Uncharted

by CaliforniaKat

Summary

Uncharted is the sequel to Uninvited (which should be read first). Eric and Sookie must marshal allies as they evade Russell and his minions. Eric begins to formulate how to bring Russell down, even as Sookie learns more about her Fae powers. However, the greatest obstacle faced by Eric and Sookie might be letting themselves love each other without questioning “why” they love.

Notes

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Chapter 1: Gusts and Storms

"There is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms."—George Eliot

NIALL POV

Niall Brigant looked on warily as his great-granddaughter slowly approached him.

He had not expected her to have Fintan's eyes. He had not expected her to be so much like his half-human son either. Certainly, they had both been gifted with powerful—almost identical—Fae sparks. Yet they both seemed to favor their humanity, and they were both clearly rebellious and stubborn by nature.

Moreover, Niall certainly hadn't expected Sookie to have feelings for the vampire, Eric Northman!

Claudine, whom he'd tasked to watch over Sookie for many years, had reported that Sookie's affections were with William Compton. Claudine had also reported that the "love" Sookie felt for Compton was not a true love—that it was based on her consumption of Compton's blood.

After learning that, Niall had been looking into having a severing spell performed for the girl, but Eric Northman's blood coming into the equation had complicated everything. Sookie's spark, which had lain dormant, burst into life because of Northman's powerful blood—blood which, according to the Norseman's maker, had tasted slightly supernatural to begin with, though Godric hadn't known if the trace was fairy or, perhaps, demon blood.

At this point, it didn't matter to Niall what the Norseman had been as a human—except that it made his blood and magic more potent than it would have been otherwise.

Niall shook his head. No—what mattered to him was his great-granddaughter. It was only by happenstance that Breandan's people hadn't sensed Sookie in the human realm yet. Her having vampire blood had actually helped to prevent her detection after her spark had become active. And that had been incredibly lucky for her, for Breandan would have certainly killed Sookie if he'd found her—after torturing her, that is.

Once Niall had sensed that his spell inhibiting Sookie's spark had been undone, he'd wanted to take her to Faerie immediately. However, the vampire blood prevented her from going there.

Thus, he'd given her up—at least for a time.

But things had changed when Desmond Cataliades had given him a message from Northman. From the demon, Niall had learned that Sookie had undergone a severing spell. After that, Niall had needed to wait for Sookie to heal, and that could only be done if she stayed in the presence of the vampire for a time, since he had acted as her so-called "helper" throughout the spell.

Niall had had a very difficult time believing that particular information! The thought of a vampire performing an unselfish act was unheard of! Then again, the vampire was calculating, and he wanted to use Sookie. The witch, Octavia, had indicated that there was more between them—that there was real care, maybe even love—but Niall had not believed that hypothesis. Thus, seeing their affection for one another with his own eyes was startling to the fairy.
However, he had to admit that it was there.

And it was true.

Niall steeled himself before he allowed his resolve to falter. Perhaps, Eric Northman wasn't as bad as Compton had been, but he was still a vampire, and Niall was convinced that Sookie would be better off without him. In time, she would move on. Plus, there was her safety to consider.

Sookie continued to move slowly toward him, but her eyes stayed locked into the vampire's eyes, just as the Norseman's eyes continued to bore into hers. Niall had allowed them their time to say goodbye due to his own memories of such affection.

Niall stifled his sigh and tried to remain patient. He hated being in the human realm. It brought forth too many memories—too much anguish.

He had never loved his fairy wife, Leonie. She had been chosen for him by his parents. That said—Niall had grown to appreciate Leonie over time, and they had celebrated together when their daughter, Magallen, was born. A few years later, it was learned that Leonie could have no other children, so she and Niall had chosen to no longer lie together in a carnal way. After all, their affection for one another had never been of the sexual variety; however, Leonie was a wonderful partner and queen. And she had been an even better mother to Magallen.

Unfortunately, on her four hundredth birthday, Magallen had died in childbirth, though she'd left Leonie and him with the gift of three grandchildren: Claude, Claudine, and Claudette. And Claudette had already provided them with a great-grandchild.

Over the many years since Magallen's birth, both Leonie and he had taken many lovers in many realms. It had been a human woman named Adira who had captured Niall's own heart. He'd stayed with her for many years—according to human standards—and Adira had given him twin sons, Dermot and Fintan. But time had not been kind to Niall and his beloved.

Niall had chosen to come to the human realm during a period when time on earth was long compared to time in the fairy realm. Thus, he'd expected to share Adira's lifetime with her while only a few months went by in Faerie.

But Niall had been called back to Faerie because of an attack on the Sky Fae made by his brother Rogan. Niall had been duty-bound to return to Faerie, even though he'd known that his beloved Adira would be long dead before he would be able to return to her. His sons both had strong sparks, and Niall's only choice was to take them with him to Faerie. Without him, there would have been no way that they could have kept hidden, especially since they would not have aged as humans did. And—since the children were so young at the time—they'd needed him to help them develop their sparks.

Thus, Niall had been forced to do the hardest thing he'd ever done. He'd made love to Adira for a final time, and then he'd used a memory charm to erase himself and their sons from her mind. He'd left her with as much wealth as he could and then had taken their sons to Faerie.

The pain from that goodbye had never left him, and he could feel similar pain coming from Sookie. He closed his eyes tightly for a moment. Since Sookie had a fairy spark, a memory charm would not work on her any more than glamour would. Otherwise, he would take away her pain, just as he'd taken away Adira's—and, many years later, Adele's.

Niall let out an angry-sounding sigh. He'd allowed for his great-granddaughter to delay them for long enough.
"Give me your hand, Sookie," Niall said, making a conscious effort to speak to her in a calm voice.

Niall had not wanted to alienate Sookie, but his anger over seeing her pine for the vampire was threatening to overtake him. He promised himself that he would do his best to make sure Sookie was well taken care of. And once she was in Faerie, the triplets would make her feel more welcome. Claudine, he knew, would be happy to get home as well. Her husband and she were anxious to begin trying for children. Claudine had been at her assignment in the human realm for almost fifteen years, although it had seemed like only a few months to them in Faerie.

Claude had spent some time with his sister so that she wouldn't be so isolated, but—as far as Niall was concerned—they had worked and played long enough among the humans for now. It was time for all of his kin to be at home.

SOOKIE POV

Hesitantly, Sookie gave Niall her hand. Tears were still streaming from her eyes, and she couldn't imagine them ever stopping. It wasn't just Eric she would be leaving. It was everything else, and she cried for those things too—for her brother, Tara, Lafayette, and Sam. She also cried for the Stackhouse homestead that she'd always loved, but which didn't really belong to her at all since she wasn't even a Stackhouse. But mostly, she cried to mark the loss of a love she had only just found.

"Wait!" she said, looking desperately at Niall. "Please—can I have one minute more. Just one—please."

The fairy nodded stiffly and turned his back.

Sookie launched herself at Eric again, and he caught her before devouring her lips with his own.

"I do love you," Sookie said when she finally pulled away. "I do! I wanted you to know that! I needed you to know."

He kissed her again, trying to infuse their last twenty seconds together with as much emotion as he was capable.

"Be safe, little one," he said when he broke the kiss after their minute was up. He set her gently onto her feet and then caressed her cheek lightly, smoothing away some of her tears. "Be happy."

"You too," she managed.

"Come!" Niall said. "No more delays."

