinite period of time on personal business. I was glad it was the wee hours and he wouldn't be there to yell at me in person. If Bert kept pushing me, I was going to have to quit, and I didn't want to. I had to raise zombies. It wasn't like a muscle that would wither if you didn't use it. It was an innate ability for me. If I didn't use it, the power would leak out on its own. In college there had been a professor who committed suicide. No one had found the body for the three days that it usually takes for the soul to leave the area. One night, the shambling corpse had come to my dorm room. My roommate got a room switch next day. She had no sense of adventure. I would raise the dead, one way or another. I had no choice. But I had enough reputation that I could go freelance. I'd need a business manager, but it would work. Trouble is, I didn't want to leave. Some of the people who worked at Animators Inc. were among my best friends. Besides, I had had about as much change as I could handle for one year. I, Anita Blake, scourge of the undead, the human with more vampire kills than any other vampire executioner in the country was dating a vampire. It was almost poetically ironic. The doorbell rang. The sound made my heart pulse in my throat. It was an ordinary sound, but not at 3:45 in the morning. I left my partially packed suitcase on the unmade bed and walked into the living room. My white furniture sat on top of a brilliant oriental rug. Cushions that caught the bright colors were placed casually on the couch and chair. The furniture was mine. The rug and cushions had been gifts from Jean-Claude. His sense of style would always be better than mine. Why argue? The doorbell rang again. It made me jump for no good reason except it was insistent and it was an odd hour and I was already keyed up from the news about Richard. I went to the door with my favorite gun, a Browning Hi-Power 9mm, in hand, safety off, pointed at the floor. I was almost at the door when I realized I was wearing nothing but my nightgown. A gun, but no robe. I had my priorities in order. I stood there, barefoot on the elegant rug, debating whether to go back for the robe or a pair of jeans. Something. If I'd been wearing one of my usual extra-large T-shirts, I'd have just answered the door. But I was wearing a black satin nightie with spaghetti straps. It hung almost to my knees. One size does not fit all. It covered everything but wasn't exactly answering-the-door attire. Screw it. I called, Who is it? Bad guys usually didn't ring the doorbell. It is Jean-Claude, ma petite. My mouth dropped open. I couldn't have been more surprised if it had been a bad guy. What was he doing here? I clicked the safety on the gun and opened the door. The satin nightie had been a gift from Jean-Claude. He'd seen me in less. We didn't need the robe. I opened the door and there he was. It was like I was a magician and had thrown aside the curtain to show my lovely assistant. The sight of him caught my breath in my throat. His shirt was a conservative business cut with fastened cuffs and a simple collar. It was red with the collar and cuffs a solid almost satiny scarlet. The rest of the shirt was some sheer fabric so that his arms, chest, and waist were bare behind a sheen of red cloth. His black hair curled below his shoulders, darker, richer somehow against the red of the shirt. Even his midnight blue eyes seemed bluer framed by red. It was one of my favorite colors for him to wear, and he knew it. He'd threaded a red cord through the belt loops of his black jeans. The cord fell in knots down one side of his hip. The black boots came almost to the tops of his legs, encasing his long, slender legs in leather from toe to nearly groin. When I was away from Jean-Claude, away from his body, his voice, I could be embarrassed, scratchy with discomfort that I was dating him. When I was away from him, I could talk myself out of him almost. But never when I was with him. When I was with him, my stomach dropped to my feet and I had to fight very hard not to say things like golly. I settled for You look spectacular, as always. What are you doing here on a night that I told you not to come? What I wanted to do was to throw myself around him like a coat and have him carry me over the threshold clinging to him like a monkey. But I wasn't going to do that. It lacked a certain dignity. Besides, it sort of scared me how much I wanted him and how often. He was like a new drug. It wasn't vampire powers. It was good, old-fashioned lust. But it was still scary, so I had set up some parameters. Rules. He followed them most of the time. He smiled, and it was the smile I'd grown to both love and dread. The smile said he was thinking wicked thoughts, things that two or more could do in darkened rooms, where the sheets smelled of expensive perfume, sweat, and other bodily fluids. The smile had never made me blush until we started having sex. Sometimes all he had to do was smile, and heat rushed up my skin like I was thirteen and he was my first crush. He thought it was charming. It embarrassed me. You son of bitch, I said softly. The smile widened.

Our dream was interrupted, ma petite. I knew it wasn't an accident that you were in my dreams, I said. It came out hostile, and I was pleased. Because the hot summer wind was blowing the scent of his cologne against my face. Exotic, with an undercurrent of flowers and spice. I almost hated to wash my sheets for fear of losing the scent of him sometimes. I asked you to wear my gift so I could dream of you. You knew what I meant to do. If you say other, then you are lying. May I come in? He'd been invited in often enough that he could have crossed my threshold without the invitation, but it had become a game with him. A formal acknowledgment every time he crossed that I wanted him. It irritated me and pleased me, like so much about Jean-Claude. You might as well come in. He walked past me. I noticed the black boots were laced up the back from heel to top. The back of his black jeans fit smooth and tight so there was no need to guess what he wasn't wearing under them. He spoke without turning around. Do not sound so grumpy, ma petite. You have the ability to bar me from your dreams. He turned then, and his eyes were full of a dark light that had nothing to do with vampire powers. You welcomed me with more than open arms. I blushed for the second time in less than five minutes. Richard is in jail in Tennessee, I said. I know, he said. You know? I said. How? The local Master of the City called to tell me. He was very much afraid that I would think it was his doing. His way of destroying our triumvirate. If he was going to destroy us, it would be a murder charge, not attempted rape, I said. True, Jean-Claude said, then laughed. The laughter trailed over my bare skin like a small, private wind. Whoever framed our Richard did not know him well. I would believe murder of Richard before rape. It was almost exactly what I'd said. Why was that unnerving? Are you going down to Tennessee? The master, Colin, has forbidden me to enter his lands. To do so now would be an act of aggression, if not outright war. Why should he care? I asked. He fears my power, ma petite. He fears our power, which is why he has made you persona non grata in his territory as well. I stared at him. You are kidding, I hope. He's forbidden either of us to help Richard? Jean-Claude nodded. And he expects us to believe it's not his doing? I said. I believe him, ma petite. You could tell he wasn't lying over the phone? I asked. Some master vampires can lie to other master vampires, though I do not think Colin is such a power. But that is not why I believe him. Why then? The last time you and I traveled to another vampire's lands, we slew her. She was trying to kill us, I said. Technically, he said, she had set all of us free save you. You she wished to make a vampire. Like I said, she was trying to kill me. He smiled. Oh, ma petite, you wound me. Cut the crap. This Colin can't really believe that we are just going to leave Richard to rot. He has the right to deny us safe passage, Jean-Claude said. Because we killed another master in her own territory? I asked. He doesn't need grounds for his refusal, ma petite. He merely has to refuse. How do you vampires get anything accomplished? Slowly, Jean-Claude said. But remember, ma petite, we have the time to be patient. Well, I don't, and Richard doesn't. You could have eternity if you would both accept the fourth mark, he said, voice quiet, neutral. I shook my head. Richard and I both value what little is left of our humanity. Besides, eternity my ass, the fourth mark wouldn't make us immortal. It just means that we live as long as you do. You're harder to kill than we are, but not that much harder. He sat down on the couch, folding his legs under him. It wasn't an easy position, wearing that much leather. Maybe the boots were softer than they looked. Naw. He rested his elbows on the couch arm, leaning his chest outward. The sheer red cloth covered his chest completely and left nothing to the imagination. His nipples pressed against the thin fabric. The red haze of cloth made the cross-shaped burn scar look almost bloody. He raised himself upward with his hands propped on the couch arm like a mermaid on a rock. I expected him to tease or say something sexual. Instead, he said, I came to tell you of Richard's imprisonment in person. He watched my face very closely. I thought it might upset you. Of course it upsets me. This Colin guy, vampire, whatever the hell he is, is crazy if he thinks he's going to keep us from helping Richard. Jean-Claude smiled. Asher is negotiating even as we speak to try and allow you to enter Colin's territory. Asher was his second banana, his vampire lieutenant. I frowned. Why me and not you? Because you are much better with police matters than I am. He threw one long, leather-clad leg over the couch arm and slithered over it to his feet. It was like watching a lap dance without a lap. To my knowledge, Jean-Claude had never stripped at Guilty Pleasures, the vampire strip club he owned, but he could have. He had a way of making even the smallest movement sexual and vaguely obscene. You always felt like he was thinking wicked thoughts, things you couldn't say in mixed company. Why didn't you just call and tell me all this? I said. I knew the answer, or at least part of it. He seemed to be as enamored of my body as I was of his. Good sex cuts both ways. The seducer can become the seduced, with the right victim. He glided towards me. I thought this was news to be delivered face-to-face. He stopped just in front of me, so close that the slightly full hem of my nightie brushed his thighs. He gave a small movement of his body and the satin edge of the nightie moved gently against my bare legs. Most men would have had to use their hands

