

CATHARSIS

A Nocturnum: The Pittsburgh Chronicles story by Julie Gouirand

Afraid—Motley Crue

*Do you, do you wanna bleed?
Do you, do you wanna live in vain?*

*It's only life
She's so afraid to kiss
And so afraid to laugh
Is she runnin' from her past?*

*It's only life
She's so afraid of love
and so afraid of hate
What's she runnin' from now??*

*Do you, do you wanna scream?
Do you, do you wanna face the strange?
Do you, do you believe?
Are you, are you afraid of change?*

*It's only life
She's so afraid of this
And so afraid to ask
She hides behind her mask
Nothing's ever right
She's so afraid of pain
So afraid of blame
It's driving her insane*

*So insecure
There is no cure*

*Well she's so afraid
She's so afraid of death
She's so afraid, afraid of life
The drama in her head
Getting louder all the time
Getting louder all the time
She's so afraid, afraid to lose
Been so afraid of fame
Everyday she feels the same
It's driven her insane...
It's driven her...
It's driven...
It's...*

Another broken pretty thing

Anita's black Jeep accelerated along the highway. A small leather bag lay across the back seats, packed full with her things. Guilt choked her as she considered her decision to leave without saying goodbye. It had been a hard decision, but she knew it was the right thing to do. She had left a note at the Hive explaining everything. She just couldn't bear it any longer. She felt so completely lost. She needed to figure things out, and she knew that she couldn't ask the others to help her.

You heartless bitch. How could you? It's John and Cyan's wedding day.

She sighed and drummed her fingers on the steering wheel as she drove. On the horizon, she could see dark storm clouds rolling in from the north. As she watched them grow closer, her mind was flooded with memories, horrible and heartbreaking, of the last four months of her life. She turned up the radio and let the music blast, in hopes of distracting her thoughts. In the early hours of the morning, exhausted and hungry, she found a motel and finally got off the road.

Once settled in the tiny single room, Anita stripped off the crimson bridesmaid's dress and stepped into the shower, sinking against the wall and letting the hot water beat down on her as she wept, overcome by her fatigue. After her shower, she dried herself with the scratchy courtesy towel, tossed it onto the floor next to the dress, and pulled a too-large sleep shirt over her head. Then, once she had shut the drapes and turned off the light, she pushed back the thin comforter on the bed and slipped between the sheets. She passed out as soon as her head hit the pillow.

* * *

A scream woke her in the middle of the night. Throwing back the sheet, she flew out of bed in a panic and followed the noise down the hallway. The summer air was thick, hot, and choking with humidity. She stopped in the doorway of Kat's bedroom. The girl, obscured by darkness, sat on the edge of the bed. Her breathing sounded heavy and shaking and she was whimpering.

"Anita? I'm sick..."

"It's alright. Hang on, okay?" She treaded next door to the bathroom, and flipped the switch. The light was incredibly bright, almost blinding. Despite this, she found what she needed and switched it back off. She turned on the faucet and dampened the washcloth in the dark, relaxed by the sensation of the cool water running over her hands and into the drain.

She wrung it out and carried it back into the room, knelt in front of her. She reached out to push Kat's sweaty hair back from her face and wiped her face with the washcloth, holding it to the back of her neck.

Kat laid her head on Anita's shoulder. Her cheek felt hot, as if it was on fire.

"Something's wrong," she mumbled.

Anita gently rubbed Kat's back, concerned. "What's wrong, honey?"

And then, with a growl, Kat bit her, her arms tightening around Anita as she savagely sank her teeth into her neck.

Anita screamed and fought hard to break away from her. She fell backwards, scrambled out of the room into the hallway, and desperately attempted to get to her feet, only to slide back to the floor as nausea and dizziness overwhelmed her. She brought her fingertips to her neck and felt the deep tears in her skin. When she took it away, her hand was covered in blood. She stared at it in disbelief. She knew that she needed to get to a hospital, but first the zombie had to be taken care of.

A very dead Kat then stumbled out of the room and tripped, landing on top of her legs. Her eyes were bloodshot, hollow, almost alien, and she reeked of the stench of decay. Her mouth was covered in blood. Thick and dark, it slowly dripped down her chin. She hissed as she reached out, her swollen, dead hands closing around Anita's throat.