Sookie disentangled herself from Eric's arms and moved toward Niall a second time.

ERIC POV

Eric felt something inside of him slipping away, even as a scarlet tear slipped from his eye. He should have been ashamed for showing such emotion in front of the fairy, but he was unable to control his sorrow, just as he was unable to stop the feeling of emptiness that was already throbbing in his un-beating heart.

He watched as Niall took Sookie's hand. And then—with a loud pop—they were gone.

Eric was on his knees before the echo of the popping sound had left the room.

The words that fell from his lips were a surprise to him—and they were too late for her.
"Ek elska hana," he whispered in the language of his father and mother. ["I love her."]
Chapter 02: A Hard Way to Learn

The realization that he'd fallen in love with Sookie brought more blood tears to Eric's eyes. The pain of her leaving jarred a place deep inside of himself, and a feeling of emptiness flooded him from that place.

He closed his eyes and attempted to "get used to" the physical feeling of the uncomfortable aching. He'd heard before that human hearts could "break" to the point that humans would endure physical pain from it, but he'd not expected that to be able to happen to a vampire. Apparently, he'd been wrong.

Very wrong.

Seeing the phone Brady had constructed for him lying on the coffee table, the vampire reached out and picked it up with a shaking hand. Had it been possible, he would have held his breath as he turned on the phone. Sookie had been wearing the ponytail holder with the tracking chip. Eric quickly pushed the button to activate it. He sighed loudly as an error message popped up on the screen. He'd not expected to find a map marking her location—but he realized that he had been praying for a miracle. However, Sookie was now as far away from him as she could be, and no technology that he could obtain would find her. That hard truth made the mighty Viking do something he'd done only two other times. On a cold, hard floor next to his human father's dead body. On a rooftop in Dallas.

He wept.

It was several hours later when he rose to his feet and went into the kitchen. The feeling of emptiness inside of him was no less painful, but the vampire knew he had to move nonetheless. He needed to gather his supplies together and leave the house in Slidell right at sunset the next night, for the concealment spell on the property was due to run its course during the afternoon on the day after that.

Eric opened the refrigerator door and almost fell to his knees again. Instead of being greeted by bottles of TrueBlood or even the usual bagged blood he'd been drinking, he was met with a bag of A+ blood, obviously obtained by Amelia at Sookie's request. He took the blood—his favorite human flavor—out of the refrigerator and examined the appliance's other contents. There were ingredients present for a fried chicken meal; in fact, the chicken was already soaking in some kind of marinating liquid. He closed his eyes as he realized that Sookie had planned things so that they would both have their favorite meals on their last night in the Slidell house. He pulled out a glass from the cabinet and heated some of the blood Sookie had procured for him, despite the fact that he knew that it would taste sour that night.

He shook himself as he tried not to spill additional tears. He already felt a little weak from blood loss, and he had many things to do before the next evening—too many things to do to be able to afford more time wallowing in his misery.

The first item on his agenda was a call to Desmond Cataliades. Eric downed his glass of blood quickly and then dialed his phone.

The demon answered on the first ring.
"Northman," Cataliades said, sounding a little concerned.

"Did you know that Niall Brigant planned to take Sookie to the fairy realm?" Eric asked without preamble.

The lawyer sighed. "He took her?"

"Yes."

"I did not know," Cataliades said. "Did he tell you why?"

Eric kept his tone emotionless—even as pain gripped his heart. "Apparently, I inadvertently caused the fairy spark within Sookie to come to life, making her vulnerable to being found by Niall's enemies. The fact that she had vampire blood in her mitigated that threat, but—according to the fairy—it would have been only a matter of time until his enemies found her once we left the protection afforded by the spell around this house.

"I did not know, Eric," Cataliades reiterated. "You know I am not a particular fan of the Fae—though I have worked for the Brigants on occasion."

"Did you know Niall was her great-grandfather?"

"Yes," the demon admitted, his voice sounding tired. "I knew Fintan. But I also knew that Niall had left Sookie alone in this realm until now. I never imagined he would take her. I did not know the spark within her had come to life."

Eric sighed deeply. He believed the demon was speaking the truth, and he couldn't blame him for the situation either. It was the fault of his own greed that had made him lose Sookie. Then again, he had a feeling that Niall would have found Sookie whether he'd ask Cataliades to track the fairy down or not. Once they left the Slidell house, she would have apparently been exposed to both Niall and his enemies. From the moment the severing spell was complete, they had been unknowingly living together on borrowed time.

Eric closed his eyes tightly. It was an impossible situation. If the severing spell had not been done, Bill could have found Sookie. With no vampire blood in her now that the spark had come to life, the Fae could find her. Eric now wished that he'd left some of his own blood inside of her, but what would have that done to Sookie's trust in him and in her own feelings?

"How will this change your plans?" the demon asked, interrupting Eric's circular thinking.

"I am not sure yet," Eric admitted, "though the likelihood of my ultimate success just went down."

"It was already quite low," the demon stated truthfully.

The vampire held in his sigh. "At least Sookie will be safer now."

"You do care for her—just as my goddaughter said."

"That no longer matters," Eric responded, even as he used a dishtowel to wipe another bloody tear from his eye. "I will leave at first dark tomorrow. I will contact you when I am at my next stop. Have you had any luck finding Klymene?"

"No," the demon reported. "There has been no trace of her since the early 1800's. Are you sure she is still among the un-dead?"
"No," Eric admitted. "Godric never mentioned her dying, but—as you know—there were many things he did not mention to me, especially in his final years."

"Pam?" the demon asked. "Does she yet live?"

"Our bond is still alive," Eric said, not giving too much away. Not even Cataliades knew of her whereabouts. Eric had kept all of Pam's arrangements separate. He trusted the demon, but he'd learned long ago never to put all of his eggs into one basket.

"That is good," the demon said.

"Niall spoke of Sookie's cousin Hadley having a child. I know only that his name is Hunter. I do not know his surname." Eric paused. "Hunter has inherited telepathy, but no spark, so Niall doesn't seem to give a shit about him. I estimate that he is around the age of four or five—maybe six. I need you to find him."

" Hmm," Cataliades sounded. "That shouldn't be too difficult if Hadley gave birth to her son in a hospital."

"I promised Sookie that I would make sure that Hunter did not have the problems she did when she was a child."

"What do you wish me to do?" the demon asked. "I assume it is not to reunite him with his mother." Eric heard the shuffling of papers and knew from Cataliades's tone that he was now in lawyer-mode.

"No," Eric said quickly. "Hadley is the reason Sophie-Anne knew of Sookie; it is dumb luck that she didn't tell the queen of Hunter before Niall erased her memory of him. I believe the boy is living with his father," Eric relayed. "Once he is found, have the father approached. Sookie would not want the child and parent separated—unless that would be necessary for the child's wellbeing. I will leave that decision up to you, but if the father is a good one, he will want help his child if Hunter is showing signs of being a telepath. I would like for you to arrange for that help—or for an appropriate family to take in Hunter if his father is found lacking."

"A demon family, I assume?" Cataliades asked.

"Preferably. Or Were. Sookie cannot hear them as well."

Eric could hear the scratching of the lawyer's pen. "There is a demon of my acquaintance who has taught several telepaths among the Dae how to use that gift. Telepathy is not as common among us as it is with the Fae, so Finola is currently between pupils. However, her price is very high."

"My account in Switzerland?" Eric asked. "Would that be adequate?"