to get that kind of movement. Of course, Jean-Claude had had four hundred years to perfect his technique. Practice makes perfect. Why face-to-face? I asked, my voice a little breathy. A smile curled his lips. You know why, he said. I want to hear you say it, I said. His beautiful face fell into blank, careful lines, only his eyes held the heat like a banked fire. I could not let you leave without touching you one last time. I want to do the wicked dance before you leave. I laughed, but it was tense, nervous. My mouth was suddenly dry. I was having trouble not staring at his chest. The wicked dance was his pet euphemism for sex. I wanted to touch him, but if I did, I wasn't sure where it would stop. Richard was in trouble. I'd betrayed him once with Jean-Claude; I wouldn't let him down again. I need to pack, I said. I turned abruptly and started walking towards the bedroom. He followed me. I put my gun on the bedside table beside the phone, got socks out of the drawer, and started tossing them into the suitcase, trying to ignore Jean-Claude. He doesn't ignore easily. He lay on the bed beside the suitcase, propped on one elbow, long legs stretched the length of the bed. He looked fearfully overdressed against my white sheets. He watched me move around the room, moving just his eyes. He reminded me of a cat: watchful, perfectly at ease. I went into the nearby bathroom to get toiletries. I had a man's shaving kit bag that I kept all the small stuff in. I was traveling out of town more and more lately. Might as well be organized about it. Jean-Claude was lying on his back, long, black hair spilling like a dark dream on my white pillow. He gave a slight smile as I entered the room. He held a hand out to me. Join me, ma petite. I shook my head. If I join you, we'll get distracted. I'm going to pack and get dressed. We don't have time for anything else. He crawled towards me over the bed, moving in a rolling glide like he had muscles in places he wasn't supposed to have them. Am I so unappealing, ma petite? Or is your concern for Richard so overwhelming? You know exactly how appealing you are to me. And yes, I am worried about Richard. He slid off the bed, following at my heels. He glided in a sort of graceful slow motion while I hurried to and fro, but he paced me, matching each of my quick steps with his easy ones. It was like being chased by a very slow predator, one that had all the time in the world but knew in the end it would catch you. The second time I almost ran into him, I finally said, What is your problem? Quit following me around. You're making me nervous. Truth was, his body being so close made my skin jump. He sat down on the edge of the bed and sighed. I don't want you to go. That stopped me in my tracks. I turned and stared at him. Why, for heavens sake? For centuries I have dreamed of having enough power to be safe. Enough power to hold my lands and finally, at long last, have some sense of peace. Now I fear the very man who could make my ambitions come true. What are you talking about? I came to stand in front of him, arms full of shirts and hangers. Richard; I fear Richard. There was a look in his eyes that I'd seldom seen. He was unsure of himself. It was a very normal, human expression. It looked totally at odds with the elegant man in his peekaboo shirt. Why would you be afraid of Richard? I asked. If you love Richard more than you love me, I fear you will leave me for him. If you haven't noticed, Richard hates me right now. He talks more to you than to me. He does not hate you, ma petite. He hates that you are with me. There is a great difference between the two hatreds. Jean-Claude stared up at me almost mournfully. I sighed. Are you jealous of Richard? He looked down at the toes of his expensive boots. I would be a fool if I were not. I transferred the blouses to one arm and touched his face. I turned his face up to mine. I'm sleeping with you, not Richard, remember? Yet, here I am, ma petite. I am dressed for your dreams and you do not even offer me a kiss. His reaction surprised me. Just when I thought I knew him. Are you hurt that I didn't give you a hello kiss? Perhaps, he said very softly. I shook my head and tossed the blouses in the general direction of the suitcase. I bumped his knees with my legs until he opened his legs and let me stand, pressing my body the length of his. I put my hands on his shoulders. The sheer red cloth was rougher textured than it looked, not soft. How can anyone as gorgeous as you are be insecure? He wrapped his arms around my waist, snuggling me against him. He squeezed his legs against me. The leather of the boots was softer than it looked, more supple. With his arms around me and his legs squeezing against me, I was effectively trapped. But I was a willing captive, so it was okay. What I want to do is go down on my knees and lick the front of this nifty shirt. I want to know just how much of you I can suck through the cloth. I raised my eyebrows at him. He laughed soft and low. The sound raised goose bumps up and down my body, tightening my nipples and other places. His laughter was a touchable, intrusive thing. He could do things with his voice that most men couldn't do with their hands. Yet he was afraid I'd leave him for Richard. He rested his face on my chest, cradled between my breasts. He rubbed his cheeks softly back and forth against me, making the satin slide against me, until my breath came faster. I sighed and leaned my face over him, folding our bodies together. I don't plan to leave you for Richard. But he's in trouble, and that comes before sex. Jean-Claude raised his face to me, our arms so entangled that he almost couldn't move. Kiss me, ma petite, that is all. Just a kiss to tell me that you love me. I laid my lips