"Stop!" she choked. The command carried all the force of her power over the dead, but it did not obey her.

It's going to eat me alive...sweet Jesus, please help me...don't let me die like this...

She began to see stars, and could sense that the world was slipping away from her. As she passed out, she felt the zombie relax its grip as it leaned over her to claim another bite of her flesh...

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She woke the next day, uneasy and troubled by the dream, checked out of the motel, and the journey continued. Anita planned to meet the Mockers, survivors of the insidious corruption of the Mad Gods. The Mockers had been helpful to her, Drake, John, Cyan, and Klaus while they had been in the Shadow Lands, and through that experience Anita had grown to regard them with deep respect. Unlike the other Covenants they were loosely organized and scattered, often blending in among other groups, such as the Pariahs, and not easy to track down without contacts and a lot of legwork. Fortunately for Anita, Megan, the young homeless Pariah who frequently hung around the Hive Arcana, had been able to tip her off as to where to look for them. Her plan was to stay with them for awhile and then eventually go home and see her family.

Megan's information proved reliable. Two days later, she arrived in Cedar Rapids and found a small cohort of them living on an old, abandoned farm just outside the city proper. Though they usually sought out victims of the Mad Ones themselves, they agreed to see Anita and listen to her story.

She told them everything that had happened. They sat in a circle around her, quiet, exchanging glances with each other.

“I think I’m really going crazy. I’m not myself. I have the most horrible thoughts! The nightmares are getting worse. Eating makes me sick. Even coffee makes me sick! I’ve never felt so screwed up in my life! I don’t know what to do. Please.” Tears spilled down her cheeks and she secretly hated herself for displaying such weakness. They remained silent for several minutes, appeared to be lost in their thoughts. One of them spoke at last, rising to his feet.

“In order to control the madness, you must allow it to run its course. We call it ‘catharsis.’ It is a dangerous process. People have died from it.” The man’s voice was quiet and lacked emotion. Anita could sense the Taint coming from within him, like a dull throb in her mind.

“I know. I understand. I…”

“You can not possibly understand.”

“Okay, whatever. I don’t understand. I just want to it to stop.”

“It will never stop. There is no cure. The mad touch will always be with you. All we can do is learn how to keep it under control, fight it back. That is all.”

“Will you teach me? I mean, show me how to control it?” She searched their faces, anxious to hear their answer.

Another older Mocker stood. His eyes swam with feral rage.

“You have not the slightest comprehension of how lucky you are, that you were touched by the madness, but not permanently Tainted. Do you know how many souls here would gladly cut out their own tongues for a chance for that?” he whispered.

“I’m damn lucky just to be alive. I know that. But I’m not like you, and I can’t live like this,” she replied. “Now will you help me, or not?”

The first Mocker peered at her from behind a mop of black hair that hung in his face, his wild, piercing blue eyes meeting her dark ones.

No one said anything for a long time after that.

Go home, Anita. They’re not going to help you. No one can help you.

“Do you like coffee?” he asked, finally.

Anita was perplexed. *What the hell kind of question is that?*

“Uh, yeah, I do. Why do you ask?”

“You should have some coffee before we start. It’s nice and crunchy. Come,” he said, taking Anita’s slender hand and leading her down a corridor to a stairwell. His soft laughter surrounded

her like a mantle as they descended the stairs into the basement of the warehouse.

* * *

She slowly opened her eyes, dizzy and confused. She lay on the floor, the room spinning and she pulled herself into a sitting position. It was hard to remember for certain how long she had been there. The laughing one, Gregory, was still there with her, she knew, even though she could not see him in the darkness of the room. She shivered. He was the one who had restrained her, then jabbed a needle into her forearm, making her sleep. She closed her eyes, desperate to stop the nausea rising in the pit of her stomach, and sank back to the floor, laying her head on her outstretched arm. Slowly, she slipped back into unconsciousness.

* * *

She checked her watch again. 6:30pm. He was 30 minutes late, now. Snow fell from the sky. She hugged herself, pulling the warmth of her coat closer to her. Her hands were frozen, her cheeks burning. She pulled her fingers inside of her sleeves and wrinkled her nose, looking around.