"Yes," Cataliades said, "much more than adequate."

"Good," Eric said. "You can earmark that entire account for the child. And—if more is needed—use the one in Singapore."

Eric heard more scratching from a pen.

"I will find the child and arrange for the father to be screened," the demon rehashed, obviously double-checking to make sure he understood the Viking's wishes. "If he is an acceptable parent for the boy, I will arrange for Finola to speak to the father and then begin teaching the child. If the father is found wanting, I will arrange for a place for Hunter to stay while Finola works with him."
"Sookie would want for Hunter to have," Eric paused, "a family, so make sure that if he is placed somewhere else, it is with people who will come to love him—people who would be willing to treat the child as their own."

"Understood," Cataliades said. "There should be plenty of money in the Swiss account to fund his upbringing and pay for Finola's contract. Should I set up a trust for the boy with the remainder?"

"Yes," Eric said. "And just add the money from the Singapore account to it too. I never want the child to have to struggle financially."

"That's a lot of money," the demon observed quietly.

"And I have a lot more," Eric said just as quietly. "Should I live, I will make contact with Hunter when he is of age; otherwise, I would prefer that he not be put into the paths of vampires—if that can be helped. He is only one-sixteenth Fae, but his blood might still attract my kind."

"I will do all I can to keep his telepathy and Fae heritage a secret. I will have Finola sign her usual confidentiality agreement; the Dae are extremely reticent about their gifts as well, so if he is placed with a Dae family, he will be well-insulated. And I will ask my goddaughter about the possibility of having scent inhibitors made up for the boy if he is ever in situations where he might encounter vampires."

"Good. I will be in touch tomorrow night for a report." Eric hung up the phone and then dialed Octavia.

"How long have you known that Niall would be coming tonight, witch?" he asked harshly.

"You were dee one to initiate contact with the fairy," she returned.

"Did you know he would take Sookie to Faerie with him?"

"Did he?" Octavia asked, her tone conveying astonishment. "I wouldn't have thought it possible."

"Explain!" Eric demanded.

"Apparently, I was wrong," she said instead. "But—no—I did not even know she had dee power of light until earlier today when I saw it. And by den, it was too late to stop Niall from coming to you."

"But you knew she was Fae?" he asked.

"Yes. Niall contacted Desmond, who told him how to make contact with me. Dee fairy came to me soon after. I told him dat he'd best not separate you and dee child until her healing was done. I'm afraid he used his own magic on me, so I could say nothing to you—until he permitted it. I believe he used a similar spell on my godfather. I told you and Sookie of Niall's impending visit as soon as the fairy permitted it."

They were silent for a moment.

"He took her," Eric said, his heartbreak evident.

"I am sorry, Eric—so sorry," Octavia said sadly.

Eric closed his eyes and wiped away more tears. He composed himself. "You did not bring the items I requested."
"I will have dem to you at first dark tomorrow," Octavia said before hanging up.

Eric ran his hand through his hair and warmed up more blood. He made himself go slower with this glass, and he tried to savor the flavor that Sookie had arranged for him to have.

He closed his eyes and imagined her sitting next to him, unapologetically eating her fried chicken with her hands and then washing it down with her beloved sweet tea.

After he was done with his meal, he rinsed his glass and put the remaining blood into the refrigerator to drink before he left the next night.

Slowly, as if a monster from his childhood nightmares were waiting to hurt him, the Viking climbed the stairs and went into the room he'd shared with Sookie for the previous twelve days. He could not remember a fortnight which had been so long and yet so short. He could not remember one that had meant more to him.

To preserve Sookie's scent on his body for as long as possible, he decided that he would shower when he rose the next night, but he did wash the dried blood from his face. Blood had gotten onto his shirt as well, but he did not want to take off the garment yet since Sookie's scent clung so richly to it.

He looked around the bathroom. Sookie had obviously begun packing her things in preparation of them leaving. Many of her hygiene products were already in a clear bag next to the sink. He left the bathroom and looked around the bedroom. Sookie's clothing was all folded neatly and waiting for the small suitcase that Amelia was to bring. Eric had noticed the suitcase downstairs and quickly retrieved it. He also saw that there was a shopping bag next to it, so he picked that up too.

When he got back upstairs, he opened the suitcase and then emptied the shopping bag. There were a few more pieces of clothing and some more shampoo and conditioner. He zipped into the bathroom to collect the rest of Sookie's hygiene products and then added the shampoo and conditioner to the bag.

Having been specially made, the suitcase had a false bottom. Eric opened that and then retrieved the various IDs he'd had made up for Sookie. He looked through the pictures. Brady had used several different pictures to create the various IDs. Eric chose his two favorites and put them to the side before placing the other IDs into the false bottom of the suitcase. He knew that he had the pictures on his disposable phone, but he would have to replace that soon. Plus, he wanted images of his beloved in a more tactile form.

Next, Eric packed the new clothing Amelia had brought before getting the folded pile of items from the dresser. All of the items had been washed since Sookie had last worn them except for a sweater that she would pull on every time she was cold. That garment held her scent the strongest. Eric put it to the side as well. After he'd gathered all of her clothing, he placed her bathroom items and her other pair of shoes into the suitcase.

That done, he went to the purse Amelia had brought Sookie the week before and dumped its contents onto the bed. He thumbed through them before picking up the cherry-flavored lip gloss she liked to wear. The taste of it was still on his lips, and he put the little tube with the sweater and the IDs before checking the driver's license that Sookie had put into her wallet to work as her first new identity when they left the Slidell house. "Katherine Miller," he said out loud.

Finding that the picture matched one that he'd taken already, he put that ID back into its place. Then he went to the nightstand on his side of the bed and pulled out a large wad of bills. He put several thousand dollars into Sookie's billfold before putting all of her belongings, as well as the
book she'd been reading, into her purse. He moved her packed suitcase and purse to the side of the
room and then began to pack his own things.

He didn't have much. He wouldn't need much. He used the duffle bag he'd had before and quickly
packed all of his belongings, except for one change of clothing. As he did, he noticed that all of his
clothes—except for the boxer-briefs he'd worn to bed—had been laundered. He knew that Sookie
must have done the chore earlier in the day.

He stopped for a moment and closed his eyes. He inhaled unneeded air into his lungs and then
exhaled it slowly.

After opening his eyes, he packed the things he was going to keep of Sookie's. This chore
completed, he moved quickly around the house, gathering the things that they had been planning to
take with them. Most of those things were books that Amelia had been collecting for them.

After boxing those up and loading them into the hatchback of the Prius, Eric wandered into the
living room and stared into the barely orange embers of the fire he'd built at the beginning of the
night.

The fire had gone out.

He found some paper and a pen and then went into the formal dining room. He'd not been into that
room so far that night since he and Sookie didn't really use it. When he looked at the table, he felt
more bloody tears rise to his eyes and then fall down his cheeks. She'd set out two places for the
meal she'd planned. She'd put candles onto the table and there was a book of matches next to them.
Eric retrieved another dishtowel from the kitchen and then returned to the dining room, where he
lit the candles and turned off the lights.

Then he wiped his eyes and sat down to write:

Sookie, my love,

You are gone from me now, and I fear that your great-grandfather will hold to his word and keep
you forever from this realm. I do not know why I write, knowing that your eyes will likely never
see this page.

But I find that now that I have discovered that I do love you, I cannot leave this place where I fell
in love with you without the hope that I might see you once more. Without that, I could not do what
I must do; I could not face my fate with Russell.