against his forehead. I thought you were more secure than this. I am, he said, with everyone but you. I pulled back enough to study his face. Love should make you feel more secure not less. Yes, he said quietly, it should. But you love Richard, too. You try not to love him, and he tries not to love you. But love is not so easily slain or so easily aroused. I bent over him. The first kiss was a mere brush of lips like satin rubbing against my mouth. The second kiss was harder. I bit lightly along his upper lip, and he made a small sound. He kissed me back, hands sliding to either side of my face. He kissed me as if he were drinking me down, trying to lick the last drops from the bottle of some fine wine, tender, eager, hungry. I collapsed against him, hands sliding over him as if even my hands were hungry for the feel of him. I felt his fangs, sharp, bruising against my lips and tongue. There was a quick, sharp pain and the sweet copper taste of blood. He made a small inarticulate sound and rolled over me. I was suddenly on the bed with him above me. His eyes were one solid glowing blue, the pupils gone in a rush of desire. He tried to turn my head to one side, nuzzling at my neck. I turned my face into his, blocking him. No blood, Jean-Claude. He went almost limp on top of me, face buried in the rumpled sheets. Please, ma petite. I pushed at his shoulder. Get off of me. He rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling, carefully not looking at me. I can enter every orifice of your body with every part of me, but you refuse me the last bit of yourself. I got off the bed carefully, not sure my knees were steady. I am not food, I said. It is so much more than mere feeding, ma petite. If only you would allow me to show you how very much more. I grabbed the pile of blouses and started taking them off the hanger and folding them in the suitcase. No blood; that is the rule. He rolled onto his side. I have offered you all that I am, ma petite, yet you withhold yourself from me. How can I not be jealous of Richard? You're getting sex. He's not even getting dates. You are mine, but you are not mine, not completely. I'm not a pet, Jean-Claude. People aren't supposed to belong to other people. If you could find a way to love Richard's beast, you would not hold back from him. Him you would give yourself to. I folded the last blouse. Damn it, Jean-Claude, this is stupid. I chose you. All right? It's a done deal. Why are you so worried? Because the moment he was in trouble, you dropped everything to run to his side. I'd do the same for you, I said. Exactly, he said. I have no doubt that you love me in your way, but you love him, too. I zipped up the suitcase. We are not having this argument. I'm sleeping with you. I am not going to donate blood just to make you feel more secure. The phone rang. Asher's cultured voice, so like Jean-Claude's: Anita, how are you this fine summer evening? I'm fine, Asher. What's up? May I speak with Jean-Claude? he asked. I almost argued, but Jean-Claude had his hand out for the phone. I gave the phone to him. Jean-Claude spoke in French, which he and Asher had a habit of doing. I was glad that he had someone to speak his native tongue with, but my French just wasn't up to following the conversation. I suspected strongly that sometimes the vampires spoke in front of me like you would speak in front of a child that doesn't have enough grown-up talk to follow the conversation. It was rude and condescending, but they were centuries-old vampires, and sometimes they just couldn't help themselves. He switched to English, talking directly to me. Colin has refused you entrance to his territory. He has refused entrance to any of my people. Can he do that? I asked. Jean-Claude nodded. Oui. I am going down there to help Richard. Arrange it, Jean-Claude, or I'll go down there without arrangements being made. Even if it's war? he asked. Shit, I said. Call the little son of a bitch and let me talk to him. Jean-Claude raised his eyebrows but nodded. He hung up on Asher, then dialed a number. He said, Colin, this is Jean-Claude. Yes, Asher told me what you have decided. My human servant, Anita Blake, wishes to speak with you. He listened for a moment. No, I do not know what she wishes to say to you. He handed me the phone and settled back against the headboard of the bed as if watching a show. Hello, Colin? This is he. His accent was pure Middle American. It made him sound less exotic than some of them. My name is Anita Blake. I know who you are, he said. You're the Executioner. Yeah, but I'm not coming down there for an execution. My friend is in trouble. I just want to help him. He is your third. If you enter my lands, then two of your triumvirate will be within my territory. You are too powerful to be allowed entrance. Asher said you also denied access to any of our people, is that true? Yes, he said. Why, for God's sake? The Council, the rulers of all vampire kind, itself fears Jean-Claude. I will not have you in my lands. Colin, look, I don't want your power base. I don't want your lands. I have no designs upon you whatsoever. You're a master vampire. You can taste the truth in my words. You mean what you say, but you are the servant. Jean-Claude is the master. Don't take this wrong, Colin, but why would Jean-Claude want your lands? Even if he was planning some sort of Ghengis Kahn invasion, your lands are three territories away from us. If he was going to try conquering someone, he'd pick land next door. Maybe there's something here he wants, Colin said, and I could hear the fear in his voice. That was rare with a master vamp. They were usually better at hiding their emotions. Colin, I'll swear any oath you want that we don't want anything from you. We just need for me to

come down there and get Richard out of jail. Okay? No, he said. If you come down here uninvited, it is war between us, and I will kill you. Look, Colin, I know youre afraid. As soon as I said it, I knew I shouldnt have. How do you know what I feel? The fear rose a notch, but the anger rose faster. A human servant that can taste a master vampires fear and you wonder why I dont want you in my lands. I cant taste your fear, Colin. I heard it in your voice. Liar! My shoulders were beginning to tighten. It doesnt usually take much to piss me off, and he was working at it. How are we supposed to help Richard, if you wont let us send anyone down there? My voice was calm, but I could feel my throat tightening, my voice going just a little lower with the effort not to yell. What happens to your third is not my concern. Protecting my lands and my people, that is my concern. If anything happens to Richard because of this delay, I can make it your concern, I said, voice still quiet. See, already the threats begin. The tightness in my shoulders spilled up my neck and came out my mouth. Listen, you little pip-squeak, I am coming down there. I am not letting your paranoia hurt Richard. We will kill you then, he said. Look, Colin, stay out of my way, and Ill stay out of yours. You fuck with me, and I will destroy you, do you understand me? Its only war if you start it, but if you start something, by God I will finish it. Jean-Claude was motioning for the phone rather desperately. We wrestled for the receiver for a few seconds while I called Colin an antiquated politician, and worse. Jean-Claude apologized to the empty, buzzing phone. He hung the phone up and looked at me. The look was eloquent. I would say I am speechless, ma petite, or that I dont believe that you just did that, but I do believe it. The question is: Do you understand what you have just done? I am going to rescue Richard. I can go around Colin or over him. Its his choice. Jean-Claude sighed. He is within his rights to see it as the beginning of a war. But Colin is very cautious. He will do one of two things. He will either wait and see if you initiate hostilities, or he will try and kill you as soon as you set foot on his lands. I shook my head. What was I supposed to do? It doesnt matter now. Whats done is done, but it changes the travel arrangements. You can still take my private jet, but you will have company. Are you coming? I asked. No. If I arrived with you, Colin would be certain that we had come to kill him. No, I will stay here, but you will have an entourage of guards. Now, wait a minute, I said. He held up his hand. No, ma petite. You have been very rash. Remember, if you die, Richard and I may die, as well. The binding that makes us a triumvirate gives power, but it does not come without a price. It is not merely your own life that you are risking. That stopped me. I hadnt thought of it that way, I said. You will need an entourage now that befits a human servant of mine, and an entourage that is strong enough to fight Colins people, if need be. Who do you have in mind? I asked, suddenly suspicious. Leave that to me. I dont think so, I said. He stood, and his anger lashed through the room like a scalding wind. You have endangered yourself and me and Richard. You have endangered everything we have or hope to have with your temper. It would have come down to an ultimatum in the end, Jean-Claude. I know vampires. You would have argued and bargained for a day or two, but in the end, it would have come down to this. Are you so sure? he asked. Yeah, I said. I heard the fear in Colins voice. Hes scared shitless of you. Hed have never agreed to us coming down. It is not just me he fears, ma petite. You are the Executioner. Young vampires are told if they are foolish, you will come and slay them in their coffins. Youre making that up, I said. He shook his head. No, ma petite, you are the bogeyman of vampirekind. If I see Colin, Ill try not to scare him more than I already have. You will see him, ma petite, one way or the other. He will either arrange a meeting when he sees you mean him no harm, or he will be there when they attack. We have to get Richard out before the full moon. Weve only got five days. We didnt have time to do this slowly. Who are you trying to convince, ma petite, me or yourself? I had lost my temper. It had been stupid. Inexcusable. I had a temper, but I was usually better at controlling it than that. Im sorry, I said. Jean-Claude gave a very inelegant snort. Now shes sorry. He dialed the phone. I will have Asher and the others pack. Asher? I said. Hes not going with me. Yes, he is. I opened my mouth to protest. He pointed one long, pale finger at me. I know Colin and his people. You need an entourage that is impressive without being too frightening, and yet if the worst happens, they must be able to defend you and themselves. I will pick who goes and who stays. Thats not fair. There is no time for fairness, ma petite. Your precious Richard sits behind bars and the full moon is approaching. He let his hand fall to his lap. If you wish to take some of your wereleopards with you, that would be welcome. Asher and Damian will need food while they are away. They cannot hunt within Colins territory. That would be taken as an act of hostility. You want me to volunteer some of the wereleopards as walking provisions? I am going to supply some werewolves as well, he said. Im lupa for the pack as well as Nimir-ra for the leopards. You need to run the wolves by me, too. Richard had made me lupa of the werewolves when we were dating. Lupa is often just another word for the head wolfs girlfriend, though usually its another werewolf, not a human. The