She stood outside of the Hive. The fluorescent light from the Joe Mama's sign across the street bathed her in a pinkish glow. Cars slid down Forbes Avenue in front of her, the drivers slamming on their brakes and shaking their fists as hoards of Pitt students darted across the road in front of them.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and jumped, startled.

"You look cold," Alan murmured into her ear. She nodded, turning to face him. He was wearing a midnight blue silk shirt with a high, split collar and black pants underneath his velvety coat. He'd pulled his hair back into a ponytail, though a few gently waving strands had fought their way loose and fell along the sides of his face. The blue of the shirt seemed to bring out the darkness of his eyes as they searched her own. She cocked an eyebrow and grinned.

"Well hello there, professor. My, don't you look spiffy?"

He smiled at her. Smiling back, she hugged him. He pulled back from her embrace and brushed his mouth lightly against hers, his hands sliding around her waist. She shivered, and her stomach flip-flopped when he let her go.

"I'm freezing. Where were you?"

"My department meeting ran late today. I apologize, but perhaps it's a comfort to know I suffered terribly as well." He smiled at her again. "You ready?"

"Yeah. What time does it start?"

“It’s showing at Loews at 9 o’clock. I thought perhaps we could have dinner first.”

She nodded. He offered her his hand as they walked down the street, away from the Hive. She took it. He squeezed her hand, his also-bare fingers warm as they wrapped around hers. She could see his silver Jaguar parked a few blocks down the street. Her mind wandered as they made their way towards it.

“A penny for your thoughts,” he said softly, bringing her attention back to the present.

“Huh? Oh, just thinking. This has just been the week from hell, quite literally.” She shuddered, shaking her head.

“Well, God willing, Evil will leave you in peace tonight.” He smiled.

“Evil’s going to have serious problems if it screws with me on my night off.”

“Right. No screwing, then,” Alan agreed. Embarrassed, she felt a blush heat her cheeks. He laughed, amused by her expression. Her embarrassment quickly turned to anger and she scowled.

They reached his car. She regarded him as he came around to the passenger side with her.

“You shouldn’t make fun of me. You know I could kick your ass.”

He slid his key into the door’s handle, a serious look on his face as he considered what she had said.

“I imagine you could. But you know some people do enjoy that sort of thing, especially when an attractive woman’s involved.”

She laughed in spite of herself. “That’s true enough.”

He turned the key and a soft beep sounded, signaling that the locks were disengaged. Her heart pounded hard against her chest when his attention focused on her again and he gazed at her. He leaned in and kissed her again, smiling.

“I win,” he whispered against her lips. The snow continued to fall on them as he reached down and pulled the door open for her...

** * **

Her eyes flew open and she woke, startled. All she could see was darkness. She was alone. A sudden surge of emotions rose up within her. Her chest was tight, and tears escaped from her eyes and fell down her cheeks. How had this one, simple memory evoked such strong feelings from within her?

“Sometimes the mind needs to recall certain things,” the Mocker’s voice rang out and he appeared in front of her. “Those memories keep you here, like anchors for your mind, stop the madness from sweeping you away.” He smiled. “Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream...”

“I was wrong. I can’t...” Anita mumbled. “I can’t do this.” She tried to sit up. “I’m done. I don’t want to do this anymore.” Sweat beaded on her forehead. She felt sick, feverish. Underneath it all, a deep, painful heartache welled inside her.

He shook his head. “Anita...”

“Please, Gregory. I’m done. I’m much better, I really am.”

“You must finish,” he replied in a soft voice.

“I am finished!” She grew more escalated.

Gregory said nothing. He could feel it building within her, a massive pressure waiting to explode.

“Gregory? Please? I’m not feeling so hot. I’d really appreciate it if you’d help me upstairs. Something’s wrong. I feel like I need to throw up.”

“I believe that you’re uncomfortable, Anita. I can sense it. Metaphysically speaking, you’re about ready to pop.” He put his hands in his pockets, carefully not moving any closer to her.

Her hands started to shake, and he could feel her sudden rage wash over him in a rush of power.

“I could rip the soul right out of you, you know that?” she hissed.

He smiled, and it was not friendly. “Yes, my little necromancer, I’m well aware of what you can do. If there’s anything left in there, you’re more than welcome to it...after you’ve finished.”