I do not know what human time in relation to Faerie time is right now. You have been gone from
my side for seven hours and fourteen minutes here. Yet it feels longer than a thousand years in
many ways. My soul is empty now that you are no longer in this world. I had not even known I had
one until you entered my life. And now I will—I fear—forever feel the pain of your not being with
me to fill it again, for that is what you did, little one. You gave me a soul and then you filled it
with your light.

Earlier today, you literally put your light into me. I will never forget the feeling of that. I will never
forget what it felt like to kiss you or to tell you about my long life. I will never forget the feeling of
your body leaned against mine as we bathed together. I will remember everything, Sookie. And—if
I am lucky enough to go to Valhalla when I am finally done with my vampire life—I hope that I
will take the memory of you with me there as well, for no Valkyrie could ever compare to your
beauty.
I feel so far from you and myself as I write this. I know not whether the hours I have spent without you have been seconds or decades to you in the fairy realm. Are you even still alive? Or has time—as well as distance—already taken you from me?

I cannot think of these things past tonight—not if I hope to live to outlast time itself. Perhaps one day Niall's enemies will all be gone, and he will let you go. I intend to write another note to you as well—one that I will give to Mr. Cataliades in the hopes that he will get it to you through Niall. That one will lead you to this one if you get it.

I have left your belongings, including your IDs, in your suitcase. I will arrange for another car to be left in the garage. If weeks are minutes there, then perhaps you will come back here someday. I am including Mr. Cataliades's phone number in this letter. If you are reading this and I am still among the un-dead, he will be able to find me. I will also keep the tracking device with me at all times, and I am leaving you your phone. I will check each night when I rise to see if you have returned to this realm, and if you have, I will come for you.

You told me that you'd fallen in love with me. I will carry those words with me until I am no more.

I did not answer you as I should have. But I learned something when you were ripped from me. I can love. I do love. And I will fight the true death every day of my existence just so that I may one day have the opportunity to tell you that in person. For now, my written words will have to do.

I love you, Sookie.

Yours,

E

Eric folded the letter into thirds and then set it aside before picking up another piece of paper. On it, he wrote a much shorter letter, knowing that it would pass through Niall's hands before Sookie saw it—if she ever saw it.

Dearest Sookie,

I miss you.

If this finds you, I want you to know that your personal items are still in our home in Slidell. In our bedroom.

I will always think of it as ours—and you as mine. (Though I am certain you would fight me on that.)

Could has become do.

Yours,

Eric Northman

The vampire sealed the shorter letter in an envelope and addressed it to Sookie before blowing out the candles and taking the longer letter to the bedroom. He put Sookie's specially-made phone and the letter into her purse. He put his own phone and his Thor's Hammer pin on his nightstand before picking up the wristband. It had been a successful test—enough silver to awaken him. The dosage had hurt, but his body had already been healing itself when Sookie shot him with her light.

Yes. It had been a successful test—of the wristband. But it had also led to the most perfect kisses
of his life. He placed the wristband into his bag and glanced at the pictures of Sookie on his phone before stripping off his clothing. Out of a habit that had formed due to Sookie's modesty, he left on his boxer briefs. Then he settled into her side of the bed and buried his nose into her pillow.

The pillowcase was streaked with blood long before he died for the day.
Chapter 3: Always Yours

As soon as she took Niall's hand, Sookie felt herself moving quickly away from Eric—so impossibly fast that her breath was knocked from her body. The air around her seemed to be spinning—purple and black swirls of light.

The next thing that Sookie became aware of was a piercing scream—her own. And then she felt the pain—so much pain that she knew she'd be ripped apart from it.

Niall's voice seemed to be coming at her from every direction. "What have you done!" Niall half-demanded and half-accused as he shook her shoulders roughly. She could tell that her great-grandfather's grip was tight. And she was sure she'd have bruises from it, but she couldn't feel it through the searing pain, which seemed to be pulling her very soul from her body.

The sound of her own screams no longer met Sookie's ears, even though her mouth was still gaping open. Her lungs were on fire.

"Niall!" a female voice yelled. Sookie barely managed to register that a beautiful brunette woman who looked vaguely familiar was now standing near them. "You must take her back—now!"

"No!" Niall yelled. "I won't take her back—just to be fed on by vampires!"

"Niall! You don't have a choice!"

"What have you done?" Niall yelled at Sookie, even as he shook her again.

"Niall!" the female voice said insistently. "Please! Go now! She'll die if you don't!"

Sookie believed the woman as her pain intensified. She was certain that nothing would ever make it go away, except for her death—and maybe not even that.

Sookie heard nothing else, nor did she see anything else—except for the purple and black colors jumbling together again.

And then suddenly, the colors were gone. And so was the pain as she sank into welcome unconsciousness.

"I thought that you were supposed to be some great and wise elder Fae," a sarcastic voice greeted Niall as he popped Sookie back to where he'd taken her from—the living room in Eric's Slidell home. "So far—I'm underwhelmed."

"What do you want, witch?" Niall demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"I came here with dee day. I figured you might show your face here again—to bring dee vampire harm—and I was not about to leave him here unguarded."

"You think I would have staked him as he slept?" Niall asked belligerently.

"Would you not have?" Octavia returned with a sneer. "After all, you tore his heart from him just last night! He might have welcomed a stake in it instead!"

"As it turns out, she would die too if I killed the vampire," the fairy said bitterly, even as he
unceremoniously lay an unconscious Sookie down on the couch.

Octavia rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. "True. But to see her like dis tells me dat you waited longer dan you should have to bring her back. Given dat fact, why would you not risk her life by killing her bonded?" she asked cynically.

"I am her kin!" Niall yelled.

"Yes. Dee same kin dat was so blinded by your prejudice against vampires dat you did not see dee evidence of their bond. I am no fairy, but I suspected it dee moment I first saw dem together."

"Do they know about the Fae bond? Why would have the vampire not told me?" Niall demanded.

Octavia shook her head judgmentally as she sneered at the fairy. "I am certain dat Eric Northman knows nothing of fairy bonds. And 'twas not my place to tell dem. I didn't know you would be fool enough to try to take her away from dis realm. Plus, 'twas nothin' could have been done 'bout it! And dee two of dem were not ready to know of it."

Niall glared at her.

"And as for tellin' you? I would have thought there'd be no need for dat! After all, you are dee great Niall Brigant, Prince of the Sky Fae," she said sarcastically as she bowed mockingly. "How did you not see dee magic between dem, oh mighty prince?"

"I was angry. I am even more so now!" Niall scoffed. "How could she form a bond with one of them?"

Octavia chuckled sardonically, not hiding her distaste for the fairy. "How would Sookie even have known what she was doing when she chose her mate and made her bond? Dee Fae are taught about tings such as bond making. Dis child was taught nothing by you or others of your kind—not how to shield her mind from dee thoughts of others. Not how to feel like a normal child. No! Because you left her alone, she endured much pain and suffering. She learned to tink of herself as a freak."

Octavia lifted her chin defiantly. "She formed a bond with dee vampire by instinct—because he was dee first being to look at her in a true way and to see nothing but beauty. Inside of herself, she could recognize dat about him—and she, in turn, saw his beauty. Why would she not form a bond with such a man? And how dare you tink of him as unworthy?"

"He is vampire," Niall said with disgust in his voice.