were leopards came to me by default. I killed their last leader and found out that everyone else was pretty much beating the hell out of them. Weak shapeshifters without a dominant to protect them end up as anyone's meat. It was my fault, sort of, that they were being hurt, so I extended my protection over them. My protection, since I wasn't a wereleopard, consisted of my threat. My threat was that I'd kill anyone who messed with them. The monsters in town must have believed it, because they left the leopards alone. Use enough silver bullets on enough monsters, and you get a reputation. Jean-Claude put the receiver up to his ear. It is getting so that a person cannot insult a monster in Saint Louis without answering to you, ma petite. If I hadn't known better, I'd say Jean-Claude was angry with me. I guess, this once, I couldn't blame him. 3

THE PRIVATE JET was like a long white egg with fins. Okay, it was longer than an egg and more pointy at the ends, but it seemed just as fragile. Have I mentioned I have this little phobia about flying? I sat in my comfy, fully swivel, fully reclinable chair very upright, seat-belted in, fingernails digging into the cushioned arms. I had purposefully turned the seat away from one of the many round windows so I couldn't see out the side nearest me. Unfortunately, the plane was so narrow that I caught glimpses on the opposite side windows of fluffy clouds and clear blue sky. Hard to forget you're thousands of feet above the ground with only a thin sheet of metal between you and eternity when clouds keep floating past the window. Jason plopped down in the seat next to me, and I let out a little yip. He laughed. I can't believe you're this scared of flying. He pushed his chair with his feet, making it spin around, slowly, like a kid with Daddy's office chair. His thin blond hair was cut just above his shoulders, no bangs. His eyes were the same pale blue as the sky we were flying through. He was exactly my height, five three, which made him short, especially for a man. He never seemed to mind. He wore an oversized T-shirt and a pair of jeans so faded they were almost white. He wore two hundred dollar jogging shoes, though I knew for a fact he never jogged. He'd turned twenty-one this summer. He'd informed me that he was a Gemini, and he was now legal for everything. Everything could cover a lot of ground for Jason. He was a werewolf, but he currently lived with Jean-Claude and played morning appetizer or evening snack for the vampire. Shapeshifter blood has a bigger kick to it, more power. You can drink less of it than human blood and feel a hell of a lot better, or so I've observed. He flung himself up from the chair and fell to his knees in front of me. Come on, Anita. What's to worry? Leave me alone, Jason. It's a phobia. It has no logic. You can't talk me out of it, so just go away. He sprang to his feet so fast it was almost magical. We're perfectly safe. He started jumping up and down on the floor of the plane. See, solid. I yelled, Zane! Zane appeared beside me. He was about six feet tall, stretched long and thin as if there wasn't enough flesh to cover his bones. His hair had been dyed a shocking yellow, like neon buttercups, shaved on the sides and gelled into small, stiff spikes on top. He wore black vinyl pants, like a slick second skin, and a matching vest, no shirt. Shiny black boots completed the outfit. You rang? he asked in a voice that was almost painfully deep. If a shapeshifter spends too much time in animal form, some of the physical changes can be permanent. Zane's gravelly voice and the dainty upper and lower fangs in his human mouth said he'd spent a little too much time as a leopard. The voice could have passed for human, but the fangs—the fangs gave it away. Get Jason away from me, please, I said through gritted teeth. Zane looked down at the smaller man. Jason stood his ground. Zane moved those last two steps to close the distance between them. They stood there, pressed chest to chest, eyes locked. You could suddenly feel that skin-crawling energy that let you know that human was not what they were. Shit. I hadn't meant to start a fight. Zane lowered his face toward the shorter man, a low growl trickling out of his closed lips. No fighting, boys, I said. Zane planted a big, wet kiss on Jason's mouth. Jason jerked back, laughing. You bisexual son of a bitch. Now, if that isn't the pot calling the kettle black, Zane said. Jason just grinned and wandered off, though there wasn't a lot of room to wander anywhere. I also have a touch of claustrophobia. I got it from a diving accident, but I've noticed it's worse since I woke up one morning trapped in a coffin with a vampire I didn't like. I got away, but I like enclosed spaces less and less. Zane slid into the seat beside me. The shiny black vest gaped over his thin, pale chest, giving a glimpse of a silver nipple ring. Zane patted my knee, and I let him. He was always touching people, nothing personal. A lot of shapeshifters were touchy-feely, as if they were animals instead of people and had fewer physical boundaries, but Zane had turned the casual touch into an art form. I finally realized that he touched others as a sort of security blanket. He tried to play the dominant predator, but he wasn't. Underneath the show of teasing confidence, he knew it. He got really tense if he was in a social situation where he had to stand alone, literally without the touch of other flesh. So I let him touch me when I'd have bitched at anyone else. We'll be on the ground soon, he said. The hand left my knee. He understood the rules. I let him touch me when he had no business doing it, but no long, lingering caresses. I was his touchstone when he was nervous, not his girlfriend. I know, I said. He smiled. But you don't believe me. Let's