At that moment, the madness erupted in full force. Her screams were terrible as it tore its way forth and consumed her. Gregory’s stomach clenched as he watched her dig her fingernails deep into the flesh of her arms, drawing blood. He backed into a corner, hiding in the safety of the shadows. She violently thrashed about on the ground, crying and shrieking one minute, and giggling and laughing the next. It was horrible to witness. Gregory closed his eyes, the memories of his own catharsis experiences triggered by watching her. He breathed deeply, cleared his mind of those memories, and waited for the first round to be over.

Some time later, she fell quiet and stopped moving. When he approached her to check on her, her head rose, almost mechanically. Even in the darkness, he saw her smile as she whispered what she would do to him if he decided to remain with her. He found those promises far more terrifying than her previous threats and took his leave of her.

In time, she fell unconscious again.

* * *

The room flickered with candlelight. Thick incense filled the air. She realized in horror that she was completely naked. Her pale skin had been marked with odd, alien tattoos. The Mark of the Djinn had been painted low on her abdomen.

She could see someone coming towards her. The figure whispered her name, and she recognized the voice as being male. The dark hood of his robes was raised, hiding his face from her view as he approached her. He ran his hands down her body. She trembled as he drew her to him, laid his body with hers. He brushed her cheek with his fingers. Every sensation was surreal, and she thought she must be dreaming.

“Shhh...it’s alright. Don’t be afraid. Close your eyes, and relax,” he whispered. A sense of calm washed over her and she obeyed.

She felt him press his lips to hers, his mouth roaming down her chin to her neck. His teeth lightly grazed her skin as he kissed her throat. She moaned, her body responding to him. There was something very familiar about him, his touch, his body. His breath came in shudders as he moved against her. She could feel the tightness begin to build within her. His rhythm became quicker, driving them both over the edge.

She opened her eyes as it was happening to look at him. Her screams filled the cavernous temple, echoing off of the walls and ringing in her ears...

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It was two in the morning on the thirteenth day. The active psychosis was going on its ninth hour, and had not broken yet. He’d had to restrain her again, to keep her from seriously harming herself. She was not doing well. Fearful, Gregory went to speak with the rest of his cohorts.

“We need a physical anchor, someone who can help bring her out of it. She’s definitely stuck, and we’re going to lose her unless we do something.”

The other Mockers nodded.

“We agree. You should contact her associates in Pittsburgh immediately.”

Gregory sighed. “She didn’t tell them what she planned to do. I’m afraid they won’t understand.”

“I’m sure they knew that she wasn’t well.”

He nodded. “I’ll try.”

“Good. In the meantime, make her as comfortable as possible. Poor thing is quite mad.”

Gregory snorted.

“We’re all mad down here,” he mumbled, and made his way to the telephone.

* * *

“What do you think of these ones?”

Anita admired the pale green flowers. Bells of Ireland.

“I think they’ll be beautiful.”

Cyan nodded to the florist, who smiled as he wrote down her final choice on the list of flowers for the wedding. The bells were for the bridal bouquet.

“That’s it then. The flowers are done. Thanks for helping me!” She smiled.

“No problem. I didn’t really do much,” Anita shrugged. She held the door for Cyan as they stepped out of the shop and onto the street.

“Well, I appreciate it. Listen, do you have time to go to David’s today? They called me first thing this morning. The dresses are in. They want to start the fittings.”

“Yeah, I can do that. I don’t work until tonight.”

“Thanks. You’re the best.”

They matched strides walking to Cyan’s car.

Cyan smiled as they climbed inside. “I love having girl time with you. We should do this more often.”

“You should get married more often.”

Cyan laughed and pushed a thick strand of red hair behind one ear. John’s engagement ring reflected in the light and shined beams of light across the dashboard. She slipped her key into the ignition and turned it, and the candy-apple Hum-V roared to life.

“Might be your turn soon enough,” she teased, adjusting her seatbelt.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You’ve been seeing Alan for, what, more than a year, right?”

Anita shrugged. "Yeah, something like that. So?"

Cyan smiled again. "Oh, it's nothing. That's just about how long it took for John to propose, that's all."

Anita rolled her eyes. "That was a totally different situation, Cyan."

"Oh come on, Anita. It's me. He's crazy about you. You have to see it."

"He's British. They're all kind of nutty. He can't help it."