"If you truly cared for dis child, you could have guided her in another way," the witch said, looking down at Sookie. She sighed loudly. "She will have to take Eric's blood now. Only dat will repair what you injured by taking her from him. She should have been able to make dis choice in her own time," the witch added sadly.

"What do you mean?" Niall asked.

Octavia blew out a puff of air in frustration. "Neither your kinswoman nor her vampire is used to feeling or receiving love. Here, in dis place, dey have been working demselves into love slowly—naturally. And dey have learned to trust demselves. Dey would have eventually exchanged blood out of love—not necessity. And dey would have formed a vampire bond to complement dee bond already holding dem together. Dey would have never doubted demselves or each other. But your actions could make dem doubt all."

"I had every right to take her; she is my kin!" Niall said stubbornly.
The witch ignored Niall's words and knelt down by the couch. She gently tucked a lose strand of Sookie's hair over her ear. "Dis one is stronger dan one so human should be." She chuckled. "Tis her stubbornness and her hope dat feed her fire. I knew dat to be true when she survived what dee vampire—Compton—tried to do to her during the severing and with his woven dreams. And now she has proven it again by holding so tightly to her mate dat it almost killed her. Still, I fear for dem. Eric will likely not take dis well."

"What do you mean? A Fae of the Sky Clan bonded with him! What do you mean that he will not take it well?" Niall yelled out.

Octavia sighed. "Dee vampire and dis child are both stubborn and wary of having their control taken from dem. Dee reason why Eric did not leave blood in her during dee severing spell was so dat she could know her own feelings. Now dey will both doubt what dey feel. Dey will both believe dat the Fae bond she made took away their choices."

"It did," Niall sneered. "The moment it was forged, the vampire would have been drawn to her like no other."

"Yes," Octavia sighed. "And dat fact will make dee Viking feel like all his emotions are constructs of dee bond—just as Sookie once worried dat all of hers were due to vampire blood. 'Twill take dem a while to understand dat she asked him to be hers with her light and dat he accepted. Dey will not understand, for neither one of dem has much experience in dee way of trust—or of love."

"Northman should be honored that my great-granddaughter chose him," Niall said, his voice haughty.

"Aye," Octavia agreed. "And he chose her in return. But dat was before dey loved each other. So dey will not trust."

"Then they are fools," Niall said.

"And so are we all fools sometimes—when it comes to love," Octavia said sadly.

The fairy's face softened a little. "Yes." He studied his sleeping great-granddaughter for a moment. "I do not approve of her choice," he said after a few minutes of silence had passed.

Octavia picked up a bloody dishtowel and a short note from the coffee table. She handed Niall the note. "Read dis," she said.

Niall read aloud.

Dearest Sookie,

I miss you.

If this finds you, I want you to know that your personal items are still in our home in Slidell. In our bedroom.

I will always think of it as ours—and you as mine. (Though I am certain you would fight me on that.)

Could has become do.

Yours,
"There are many of dese around," Octavia said, as she held up the bloody rag. "The vampire cried many tears for her. But I imagine your approval is just as far from him as it was before."

Niall sighed. "The bond she made with him could very well have created the love that made those tears and formed these words."

"Dat is what Eric will tink too," the witch said sadly. "And dee child will always worry dat his love is not true—dat she forced him to love her." She chuckled ruefully even as she brushed a tear from her own eye. "Before Sookie, Eric did not believe he could love—not romantically. And, before Eric, Sookie did not believe dat she deserved love. Dey will likely fall back to those false beliefs."

"Then they are doomed to their unhappiness, for they can no longer be apart," Niall said with a twinge of regret.

"Not as far apart as you would make dem be," Octavia said, looking at Niall accusingly.

"The more they are together, the harder it will be for them if they try to part." He shook his head. "Even if they are both in the same realm, more than a short separation will bring them much pain. That is why Fae bonds are so discouraged. I did not imagine it would be something to worry about with Sookie," Niall confessed. "I had stifled her spark. There were very few situations that could have relit it. Plus, she is only one-eighth Fae. I have never heard of one with so little blood having a strong enough spark to form a Fae bond."

Octavia sighed as Sookie groaned in her sleep. "She would rest easier next to her chosen one. It is still a few hours before he will wake, and 'twould be best if they were near to each other so that no more damage can be done to the bond."

Niall sighed heavily, but scooped Sookie up into his arms anyway; this time, he was gentle in his movements. "You know the way," he said to the witch.

Octavia led Niall up the stairs and into the bedroom where Eric was dead for the day. The vampire's body was completely vulnerable, despite the fact that it was fully cocooned in the bedcovers. The witch noted that—had he needed to breathe—Eric would have likely suffocated himself because he had so firmly buried his nose into the pillow he was using. There were blood stains on the pillow case.

Niall sighed again as Octavia lifted up the sheets on the side opposite of Eric Northman's body. The fairy gently placed Sookie next to the vampire and watched impassively as Octavia shaped his great-granddaughter's body so that it molded against the vampire's. It was immediately evident that Sookie's breathing had eased.

Octavia covered the girl lovingly.

Niall didn't say a word as he left the bedroom, intent to be away from the sight of his kin and the vampire. His people had always loathed and feared the un-dead. In fact, their best defense against the monsters of the night had been to stay away from them. And, if that failed, then they would use their blood to make the vampires drunk in order to disorient them long enough to kill them. Many fairies had sacrificed their lives in order to incapacitate vampires so that their kin could survive.

Niall's uneasy alliance with Godric had been to save his child Magellen who had been trapped by a coven of witches who also held Godric's maker. Able to hide his scent, Niall had spotted the
vampire getting ready to attack the coven, and the two had decided to join forces. During the ensuing fight, Niall had almost died as he'd shielded his badly injured daughter from an iron sword wielded by one of the witches. But Godric had stepped in and had taken the sword strike. In effect, the vampire had saved both Niall and his beloved daughter. Of course, the monster inside of Godric had soon reared its ugly head as he drained several witches in order to recover. And then—because Magellen could not mask her scent—the crazed vampire had come after her as well! Niall had barely been able to teleport his daughter and himself back to Faerie before the vampire bit.

Recalling both Godric's honor and his frenzy, the fairy returned to the living room and sat heavily onto the couch. Niall had already decided that he should stay in order to explain the Fae bond to Sookie and her vampire. He owed his great-granddaughter that much before exiting her life. Perhaps the witch had been right in that he shouldn't have left Sookie in the dark about her Fae heritage. However, Niall would not dwell on the past. He could live only in the now. Experiencing time differentials between Faerie and other realms had taught him that.

"Dey are resting together," Octavia said as she came back into the living room a few minutes later. "I lit some dandelion blossoms to help dem rest easier."

"Dandelions are weeds—if I remember correctly," Niall said with a sneer.

"Aye," Octavia chuckled. "But something is only seen as a weed if it is stronger den dat which people want to take root. I have seen dee dandelion used in remedies of many kinds." She paused. "I thought dee dandelions matched dee tenacity of dee two upstairs. There are so many small things dat could prove their love—if dey but open their hearts to dem. Let us hope dat dee wind takes those things and plants dem firmly into dee ground."

Niall didn't respond to the witch's hope, and the two supernatural beings remained silent for a long time.

"I did not expect this visit to end up as it has," Niall said finally. Resignation laced his tone.

Octavia cackled. "It seems there is already a weed in your garden den!"