just say Ill relax when we actually land. Cherry joined us. She was tall and slender, with straight, naturally blond hair cut very, very short and close to a strong, triangular face. The eye shadow was gray, the eyeliner so black it looked like crayon. The lipstick was black. The makeup wasnt the colors Id have chosen for her, but it did match her clothes. Black fishnet stockings, vinyl miniskirt, black go-go boots, and a black lace bra underneath a fishnet shirt. Shed added the bra for my benefit. Left to her own devices, when she wasnt

working as a nurse, she went pretty much topless. Shed been a nurse until they found out she was a wereleopard; then shed been the victim of budget cuts. Maybe it was budget cuts, but then again, maybe it wasnt. It was illegal to discriminate against someone because they had a disease, but no one wants a were-anything treating the sick. People seem to think lycanthropes cant control themselves around freshly spilled blood. Some of the newer shapeshifters would be in trouble, but Cherry wasnt new. Shed been a good nurse, and now shed never be a nurse again. She was bitter about it and had turned herself into the slut bride from Planet X, as if even in human form, she wanted people to know what she was now: different, other. Trouble was, she looked like a thousand other teens and early twenties who also wanted to be different and stand out.

What happens once we land? Cherry asked in a purring, contralto voice. Id thought her voice had been the product of too much fur time, like Zanes teeth, but nope, Cherry just had this wonderful, deep, sexy voice.

Shed have done good phone sex. She sat on the ground at our feet, knees out, ankles crossed, making the short skirt ride up enough to show the hose were thigh high but still managing to cover the rest. Though in a skirt that short, I was hoping she was wearing undies. Id have never have been able to wear something that

short and not flash. I contact Richards brother and go to the jail, I said. What do you want us to do? Zane asked. Jean-Claude said that he made arrangements for rooms, so you guys go to the rooms. They exchanged a glance. It was more than an ordinary glance. What? I asked. One of us will need to go with you, Zane said.

No, Im going to go in there flashing my executioners license. Im better off on my own. What if the master of this city has his people waiting for you in town? Zane asked. Hell know youre going to the jail today. Cherry

nodded. It could be an ambush. They had a point, but... Look, nothing personal, guys, but you look like the top half of an S and M wedding cake. Cops dont like people who look sort of... I wasnt sure how to say it without being insulting. Cops were meat-and-potatoes people. They werent impressed by the exotic. Theyd

seen it all and cleaned up the mess. Most of the exotic that they saw were bad guys. After a while, policemen seem to think anything exotic is a bad guy; just saves time. If I walked into the police station with Tweedle-

punk and Tweedle-slut, it was going to raise the cops antennae. Theyd know I wasnt exactly what I was claiming to be, and that would complicate things. We needed to make things easier, not harder. I was dressed

in vampire executioner casual. New black jeans, not faded, crimson short-sleeved dress shirt, black suit jacket, black Nikes, black belt so the loops of my shoulder holster had something to hang on. The Browning

Hi-Power sat under my left arm, a familiar tightness. I was carrying three blades. A silver knife in a wrist sheath on each arm and a blade in a sheath down my spine. The handle stuck up high enough that my hair

had to hide it, but my hair was thick and dark enough to do the job. The last blade was like a small sword. Id used it only once for real to pin a wereleopard through the heart. The tip had pushed out his back. A silver

cross under the blouse for true emergencies, and I was packed for werebear, or almost anything else. I had a

spare clip of normal bullets in my fanny pack just in case I met up with a rogue fairie. Silver didnt work against them. Ill go with you. Nathaniel slid in behind Cherry, pressing himself against the wall of the plane

and my legs. One broad shoulder rested against my jeans in a nice, solid weight. There was actually no way for him to sit there and not touch me. He was always trying to touch me, and he was good enough at it that I

couldnt always bitch about it, like now. I dont think so, Nathaniel, I said. He hugged his knees to his chest and asked, Why not? He was dressed normally enough in jeans and a tucked-in T-shirt, but the rest of him...

His hair was a deep, nearly mahogany auburn. Hed tied it back in a loose ponytail, but the hair fell like silken water to his knees. Nathaniel gazed up at me with eyes the pale purple of Easter egg grass. Even if he

cut the hair, the eyes would have given him trouble. He was short for a man, and was also the youngest of us, nineteen. I suspected strongly that he was in the middle of a growth spurt. Someday, that short body was

going to match his shoulders, which were broad and very masculine. He was a stripper at Guilty Pleasures, a wereleopard, and once hed been a male prostitute. Id put a stop to that. If youre going to be leopard queen,

you might as well rule. The rule was that none of the leopards were whores. Gabriel, their old alpha, had pimped them out. Shapeshifters can take a lot of damage and survive. Gabriel had figured out a way to make

that pay. He pimped his kitties out to the S and M set. People who liked to give pain had paid a lot of money for Nathaniel, once upon a time. The first time Id ever seen him was in the hospital after a client had gotten

carried away and nearly killed him. Admittedly, this was after Gabriel had been killed. The wereleopards

had tried to keep up the client list without anyone to protect them from the clients. Zane had tried to take Gabriels place as pimp and bad-ass kitty, but he hadnt been strong enough to fill the bill. Hed let Nathaniel nearly die and hadnt been able to protect him. Nathaniel could bench-press a grand piano, but he was a victim. He liked pain and wanted someone to be in charge of him. He wanted a master and was trying very hard for me to take the job. We might have worked something out, but being his master or mistress seemed to include sex, and that I was not up for. Ill go, Jason said. He sat down beside Cherry and laid his head on her shoulder, snuggling. Cherry moved away from him, cuddling closer to Nathaniel. It wasnt sex, exactly, it was that the wereanimals tended to get up close and personal with their own kind. It was considered something of a social gaffe to cuddle up to a different sort of animal. But Jason didnt care. Cherry was female, and he flirted with anything that was female. Nothing personal, just habit. Jason wiggled his butt until Cherry was pressed between him and Nathaniel. Ive got a suit in my luggage. A nice, normal, blue suit. Ill even wear a tie. Cherry growled at him. It sounded all wrong, coming from that pretty face. I am not one of those women who wants to redo other women. I dont care much for makeup or clothes. But Cherry made me want to give her hints. If she was pretty in the Bride of Frankenstein makeup, shed have been a knockout in something that matched her skin tone. I smiled. Thanks, Jason. Now, give Cherry some breathing room. He pressed himself even closer. Zane gave me a kiss to make me move. Move, or Ill bite your nose off. She gave an expression that was half-snarl, half-smile, a threatening flash of teeth. I think she means it, I said. Jason laughed and stood in one of those lightning-fast movements that they were all capable of. He went to stand behind my seat, leaning his forearms on it. Ill hide behind you until its safe, he said. Get off the back of my seat, I said. He moved his arms but stayed standing behind me. Jean-Claude thought you might have to take some of us into police situations. We cant all look like college students and porn stars. The porn star comment was sadly accurate for all three of the wereleopards. Another good idea of Gabriels had been to star his people in porno films. Gabriel did his own share of starring roles. He was never one to ask of his kitties what he wasnt willing to do himself. Hed been a sick son of a bitch, and hed made sure that his wereleopards were as sick as he was. Nathaniel had given me a gift box of three of his movies. He suggested we watch them together. I said thanks, but no thanks. I kept the tapes mainly because I wasnt sure what to do with them. I mean, hed given me a gift. I was raised not to be rude. They were way in the back of my video cabinet, hidden behind a stack of Disney tapes. And no, I had not watched them once I was alone.