Cyan sighed, exasperated. "Anita..."

"I'm asking you to drop this, right now."

"Why?"

Anita looked very hard at her friend.

It was Cyan's turn to roll her eyes. "Okay, fine. You're off the hook for now. But this conversation is far from over."

Anita slowly let her breath out. They sat in silence for a long while.

Eventually, Cyan reached over and squeezed Anita's hand as she drove.

"I didn't mean to make you upset, sweetie. Please don't be mad at me."

"I know. I'm not mad. I just don't want to discuss it, okay? I'm not marrying anyone." She watched out the window as they exited the parkway and flew up the ramp leading into the maze that was Robinson.

"Anita?"

"Yeah?"

"Honey, listen to me..."

"What is it?"

"Come back to us, sweetie..."

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm right here!"

"Anita...wake up..."

Every bone in her body ached. Her mouth was dry, and she was incredibly thirsty. It occurred to her that she was laying on something. Slowly, she sat up and looked around, dazed.

She was in a canopy bed. Sheer drapes fell on all sides of her, shielding her view. As she reached out to pull them back, she saw a shadow abruptly pass over them, and let out a shriek as Gregory poked his head in, grinning at her. He was wearing a colorful, brightly tie-dyed Grateful Dead tee shirt that made Anita's eyes water, his black hair spiked wildly.

"You're up!"

She frowned at him. "And you're observant. What the hell happened?"

He continued to grin.

"It's graduation day. The catharsis is over. How do you feel?"

Pausing, she thought his question over for a moment, and realized that underneath the physical pain, something about her was very different. She looked at him, and a smile slowly spread across her face.

"I'm...okay. I'm really sore, though."

He nodded emphatically. "It's hell on the body. You had a rough time for awhile, there, but you pulled through. You're a strong one."

I did it. I made it through.

She reached out and took his hand. He looked surprised, unsure of how to react.

"Gregory, thank you."

She squeezed his fingers and smiled gratefully at him. He nodded, smiling back, before letting go of her hand and pulling the curtain back further, bathing her in sunlight.

"Coffee?"

She laughed. "Yeah, coffee would be great."

It was five thirty in the morning. She'd been driving all night, but she'd finally made it home. Her stepmother answered the door in her pink satin bathrobe and slippers and took her straight into the kitchen.

“I’m sorry to wake you so early.”

“It’s alright.” She pursed her lips. “Do you want coffee, or...?”

“No thanks.”

“Are you hungry?”

Anita shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“How long will you be staying?”

“I haven’t quite figured that out yet.”

She did not look pleased, but said nothing. Anita was too tired to argue with her.

“I’m going to get some sleep, if that’s okay...”

“Of course. You know where everything is. I’ll let your father know you’re here when he wakes up.”

“Thanks. Goodnight.” And with that, she stood up from the kitchen table and made her way to the steps leading to the basement, where the “guest room,” formerly Anita’s bedroom, was. She stretched out on the futon and pulled a soft afghan around her, relaxing in the safety and comforts of her childhood home.

She woke hours later. Her father was sitting on the edge of the futon, shaking her gently.

“You’ll miss the rest of the day, lazy bones.”

“I didn’t get in ‘till 5:30 this morning,” Anita mumbled as she stretched. She sat up and hugged him. He kissed her cheek and smoothed her sleep-tousled hair.

“You’ve lost weight, Niña.”

She nodded. “I’ve been through some stuff. It’s okay. I’m getting better, slowly but surely.” She hugged him again. “It’s good to see you, Dad.”

“You get in the shower. I’ll cook us up some breakfast and make a pot of coffee, and we’ll talk. Okay?”

She nodded. Twenty minutes later, she sat at the kitchen table with a plate of stuffed crepes and a steaming mug of goodness in front of her. After she’d finished the last bite, cleaning her plate, she reached for her coffee.

“Dad, have you heard of the Church of Revelations?”

He shook his head, sipping from his own mug. “That some new religious group? Why do you ask?”

“Just...don’t trust anyone who associates with them. They’re seriously bad and not at all what they seem to be.”

Her father frowned. “What do you mean?”

“It’s complicated, Dad. Just trust me.”

“Do they have to do with this “stuff” that you’ve been through recently?”

She paused, and then nodded. “Yeah, you could say that.”