Eric woke up to find that his prayers to Odin had been answered and immediately wondered if he'd gone insane sometime during his day-death.

"Sookie," he said as he pulled her body closer to his.

He shook his head to clear it. She seemed real.

He stretched out his senses, and his fangs immediately snapped down. Niall and Octavia were downstairs, but they were stationary at the moment. He assessed the woman in his arms. She was weak, much weaker than when she'd been taken from him. But she was real.

"Sookie," he said again as he nuzzled into her hair and took in her scent. He wanted to bite into her —literally and figuratively—but he kept the beast inside of him at bay. She was unwell, and he needed to know why. He needed to know what he could do for her.

The vampire disentangled himself from Sookie and quickly dressed. That done, he carefully picked her up, retrieved the quilt from their bed, and carried her down the stairs. In that moment, the vampire was certain of only one thing: he was not willing to let her leave his sight again.

Octavia and Niall were sitting on the couch, but did not even look at him when he walked into the room. It was just after sunset. Eric had expected to wake up a bit sooner, but the previous night and his blood loss must have weakened him. However, he now felt whole again, for the empty place
inside of his body was filling with light once more.

Once more, his soul was a living thing.

Gently, he placed Sookie into an oversized chair next to the couch before wrapping her up into the quilt. Then he turned his attention to building a fire. Sookie's body temperature was cooler than normal, and he knew that he could not provide her with warmth from his own body, but the fire and the quilt would be enough to do what he could not.

He kept a wary eye on his "guests" as he quickly and wordlessly performed his task. Then he picked Sookie back up and sat into the chair, curling her into his lap. She was still sleeping very soundly.

"She will need your blood," Niall said stiffly. "If she is to heal, she must have it."

Eric stiffened and pulled her body closer. "No. Not unless she is awake and asks for it—not unless it is her choice!" he said vehemently.

"Neither one of you ever had much choice," Octavia said sadly. "She will stay as she is without your blood. And dat is not a fate dis child would choose."

"What do you mean?" Eric asked.

Niall sighed. "I will say what must be said only once, and it will not be while she is unconscious."

His voice softened as much as it could as he addressed the vampire, but it was still gruff. "You should take her blood as well. An exchange would help to heal what has been damaged."

"I will not take her blood," Eric hissed insistently. "She is too weak."

"She is not weak 'cause of lack of blood, Viking," Octavia said kindly. "She is weak from a lack of connection, and you are dee only thing in dee universe dat can fix dat problem."

"What are you talking about?" Eric asked insistently. "She and I have no blood tie!"

Niall sighed deeply. "There are many kinds of ties in the world." He held up the short note Eric had written. "If she is yours, then you must take her blood. If you belong to her, then you must give her your blood."

Niall crumpled up the note and threw it into the fire—almost as if by burning it, he could burn the vampire who had written it.

Eric looked down at the sleeping woman in his arms. "Not with you two here," he said curtly. If he was to do an exchange with Sookie—force an exchange—then it would not be for an audience.

"I'll just introduce Niall to iced tea den," Octavia said, standing up. "Would you care for lemon?" she asked with a grin on her face.

Niall growled a little, but stood up. "We will stay in the kitchen until you call," the elder fairy said before walking out of the room. Octavia was a step behind him, but stopped at the doorway.

"Dee way tings happen does not necessarily ruin their significance," Octavia said knowingly. "Dee woman who gave you her light will not hate you for creating a blood tie." She turned and left the room quietly.

Hoping that the witch was right, Eric looked back down at the woman in his arms—the woman
he'd been certain that he'd never see again.

The woman he loved.
“Ek elska þik,” Eric said in a whisper, the ancient language of his parents slipping like smooth silk from his tongue.

“I love you,” he translated, even more quietly, barely brushing the words against Sookie’s skin as he kissed her forehead.

He stood up, taking her with him before setting her back into the chair. He quickly grabbed the blanket on the back of the couch and made a pallet on the floor in front of the fire. He grabbed some throw pillows so that he could ensure Sookie’s comfort, and then he settled them both in front of the fire. He unwrapped the quilt from around her so that he could feel her body against his. But he placed her closer to the fire so that she would receive its warmth. Then, he covered them both with the warm quilt.

“For my people, a fire meant life because it gave both heat and light,” Eric said in a low voice, hoping that the fairy wouldn’t be able to hear. “For my other people—vampires—blood is life.” He paused and looked at the fire for a moment. “For me, you are my heat and my light. And you are quickly becoming the focus of my life. I cannot say how or why or when this happened, but it is the truth, little one. I wish that you were awake right now so that you could choose me as I choose you, but you will not awaken unless I choose for both of us.”

He sighed as he looked into the fire. “Please choose me, Sookie. Please, do not hate me when you wake up,” he said into the flame before biting into his wrist. He let the blood pool before putting the wound up to Sookie’s mouth. She was unresponsive as first, so he used his fingers to gently massage the blood down her throat. “Please,” he whispered.

Sookie began to swallow, and with each gulp, Eric felt that his blood was going home into her. However, this time, it was different. Bill’s blood was not there, interfering with his at every turn. Eric felt himself being welcomed by Sookie’s very essence. He closed his eyes and savored the feeling, for he had never experienced anything like it before. It was warmer than any fire he’d ever felt. It was richer than any flavor he’d ever tasted.

Sookie was beginning to move a little—to feed more forcefully from him. In that moment, Eric would have let her have everything—take everything. She moaned and he pressed into her, wishing he was as bare as his blood inside of her.

“Eric,” she gasped around his wound as she became slightly more aware. She bit into him and he was undone. His fangs had clicked down as soon as his blood hit her system, but now he allowed them to pierce her skin for the first time. He bit into her neck, seeking her blood more gently than he’d ever sought sustenance.

In truth, being gentle was the only thing that made sense to him—despite his vampiric nature. He felt the need to revere the woman who sustained his soul. He’d tasted her only one other time, and that blood had not been fresh from her body. But tasting her like this—in front of a fire, even as she took of him in exchange—was so much more.

The word for the divine afterlife had not changed much between the language of his parents and
modern Swedish—or even English. Eric had learned it as “himinn.” But it had not applied to
simply the afterlife. It had applied to the kind of contentment that could be obtained if one was at
peace with himself or herself. Modern Swedes used the word “himlen.” In Old English, the word
was “heofon.” Sookie would understand the word as “heaven.”

As a vampire, Eric had lost understanding the word—in any of the languages he knew. How could
a vampire contemplate the afterlife when his life on earth could last forever? But now—drinking
Sookie’s blood and having her drink his—the concept became clear to him.

Heaven was not some faraway place. It was not a mead-hall in Asgard. It was in the heart of the
woman in his arms.

Eric forced himself to stop after taking a few sips. He licked Sookie’s wound, careful not to spill a
single drop of his ambrosia.

Sookie was more cognizant now, licking his wound as well. She had been more or less on her back
on the floor, but now she turned toward him.

“Eric,” she whispered, her eyes opening and taking in the fact that she was in the Slidell house with
her vampire.

Her home. Her vampire.

“Sookie,” he whispered.

Their eyes finally met—her recognition meeting his passion. And by the next moment, their lips
had met too. Their blood mixed in their mouths as they drank in each other with a fervent kiss.

Eric wanted Sookie with everything inside of him. His cock was hard and ready. His hands were
explorative. His lips asked and then yielded to hers.