The air slapped against the plane, making it shudder. Turbulence, just turbulence. Youre actually pale, Cherry said. Yeah, I said. Jason kissed the top of my head. You know youre actually cute when youre scared. I turned very slowly in the seat and stared at him. I would have liked to say I stared at him until his smile faded away, but we didnt have that kind of time. Jason would grin on his way into hell. Dont touch me. The grin widened. His eyes sparkled with it. Who me? I sighed and settled back into the seat. It was going to be a very long couple of days. 4 PORTABY AIRFIELD IS small. I guess thats why its called an airfield instead of an airport. There were two small runways and a cluster of buildings, if three could be called a cluster. But it was clean and neat as a pin, and the setting was postcard perfect. The airfield sat in the middle of a wide, green valley surrounded on three sides by the gentle slopes of the Smokey Mountains. On the fourth side, behind the buildings, was the rest of the valley. It sloped sharply down, letting us know that the valley we were standing in was still part of the mountains. The town of Myerton, Tennessee, stretched below us in air so clean it sparkled like someone had dusted the clouds with ground diamonds. Words came to mind like pristine, crystalline. That was the main reason one of the last remaining wild bands of Lesser Smokey Mountain Trolls lived in the area. Richard was finishing up his masters degree in biology. Hed been studying the trolls every summer for four years between teaching full time. Takes longer to get your masters degree part time. I took a deep breath of the clean, clean air. I could see why Richard would want to spend his summers here. It was exactly the kind of place hed enjoy. He was into outdoorsy stuff in a big way. Rock climbing, hiking, fishing, camping, canoeing, bird-watching pretty much anything you could do outside was his idea of fun. Oh, caving, too. Though I guess, technically, youre not outside if youre inside a cave. When I said that Richard was a Boy Scout, I didnt mean just his moral fiber. A man walked towards us. He was almost perfectly round in the middle, wearing a pair of coveralls with oil on the knees. White hair stuck out from underneath a billed cap. His glasses were black-rimmed and square. He wiped his hands on a rag as he walked. The look on his face was polite, curious. His eyes flicked from me to the rest of the guys as they filed out of the plane. Then his eyes flicked to the coffins that were being unloaded from the storage compartment. Asher was in one. Damian was in the other. Asher was the more powerful of the two, but he was several hundred years younger. Damian had been a Viking when he was alive, and I dont mean the

football team. Hed been a card-carrying, sword-wielding, marauding raider. One night hed raided the wrong castle, and she took him. If she had a name, Ive never heard it. She was a master vampire and ruler of her lands, the equivalent to Master of the City when there is no city in a hundred miles. She took Damian on a summer night over a thousand years ago, and she kept him. A thousand years, and he felt no more powerful in my head than a vampire half his age. Id underestimated his age by hundreds of years, because part of me just couldnt accept that you could exist that long and not be more powerful, scarier. Damian was scary but not a millennium worth of scary. Hed never be more than he was: a third or fourth banana for all eternity. Jean-Claude bargained for Damians freedom when he came to be Master of the City. He ransomed Damian. I never knew what it cost Jean-Claude, but I knew that it hadnt been cheap. She had not wanted to give up her favorite whipping boy. The man said, Id shake your hand, but Ive been working on the planes. Mr. Nileys man is waiting in the building. I frowned. Mr. Niley? He frowned then. Arent you Mr. Nileys people? Milo said youd be coming in today. He looked back, and a tall man stepped out of the building. His skin was the color of coffee, two creams. His hair was cut in a wedge, leaving his elegant, sculpted face bare and unadorned. He was wearing a suit that cost more than most cars. He stared at me, and even from a distance I felt the dead weight of his eyes. All he needed was a sign over his head that said Muscle. No, were not Mr. Nileys people. That hed made the mistake made me wonder who Mr. Niley was. A voice called, These are the people Ive been expecting, Ed. It was Jamil, one of Richards enforcers. The enforcers were Skill and Hati after the wolves that chase the sun and moon in Norse mythology. When they catch them, it will be the end of the world. Tells you something about werewolf society that their enforcers were named after creatures that would bring about the end of everything. Jamil was Skill for Richards pack, which meant he was head enforcer. He was tall and slender in the way a dancer is slender, all muscles and shoulders planed down to a smooth, graceful machine of flesh. He was wearing a white sleeveless mens undershirt and loose, tailored white pants with a very sharp cuff rolled at the end of the pants legs. Black suspenders graced his upper body and matched the highly polished black shoes. A white linen jacket was thrown over one shoulder. His dark skin gleamed against the whiteness of his clothes. His hair was nearly waist length in cornrows with white beads woven through the braids. Last time Id seen him, the beads had been multicolored. Ed flicked a look back at Jamil. If you say so, he said. He went back to the main building, leaving us to ourselves. Probably just as well. I didnt know you were here, Jamil, I said. Im Richards bodyguard. Where else would I be? He had a point. Where were you the night his body was supposedly attacking this woman? Her name is Betty Schaffer. Have you talked to her? His eyes widened. Shes already cried rape once on a fine, upstanding white boy. No, I havent talked to her. You could try and blend in a little. Im one of only two black men for about 50 miles, he said. Theres no way for me to blend in, Anita, so I dont try. There was an undercurrent of real anger there. I wondered if Jamil had been having trouble with the locals. It seemed likely. He wasnt just African American. He was tall, handsome, and athletic looking. That alone would have gotten him on the redneck hit parade. The long cornrow hair and the killer fashion sense raised the question that he might violate the last white male bastion of homophobia. I knew that Jamil liked girls, but I was almost willing to bet some of the locals hadnt believed that. I assume that is the other African American guy. I was careful not to point at Milo. He was watching us, face expressionless, but too intense. Muscle recognizes muscle, and he was probably wondering about Jamil just as we were wondering about him. What was professional muscle doing out here in the boonies? Jamil nodded. Yeah, thats the other one. He doesnt blend in, either, I said. Who is he? His name is Milo Hart. He works for a guy named Frank Niley who is supposed to arrive today. You and he sit down and have a talk? No, but Ed is just full of news. Why does Frank Niley need a bodyguard? Hes rich, Jamil said as if that explained it, and maybe it did. Hes down here doing some land speculation. Ed the plane mechanic tell you all this? Jamil nodded. He likes to talk, even to me. Gee, and I thought you were just another pretty face. Jamil smiled. Ill do my job when Richard lets me. Whats that supposed to mean? It means if hed let me watch over him like a good Skill is supposed to, this rape charge would never have happened. Id have been a witness, and it wouldnt be just her word against his. Maybe I should talk to Ms. Schaffer, I said. Babe, you just read my mind. You know, Jamil, youre the only person who ever calls me babe. Theres a reason for that. His smile widened. Ill try to remember that. What happened to Richard, Jamil? You mean did he do it? I shook my head. No, I know he didnt do it. He did date her, Jamil said. I looked at him. What are you saying? Richards been trying to find a replacement for you. So? So, hes been dating anything that moves. Just dating? I asked. Jamil swirled his jacket from his shoulder to one arm, smoothing the cloth and not looking at me. Answer the question, Jamil. He looked at me, almost smiling, then sighed. No, not just dating. I had to ask. Hes been sleeping around? Jamil nodded. I stood