His frown grew. “Anita...”

“Someone I know got involved with them, and they messed his head up pretty good. It was bad.”

“One of your friends in Pittsburgh?”

She avoided his gaze. “Yeah. Well...not exactly. We were seeing each other, sort of.”

His voice fell quiet. “You never told me you were seeing someone...”

“If it makes you feel better, I didn’t tell anyone.”

“No, it really doesn’t. So what happened?”

“Nothing, thankfully. We were lucky.” She folded her hands in front of her.

“And this guy? What happened to him?”

“He’s serving the consequences for what he did.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? What did he do to you?”

“Look, it doesn’t matter. It’s over, and I’ve forgiven him. He had no idea what the hell he was into. He was deceived. We all were,” she murmured.

“Was it serious?” Her father ran his hand through his hair and gave her a hard look.

“You mean between me and Alan? Yeah.” She hugged her arms across her chest.

“How long?”

She paused, not liking where this conversation was going. “Two years.”

“Were you in love?”

“Yes. I still love him. It’d be easier if I didn’t.” She let out a long sigh.

“Why didn’t you say anything about any of this before?”

“I was still sorting things out...you know, about being in a relationship again. I was in serious denial for a long time.”

“I just wish that you felt like you could talk to me about things. I hate it that you feel you have to keep everything from everyone. Ever since Chris died you’ve shut the rest of the world out. You can’t do that forever, Anita, or you’re always going to be alone.”

“I wasn’t trying to shut you out. I was scared. I didn’t know what to do.”

He sighed. “I know that, baby. I know.” He reached out, hugging her. “I’m sorry that you’re hurting. I wish I could take it away.”

She leaned her head on her father’s shoulder and let the tears she’d been holding back fall. He held her tightly and let her cry. After awhile, she quieted and her breathing returned to normal. She sat up and wiped her eyes.

“Sorry about the unexpected drop-in, by the way. I just needed to get away for awhile. I’m thinking of going to London for a bit, too.”

“London?”

“Yeah. His family’s there. I really should go and see them. I have some other friends around England, too.”

“What about work?” he asked.

“Dana can manage things without me for awhile. We have enough help. And all of my current cases are wrapped up, so. I’m sure there’ll still be plenty of clients when I’m ready to go back.”

Her father nodded. “You are the bright, shining beacon for all things unusual, Anita”

“Yep. But my life never ever gets boring.” She grinned.

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Anita regarded the giant house beyond the gate in front of her. Now that she was here, on the

front lawn of his family's estate, she wasn't quite sure what to do with herself.

Why the hell did I come here? Was this a mistake? They probably have no idea who I am. Maybe I should just go home. She sighed, feeling unsure, and anxious.

No. You can't go home yet. You need to do this. For you, for him, and for them. Now start walking.

Finally, she lifted the latch and wandered up the walkway. The door was adorned with a golden knocker within a great lion's head. After some hesitation, Anita lifted the ring and let it strike three times.

An Indian woman answered the door. She regarded Anita with curiosity.

"Yes?"

"Is this the Collins' residence?"

"Yes, it is. May I ask what this is regarding?"

She paused, uncertain of how to answer that question.

"My name is Anita Blake. I--"

A look of recognition passed across the woman's face. Without another word, she opened the door.

"Please come in." She took Anita's bag and coat, showing her into the living room. A long velveteen sofa sat in front of a considerable fireplace. A low coffee table separated them, stacked with some books and newspapers. A thick, ornately carved mantle framed the fireplace, adorned with many pictures. Anita regarded her reflection in the antique mirror that hung above the mantle.

She recognized someone in one of the pictures on the mantle, picking it up to examine it more closely. A handsome young man stood on the steps of a massive cathedral. He wore a long, dark cloak. His eyes sparkled, his mouth drawn into a knowing smile.

"That was taken his first year at university. He was just 19, if memory serves me correctly. Quite the heartbreaker, wasn't he?"

Anita turned. A woman stood behind her. She was almost as petite as Anita. Her hair was pulled back into a fashionable style, and a delicate silk wrap was draped along her slender shoulders. Her eyes were very familiar.

"My name is Anita Blake. I--"

“Felicia Collins.” She stepped forward and took Anita’s hand. “I know who you are, Anita. We’ve been waiting for you.”