And Sookie was just as eager to take and to yield. She’d awoken to paradise, even as she’d fallen
asleep to hell. Her core was on fire, and her underwear was a melted puddle as she tried to stretch
her leg around Eric’s.

Eric gave them one minute in the paradise of each other. Hands and mouths and legs and tongues.
Nothing was off limits. He even allowed himself to palm her breast and found that it was exactly as
he’d imagined—supple and the perfect fit for his hand. In return, her hands were all over his ass,
gripping and squeezing and trying to pull their bodies together using that perfectly formed body
part as her leverage.

One minute came too soon, but Eric forced his mouth to separate from hers.

“Sookie,” he whispered.

“Eric?” she said, clearly still asking—still wanting to make sure she was with him and not
dreaming or dead.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Why am I back here?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “But you are here. Do you remember anything that happened
after you left?”
She shivered in his arms. “I felt myself moving away, and there was this pain that came over me. It hurt so bad I thought I was dying.”

I gripped her closer.

“I heard voices,” she went on. “Niall was asking what I’d done, and another voice—a kind voice—was telling him to bring me back. But that’s all I remember.”

“How long were you there?” he asked.

“Maybe thirty seconds?” Sookie responded uncertainly.

He sighed. “Time was not unkind, little one. You were gone no more than fifteen hours here.”

“Eric? Why do I taste blood in my mouth?” she asked as her eyes fully focused for the first time since she’d been back.

He looked for judgment in those eyes, but found none. Still he was nervous. Would she hate having his blood in her again? Would she doubt her feelings again? Would she doubt him?

He spoke nervously, “Whatever happened to you during the time you were gone weakened you. Niall brought you back, and Octavia is here as well. They said that the only way you would wake up was if I gave you my blood. They said that I should take some of yours as well, but they didn’t offer much of an explanation for why. I believe that Niall intends to explain what happened now that you are awake.”

“Niall’s still here?” Sookie asked, licking her lips absentmindedly in a way that greatly distracted the vampire.

“Yes,” Eric said, looking at her lips for a moment before returning his gaze to her eyes.

“I won’t go with him again,” she averred quietly. “When I got to wherever it was he took me to, I felt like my body was going to be ripped in two. I hurt so badly.”

“He cannot take you there again,” Eric assured, leaning in to kiss her forehead. “No one with vampire blood can pass into Faerie.”

“Vampire blood will hinder Breandan and Mab from finding you as well,” Niall said from the doorway of the living room.

Sookie—aided by Eric—scrambled to a sitting position as the witch and the elder fairy came back into the room.

“You were to wait until I called you back in,” Eric growled irritably.

“Yeah, I got tired of waiting,” Niall said snidely.

As Octavia and Niall retook their places on the couch, Eric shifted his body so that he was leaning against the oversized chair he’d been sitting in before. Not wanting to let go of Sookie, especially given their recent blood exchange, he was happy when she slid over and leaned against his body. He made sure that the pallet moved with her and then covered her once more with the quilt from their bed. Still a little weak, she rested her head onto his broad chest as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders to support her.

Niall looked at their position on the floor judgmentally; however, Eric ignored the disdain on the
fairy’s face.

The vampire felt rooted in the woman and in the home and in the hearth that had somehow been built between them during the past weeks. It was on this floor that they’d lain in each other’s arms for comfort during the severing spell. And now, it was on this floor that they’d begun a blood bond based on love. And it was on this floor—right at that very moment—that Eric first felt Sookie’s love for him through the blood tie they’d just made.

Niall sighed and looked directly at Sookie. “The vampire’s blood will not make it impossible for Mab and Breandan to find you, but as long as they do not know you are alive and do not know to look for you, I believe you will be safe enough from them as long as you are with the vampire.”

“What happened when you took me away? Why did I feel like I was dyin’? Why did you keep askin’ me what I’d done? Who was that woman I saw?” Sookie asked her questions in quick succession.

Niall chose to answer her last question first. “The woman was Claudette, one of my granddaughters from my Fae wife. You may think of Claudette as a cousin if you wish.”

“She looked familiar to me,” Sookie remarked.

“Her twin sister is your guardian of sorts. It was she—Claudine—whom I had watching over you after your grandfather and parents were killed.”

“Oh. Like a fairy godmother?” Sookie asked, having to—despite the tension in the room—refrain from giggling at the absurdity of the idea.

“Something like that,” Niall said wryly. “Claudine was assigned to keep an eye on you and to protect you if any Fae came after you. You should never have seen her, so she shouldn’t have looked familiar to you,” he added gruffly.

Sookie shrugged. “I can’t remember a specific time when I did see her; it was just a feeling that I knew her.”

Niall nodded as if pacified by her response.

“So I had a fairy godmother—all this time?” Sookie mused. “I get why she couldn’t help me with vampires around, but why didn’t she help me when I was attacked by Rene or the Werewolf?” she asked. “They both attacked me during the day time. And why didn’t she help with . . . .” She stopped and sunk further into Eric.

“Her uncle Bartlett,” Eric finished for her.

Niall addressed his response to Sookie. “The situation with your uncle was regrettable, but by the time Claudine was assigned to watch over you, your grandmother had already ordered him away. There is a time difference between Faerie and here. Several months went by here between the time Fintan died and the time I came to see Adele Stackhouse. It was only then that I found out you were alive.”

“Okay,” Sookie said, glad at least to know that her fairy family hadn’t been around when her Uncle Bartlett was abusing her. But she was especially glad for Eric in that moment. His arm had tightened around her, and the pressure of his touch made her feel safe—protected.

“As for the other times you were in danger—,” Niall said as if it were obvious, “none of those enemies were fairies. Claudine had been tasked with keeping you safe from them. Plus, Claudine
could not be with you at all times—especially after you began associating with,” he paused and looked scornfully at Eric, “his kind. As your kin, she would have sensed if you were in danger and teleported near you. But she was only to reveal herself in a case that was dire.”

Given the fact that she’d almost died several times, Sookie wondered what would be needed to make a case dire. “Why couldn’t Claudine ever introduce herself and tell me what I was?” Sookie asked. Knowing that there had been a fairy close by for most of her life—someone who might have befriended her and helped her with her telepathy—was what made Sookie the most angry at her great-grandfather.

“I determined that it was best that you did not know,” Niall said unashamedly. “And Claudine is bound to obey my wishes. But—now—we must move forward instead of looking to the past.”

Sookie sighed. She’d not expected an apology from Niall. But it would have been nice to understand his reasoning. When it came to his mostly-human descendants, it seemed that the fairy took little notice unless there was a spark present in them. And once he’d prevented her spark from showing itself, he seemed to have pretty much written her off as well, except for providing a guardian that couldn’t really protect her at all when it all came down to it. Niall’s choices and actions had hurt her—had damaged her. And Sookie realized as she looked at the stern-faced fairy in front of her that she’d never get what she really wanted from him: a family.

“Why did you bring Sookie back?” Eric asked. “And why was she so ill?”

Niall leaned forward a little, his eyes piercing into the couple sitting on the floor.

“Sookie could not exist in Faerie because of a bond she has formed in this realm. As soon as she was in Faerie, that bond began to stretch for its complement in this realm. The severity of her reaction was proportional to the strength of that bond and her unwillingness to let go of it.”

“What do you mean a bond?” Sookie asked, sitting up straighter.

Eric too had tensed next to her. “But I felt no vampire bond in her,” Eric said. “What you say isn’t possible.”