there, thinking about that for a second or two. Richard and I had each been celibate for years, separate decisions. I'd certainly changed my lifestyle. Did I really think he'd stay chaste when I hadn't? Was it any of my business what he did? No; no, it wasn't. I finally shrugged. He's not my boyfriend anymore, Jamil. And he's a big boy. I shrugged again, not really sure how I felt about Richard sleeping around. Trying very hard not to feel anything about it, because it didn't matter how I felt. Richard had his own life to live, and it didn't include me, not in that way. I'm not here to police Richard's sex life. Jamil nodded almost to himself. Good. I was worried. What, you thought I'd throw a fit and storm off, leaving him to his just desserts? Something like that, he said. Did he have sex with the woman who's made the accusation? If you mean intercourse, no. She's human, he said. Richard doesn't do humans. He's afraid they're too fragile. I thought you just said he'd been sleeping with Ms. Schaffer. Having sex, but not doing the dirty deed. I wasn't a virgin. I knew there were alternatives, but... Why alternative methods with humans? Why not just... do it? Doing the wild thing can release our beast early. You don't want to know what happens when you're with a human who doesn't know what you are, and you shift on top of them, inside them. A shadow crossed his face, and he looked away. You sound like the voice of experience, I said. He looked slowly back at me, and there was something in his face that was suddenly frightening, like looking up and realizing that the bars between you and the lion at the zoo aren't there anymore. That is none of your business. I nodded. Sorry, you're right. You're absolutely right. It was too personal. But it was interesting information. There had been a point where I'd pretty much begged Richard to stay the night. To have sex with me. He'd said no because it wouldn't be fair until I saw him change into werewolf form. I needed to be able to accept the whole package. I hadn't been able to do that once the package bled and writhed all over me. But now I wondered if part of his hesitation had been simply fear of hurting me. Maybe. I shook my head. It didn't matter. Business. If I concentrated really hard, maybe I could stay on track. We were here to get him out of jail, not to worry about why we broke up. We could use a little help here with the luggage, Jason called. He had two suitcases under each arm. Zane and Cherry were carrying one coffin. They looked like pallbearer bookends. Nathaniel was lying on his back on the other coffin. He'd taken off his shirt and unbound his hair. His hands were folded across his stomach, eyes closed. I didn't know whether he was playing dead or trying to get a tan. A little help here, Jason said, kicking his foot towards the rest of the luggage. Two suitcases and a huge trunk still sat unclaimed. I walked towards them. Jesus, only one of those suitcases is mine. Whose the clotheshorse? Zane and Cherry put the coffin gently on the Tarmac. Just one suitcase is mine, Zane said. Three of them are mine, Cherry said. She sounded vaguely embarrassed. Who brought the trunk? Jean-Claude sent it, Jason said. Just in case we do meet with the local master. He wanted us to make a good show of it. I frowned at the trunk. Please tell me there's nothing in there that Jean-Claude plans on me wearing. Jason grinned. I shook my head. I don't want to see it. Maybe you'll get lucky, Jason said. Maybe they'll try to kill you instead. I frowned at him. You're just full of happy thoughts. My speciality, he said. Nathaniel turned his head and looked at me, hands clasped across his bare stomach. I can lift the coffin, but it's not balanced right for carrying. I need help. You certainly do, I said. He blinked up at me, one hand raised to block the sun. I moved until my body blocked the sun and he could look at me without squinting. He smiled up at me. What's with the coffin sunbathing? I asked. The smile wilted around the edges, then faded completely. It's the scene in the crypt, he said as if that explained everything. It didn't. I don't know what you're talking about. He raised just his shoulders and head off the coffin like he was doing stomach crunches. His abs bunched nicely with the effort. You really haven't watched my movies, have you? Sorry, I said. He sat up the rest of the way, smoothing his hair back with both hands in a practiced gesture. He slipped a silver clasp around the hair and flipped the tail of auburn hair behind his back. I thought silver jewelry burned when it touched a lycanthrope's skin, I said. He wiggled his hair, settling the silver clasp securely against his neck. It does, he said. A little pain makes the world go round, I guess. He just stared at me with his strange eyes. He was only nineteen, but the look on his face was older, much older. There were no lines on that smooth skin, but there were shadows in those eyes that nothing would ever erase. Cosmetic surgery for the soul was what he needed. Something to take the terrible burden of knowledge that had made him what he was. Jason limped over to us, loaded with suitcases. One of his movies is about a vampire who falls in love with an innocent young human. You've seen it, I said. He nodded. I shook my head and picked up a suitcase. You got a car for us? I asked Jamil. A van, he said. Great. Pick up a suitcase, and show me the way. I don't do luggage. If we all help, we can load the van in half the time. I want to see Richard as soon as possible, so grab something and stop being such a freaking prima donna. Jamil stared at me for a long, slow count, then said, When Richard replaces you as lupa, I won't have to take shit from you. Fine, but until then, hop to it. Besides, this isn't giving you shit, Jamil. When I give you shit, you'll know it.