The Indian woman appeared again with a tray balanced in her hands. She cleared the coffee table, setting out a large, ornate china teapot, cups, saucers, a basket stuffed with assorted teabags, and several small platters piled with homemade scones and tea breads. Alan’s mother placed two cups onto saucers and offered Anita the basket of tea. She chose a sachet, dropped the bag into her cup and poured hot water from the pot over it. Felicia fixed hers as well, adding a lump of brown sugar and a dollop of milk before she settled back into the support of the sofa. She eyed Anita as she sipped her tea.

“I’m so glad that you decided to come, Anita. Dr. Arnedt thought you might. I was hoping we’d get to meet you.” She smiled.

At that moment, a man entered the living room from a hallway on the opposite end of the room. His silver hair fell against his shoulders, his black shirt flowing as he strode towards them. Fire glimmered in his eyes. Felicia held her hand out to him and he took it, sliding his body against the back of the sofa, close to her.

“This is my husband, Alan...the second, of course. Dear, this is Anita Blake.”

He nodded, somber.

“It’s a pleasure, Miss Blake. We’ve heard a lot about you.”

“I was afraid of that.”

They both laughed. She smiled, relieved.

“I just thought it was the right thing to do to come and see you.”

“It was. You are welcome to stay for as long as you like,” he said, smiling at her. “We are grateful for the company. Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you.” Anita returned his smile. “That’s very generous of you.”

Felicia took a deep breath, her eyes filling with tears.

“We knew something was wrong when he stopped calling us about four months ago. It was so unlike him, but then we got a letter from him saying that he was extremely busy with work and not to worry. We should have phoned him. We should have done something.” She shook her head.

Anita put her teacup down.

“Don’t blame yourself. It won’t help, trust me. No one knew what was happening to him.

Once he revealed what he had been doing, everyone tried to help him, but he was too sick by that point.”

“Dr. Arnedt said that he did some terrible things...”

“Alan wasn’t himself. If he had been, he never would have done the things he did. But in the end, he did realize that what he was doing was wrong. It was almost like he hadn’t understood things clearly up until then.”

“Where you think he is, now?”

He’s somewhere, suffering unimaginable torment...I see him all the time in my dreams...

“Alan redeemed himself before he...he helped to save three innocent lives. He kept saying over and over again that he was sorry for what he had done. God is sympathetic to those who ask for forgiveness.”

His mother nodded through her tears. Her husband wrapped his arms around her shoulders, letting out a long sigh.

“Felicia, Anita is tired. She has traveled a long way. There will be plenty of time later to discuss these things. We should let her get some rest,” he said gently.

She nodded. “Your things are already upstairs. Just follow the hallway to the staircase. At the landing, bear right, and you’ll be in the eastern wing. Please let us know if you need anything.”

Anita nodded. “Thank you.”

-7-

She was standing on top of a hill. A bright moon hung in the inky sky over her head. She could see lights flickering down along the hillside below. The wind whipped about her, blowing her dark hair in her face, chilling her skin under the thin, black material of her gown. Dark clouds rolled in with the winds, and it became apparent that a storm was imminent. Lightning flickered briefly, and rain began to pour from the sky. She descended the hill carefully, her bare feet sinking into the muddy ground. She could see something below, distant, at the base of the hill. As she approached, she realized what it was.

A circle.

She stepped towards the stones that appeared to mark its boundaries. He sat inside, filthy and shivering. His pale skin was bruised and bleeding in places. He hugged his knees to his bare chest, his hair falling in wet strands about his face. There was an animalistic hunger in his eyes, which were fixed on her.

She said his name softly, reached her hand out towards him, but was unable to cross the

stone barrier. Closer now, she could see the purple, blue, and black streams forming a wall of energy between the rocks. She laid her palm against it, feeling its power reverberate against her skin, and closed her eyes.

When she opened them, he had moved and was now directly in front of her. A low growl rose from his throat. Her heart began to pound in her chest. He, too, reached his hand out to touch the force between them...

The mystical energies flared, and she screamed as she watched them rise around him and explode, throwing him backwards to the center of the circle. Lightning crashed overhead, blinded and deafened her. She stumbled backwards and fell, gasping as the ground opened up and swallowed her...

* * *

“Anita?”

She felt hands gently shaking her shoulders, bringing her out of her dream. Alan’s father was kneeling in front of her, the afternoon sun illuminating his outline.

“Sorry. I didn’t hear you calling me.”

He smiled. “It’s alright. You have a phone call, dear.”

“I must have really been out of it. I didn’t hear my cell ring, either.” Still disoriented, she reached for her phone, and then remembered where she was.

Duh. Your cell phone doesn’t work in Europe, remember?

He covered her hand with his own. “It’s on the house phone.” He stood, offering her his other hand.

“Odd. I wonder who it could be...” She took his hand and allowed him to help her stand up. She brushed her hands over the legs of her jeans as they walked out of the garden and back towards the house.

“I’ll bring it out to you, alright?” He squeezed her shoulder before disappearing into the house. Anita pulled a rod iron chair out from a patio table and sat down.

Who is it? How did they know where I was? Her paranoia surged, causing her entire body to become tense. She crossed her arms over her chest, hugging herself. He reappeared a few moments later with a cordless telephone.

“We’ll be in the dining room if you’d like some lunch, after you’re finished, of course.”

She nodded. “Thanks.” He left her, sliding the glass door closed behind him. She hesitated,

staring at the phone for a moment before reaching out to grab it and bringing it to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Anita.”

“Drake? What’s going on? What’s wrong?” Anita asked, alarmed at the sound of his voice.

“Nothing. Everything’s fine. How are you doing?”

“I’m okay. How did you find me?”

“Willow told me you were in the country. I guess you wanted to see his family after everything that happened?”

“Yeah, I needed to. They’re really good people. I’ve been here a couple weeks. Where are you calling me from?”

“Ireland. Katherine’s here with me

“Is she? What are the two of you up to?”

“Planning our nuptials. We’re to be wed next month.”

“Um, isn’t that going to be kind of difficult, seeing as Katherine’s incorporeal?”

“Not anymore. It’s a long story, but she’s solid now, here in the flesh. For now, anyway.”

“Wow. That’s big news. So, you’re really getting married?” She smiled.

“Yes, I am. We are.”

“Seems like everyone I know is getting hitched. I guess I am going to become an old maid, just like my grandmother Blake always predicted,” she said softly.

“Anita, you’re not old, or a maid.”

She laughed, amused at Drake’s typical interpretation of modern colloquialisms.

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m just in one of my moods. Really, I’m very happy for you. And Katherine.”

“I was...we were hoping you could come and bear witness to our marriage.” He paused. “If it’s too much or too soon for you, I understand...”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good. I’m glad I found you.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“If you’d like, I could make arrangements for you to come up a few days before. I’ve been re-acquiring my family’s lands. There’s plenty of room if you’d like to come and stay.”

“I know! I read about it in the paper. That would be really lovely, Drake. Thank you.”

“Sure. Well I’ll call you next week, then, and we can figure the details out.”

“Sounds great.”

“Good.”

“Congratulations to both of you.”

“Thank you. I’ll talk to you later.”

-8-

Anita barely managed to squeeze the Jeep into the space. *All praise to my parallel parking skills.* She pushed the emergency brake with her foot, which had fallen asleep sometime in Ohio, and turned off the car, making her way to the back to open the trunk and gather her belongings.

I made it. I’m home! She smiled, relieved and nervous all at once. She wondered what everyone’s reactions would be when they realized that she was back, saw how different she was. She’d been gone for a long time. *What if everything’s changed, and there’s not a place here anymore for me?* Shaking the anxiety from her mind, she climbed the stairs to her house.

Everything was dark and quiet as a graveyard as she turned her key in the lock. She checked her watch. 3 am.

Maybe Klaus went out, she thought, and slowly pushed open the door. Her heart stopped in her chest as she stepped into the entryway and he suddenly appeared, with a wild look in his eyes and a large, pewter candlestick clutched in his fist. She went for her gun, which resided under her coat in its holster, the butt resting against her ribcage.

“Ach, Anita! I thought you were a burglar.” He immediately put it down and walked into the living room, turning on a lamp. Her hand relaxed and eased off of the trigger, as she let it fall back at her side. She shut and locked the door behind her and put her things down before treading into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee.

Yep, she thought with a smile, *I’m home, all right.*