He gave a low chuckle. He slipped his jacket back on and picked up the trunk. It should have taken two strong men to lift it. He carried it like it weighed nothing. He walked off without a backward glance, leaving me to get the last suitcase. Zane and Cherry picked the coffin back up and walked after him. Jason shuffled after them. What about me? Nathaniel said. Put your shirt back on and stay with the coffin. Wouldnt do to have someone make off with Damian. I know women who would pay me to take the shirt off, he said. Too bad Im not one of them, I said. Yeah, he said, too bad. He picked his shirt up off the ground. I left him sitting on the coffin in the middle of the Tarmac, shirt wadded in his hands. He looked sort of forlorn in a strange, macabre way. I felt very sorry for Nathaniel. Hed had a rough life. But it wasnt my fault. I was paying for his apartment so he didnt have to turn tricks to make ends meet, though I knew other strippers at Guilty Pleasures who managed to make ends meet on their salary. Maybe Nathaniel wasnt good with money. Big surprise there. The van was large, black, and looked sinister. The sort of thing serial killers drive in made-for-TV movies. Serial killers did drive vans in real life, but they tended to be pale colors with rust spots. Jamil drove. Cherry and I rode up front with him. The luggage and everyone else went in the back. I expected Cherry to ask me to sit in the middle because I was at least five inches shorter than she was, but she didnt. She just crawled into the van, in the middle, with those long legs tucked up in front of the dashboard. The road was well paved, almost no potholes, and if you held your breath, two cars could pass each other without scraping paint. Trees hugged the road on either side. But on one side, you caught glimpses of an amazing drop-off, and on the other side, there was just rocky dirt. I preferred the dirt. The trees were thick enough that the illusion of safety was there, but the trees fell away like a great, green curtain, and you could suddenly see for miles. The illusion was gone, and you realized just how high up we were. Okay, it wasnt like Rocky Mountain high, but it would do the job if the van went over the edge. Falling from high places is one of my least favorite things to do. I dont clutch the upholstery like in the airplane, but Im a flatlander at heart and would be glad to be in the lower valley. Do you want me to drop you at the police station or take you to the cabins first? Jamil asked. Police. Did you say cabins? He nodded. Cabins. Rustic living? I asked. No, thank God, he said. Indoor plumbing, beds, electricity, the works, if you arent too particular about the decor. Not a fashion plate? Not hardly, he said. Cherry sat very still between us, hands folded in her lap. I realized she wasnt wearing her seat belt. My mother would be alive today if shed been wearing hers, so Im picky about it. Youre not wearing your seat belt, I said. Cherry looked at me. Im squashed enough without the seat belt, she said. I know you could survive a trip through the windshield, I said, but having you heal that much damage would sort of blow your cover. Am I supposed to be playing human? she asked. It was a good question. For the townsfolk, yeah. She fastened her seat belt without any more arguing. The wereleopards had taken me to heart as their Nimir-ra. They were so glad to have someone act as protector, even if it was just a human, that they didnt bitch much. You should have told me we were trying to blend in. Id have dressed differently. Youre right; I should have said something. Truthfully, it hadnt occurred to me until just that moment. The road spilled down into what passed for flatland here. The trees were so thick that it was almost claustrophobic. There was still a gentle swell to the land, letting you know you were driving over the toes of mountains. Do you want us to wait for you outside the station? Jamil asked. No, you guys sort of stand out. How are you going to get to the cabins? he asked. I shook my head. I dont know. Taxi? He looked at me, the look was eloquent. In Myerton, I dont think so. Damn, I said. Drive us to the cabins then. Ill take the van back into town. With Jason? Jamil said. I nodded. With Jason. I looked at him. Why is everyone so solicitous of me? I mean, I know there may be problems, but you guys are being awful cautious. I sat up straighter in the seat and stared at the side of Jamils face. He was watching the road like his life depended on it. What arent you guys telling me? He hit his turn signal and waited for a pickup truck to go past, then turned left between yet more trees. Itll take longer to get to the cabins. Jamil, what is going on? Cherry tried her best to sink into the seat, but when youre model tall and in the middle, its hard to play invisible. That one body movement told me she knew, too. That they both knew something I didnt. I looked at her. Cherry, tell me whats going on. She sighed and sat up a little straighter. If anything happens to you, Jean-Claudes going to kill us. I frowned at her. I dont understand. Jean-Claude couldnt come here himself, Jamil said. It would be seen as an act of war. But hes worried about you. He told us all that if we let you get killed, and he survives your death, hell kill us, all of us. He watched the road as he talked, turning onto a gravel road that was so narrow that trees brushed the sides of the van. Define all, I said. All of us, Jamil said. Were your bodyguards. I thought you were Richards bodyguard? I said. And youre his lupa, his mate. If youre a real bodyguard, you cant guard two people. You can only guard one at a time. Why? Cherry asked. I looked at Jamil. He didnt answer, so I did. Because you cant take a bullet for more than one person, and thats

what a bodyguard does. Jamil nodded. Yeah, that's what a bodyguard does. You really think anyone's going to be shooting at Anita? The bullets a metaphor, Jamil said. But it doesn't matter. Bullet, knife, claws, whatever it is, I take it. He pulled into a wide gravel turnaround and a huge clearing. There were small, white, boxy cabins scattered around the clearing like a Motel 6 that had been cut into pieces. There was a neon sign, pale in the sunlight, that said Blue Moon Cabins. Anita is our Nimir-ra. She's supposed to protect us, not the other way around. I agreed with her. I'd picked Zane and Cherry not for their bodyguarding ability but because they didn't mind sharing blood with the vampires. Even among the wereleopards, most of them didn't like donating. They seemed to think being a blood cocktail for the vamps was worse than sex for money. I wasn't sure I agreed with them, but I wasn't about to force them to do it if they didn't want to. I didn't donate blood, and I was sleeping with one of the undead. No, I said. I didn't agree to this. I can take care of myself, thank you very much. I opened the door, and Jamil reached across and grabbed my arm. His hand looked very dark against the paleness of my arm. I turned very slowly and looked at him. It was not a friendly look. Let go of me. Anita, please, you are one of the toughest humans I've ever met. You are the most dangerous human female I've ever seen. His hand squeezed just enough for me to feel the immense strength in it. He could probably deadlift an elephant if it didn't wiggle too much. He could certainly crush my arm. But you are human, and the things you're up against aren't. I stared at him. Cherry sat very still between us, half-pinned by Jamil's body. Let go of me, Jamil. His hand tightened. It was going to be a hell of a bruise. Just this once, Anita, stay in the background, or you're going to get us all killed. Jamil's body was extended across the seat, across Cherry. I was on the edge of the seat, butt half in the air. Neither he nor I were balanced very well. His grip was on the middle of my forearm, not a good place to hold on. What you f\*ckballs keep forgetting is that strength isn't enough. Leverage, that's the ticket. He frowned at me, obviously puzzled. His hand tightened just this side of serious injury. You can't fight this, Anita. What do you want me to say? Uncle? Jamil smiled. Uncle, okay, yeah, say uncle. Admit that just this once you can't take care of yourself. I pushed myself out of the van, tucking my legs so he was suddenly trying to hold my entire body weight with a one-handed grip on my forearm. My arm slipped through his fingers. I let myself fall to the ground, going for the long blade down my back, not worrying about trying to stand. My right hand went for the Browning, but I knew I wouldn't make it in time. I was trusting that Jamil wasn't going to kill me. We were grandstanding. If I was wrong on that, I was about to die. Jamil spilled over the seat, arms reaching for me, trusting in his own way that I wouldn't blow his head off. He knew I had the gun. He was treating me like a shapeshifter who knew the rules. You didn't kill over small stuff. You bled each other, but you didn't kill. I sliced his arm open from a nearly prone position. There was a moment of utter surprise on his face. He hadn't known about the third blade or its length, and getting sliced open is always a shock. He jerked backwards out of sight like someone had pulled him, but I knew better. He was just that fast. I had time to get to one knee before he bounded onto the hood of the van, crouched like the predator he was. I had the Browning pointed at him. I got to my feet, gun nice and steady on the middle of his body. Standing didn't help things. I didn't shoot better standing. But somehow I wanted to be on my feet. Jamil watched me but made no move to stop me. Maybe he was afraid to try. Not of the gun but of himself. I had hurt him. Blood was splashing all over those pretty white clothes. His entire body vibrated with the desire to close the distance between us. He was pissed, and it was four nights until full moon. He probably wouldn't kill me, but I wasn't going to test the theory. He could break my neck with one blow. Hell, he could explode my skull like an egg. No more chances. I pointed the Browning at him one-handed, knife still in my left. Don't do it, Jamil.

I'd hate to lose you over something this stupid.