Niall ignored Eric and looked at Sookie. “It is a Fae bond. You have formed a Fae bond with the Norseman,” he said accusingly, not even trying to hide his disgust at the fact.

“What are you talking about?” Eric asked. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“It matters not what you have heard of, vampire,” Niall said through clenched teeth. “You would not have heard of this kind of bond because you have no business in fairy affairs.” He scowled. “A Fae has never formed a bond with a vampire—or a human for that matter. Fae bonds are only formed between two fairies, and, even then, they are very rare—perhaps one is formed every hundred years or so.”

Octavia scoffed. “Apparently, dee rules are changing,” she said under her breath.

“Back up!” Sookie said apprehensively. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t form a bond with Eric. I didn’t even know I was part fairy until a few hours ago!”

“You did not know what you were doing, child, but I sensed there was something strong between you and dis vampire when I met you. I had heard only rumors of Fae bonds existing, so I was not sure about what I sensed until I saw you place your light into Eric without harm coming to him,” Octavia said gently. “You should have been told of bonds by your kin,” she added, looking at Niall critically.
Niall growled next to her. “Without her spark, forming a bond would have been impossible for Sookie! And—as I told you before, witch—one with so little Fae blood should not have been able to form one anyway! It has never happened before. And certainly never with a vampire! It’s impossible!”

Octavia glared at the fairy prince. “I am beginning to think that you don’t understand the meaning of the words, ‘never’ and ‘impossible,’ fairy. You should have sensed the bond as soon as you saw them.”

“Yes,” Niall confessed quietly, though with no contrition in his voice. “I will admit that I should have sensed a bond; however, it was not even something I could imagine happening.”

While the two supernaturals on the couch had quarreled with each other, a shift had occurred on the floor. Sookie was now sitting a little further away from Eric, their only physical contact being her knee touching his leg. She was having a hard time understanding the fact that she had formed a Fae bond with Eric; she didn’t even know what one was.

For his part, Eric no longer felt grounded to the floor. The roots which he’d celebrated being planted between Sookie and himself moments before seemed almost like chains now. He thought about the feeling of Sookie being gone from him and focused his blood to examine the site from which his pain had come. He had thought it was his soul, a soul that was empty without her—but a soul nonetheless.

Now the vampire knew that was not the case. What he’d been feeling was a bond. He struggled to remember when he first noticed it, but he couldn’t pinpoint its birth. All he knew was that it had been growing inside of him for a while.

He had thought that growing thing was his love for Sookie. Now—he was not sure. A vampire could use a tie to affect the emotions of a human. And with a bond, both vampire and human could share and affect emotions. What if a Fae bond was similar?

Eric interrupted the bickering fairy and witch.

“How is a Fae bond formed? And what is its effect?” he asked in a cold tone.

Sookie shivered and pulled the quilt around her even as she moved toward the fire.

Niall turned to look at the two on the floor. He smiled slightly when he saw the new, subtle distance between them. On the other hand, Octavia frowned and sighed sadly. She wondered what would become of Eric, whom she had always liked, and Sookie, whom her heart had gone out to like a mother.

“A Fae who has decided to bond needs only to give his or her light to the one he or she has chosen. It is done with a single touch,” Niall said.

“But I didn’t decide. I didn’t choose,” Sookie said insistently, looking over at Eric as if praying for his understanding. He wasn’t looking back at her. He was looking at Niall.

“In your case, great-granddaughter, the choice would not have been conscious,” Niall said, shifting a little uncomfortably in his seat.

“I believe you recognized this vampire as the only being to ever look at you with both truth and acceptance in his eyes,” Octavia said, hoping that both Sookie and Eric would see the truth in her words—that they would quell the distance growing between them due to their uncertainties about themselves. “‘Tis only trust dat could have forged such a bond.”
Niall sighed. “The witch is right in that respect, child. You could not have formed a bond with the vampire unless you trusted him unreservedly.”

“But I didn’t always trust Eric,” Sookie said quietly, not looking directly at Eric, but seeing him flinch nonetheless.

“I was not always trustworthy,” the vampire admitted, also in a quiet voice.

“I am talking of a different kind of trust,” Niall said. “Ironically, it has very little to do with actions. It is instinctive.”

“I don’t understand,” Sookie said, sounding a little defeated.

“Even if Eric broke your trust to a certain extent—as I’m sure he would have, given his high-handed nature,” Octavia chuckled a little, “you would have known—on dee inside—dat you could trust him with dee most important part of yourself: your very essence.”

Niall sighed. “As a rule, fairies are taught not to bond, and it is usually in their nature not to bond either.”

“Why did I bond then? How could I do it without knowing it?” Sookie asked.

“Your human side probably compelled you,” Niall said somewhat disdainfully. “You were obviously looking to make a connection with someone since the only one who had ever truly cared for you—your grandmother—had recently died,” he continued matter-of-factly. “You were lonely and looking for someone willing to be your companion.”

Sookie let out a little sob.

Octavia glared at Niall. “You speak too harshly, fairy!” She softened her tone as she turned back to Sookie. “You were seeking something you’d never found before, child: a true connection. There is nothing wrong with craving dat. We all do—you know.”

“So I formed a bond because I was lonely? Because I was pathetic? Because I knew no one would want me otherwise?” Sookie asked, feeling all of her self-doubts flooding through her like a tidal wave. Her fingers itched to reach out for Eric, but she wrapped them into the quilt instead. There was nothing about Eric’s demeanor that told her that he would even accept her touch, let alone offer her comfort. And she was beginning to understand that all the care he had been showing her had originated from a bond that she had unknowingly forced upon him.

“What are the effects of a Fae bond?” Eric asked, repeating his question from earlier.

“Before you hear of the effects, you need to understand that a Fae bond cannot form unless it is accepted,” Niall said punitively. “So you were just as responsible for it as she was, vampire.”

“I understand,” Eric said detachedly. “Sookie unknowingly offered a fairy bond, and I unknowingly accepted it. Now—what are the effects?” he demanded once more.

The Viking had to restrain himself from taking Sookie into his arms. He could smell her tears now, and her harsh words directed at herself had stung him more than silver. However, all of his feelings for her seemed to be coming from what he now recognized was the fairy bond—a foreign thing that had taken him over and that was trying to control him.

How could he trust that any of his feelings for Sookie were his own? How could he trust anything anymore?
The Fae Bond

Chapter 05: The Fae Bond

“I can say only what happens between two Fae. There may be differences since you are vampire,” Niall directed at Eric.

“Understood,” Eric said. “Now speak.”

Niall glared at the vampire who was daring to order him to do anything, but he answered anyway. “A Fae bond works to draw two souls together into one. The two Fae become partners in all things. Their love is enduring—even into the Summerlands. Yet, as idealistic as all this sounds, there are drawbacks.”

“What are they?” Eric asked.

Niall sighed. “A Fae bond cannot be undone. There is no magic that can sever it or lessen it. The two become so enmeshed into each other’s spirits that they cannot be separated. That is why taking Sookie to Faerie almost killed her. You also would have felt that pain, but yours would have been spread out to match the time difference. What she felt as concentrated pain in the seconds she was in Faerie would have been mitigated by the fact that it did not come at you all at once.”

“Does the Fae bond create feelings that are not there?” Eric asked.

Again, he could hear Sookie crying softly, but he kept his eyes on Niall.

Niall sighed. “Where there is respect, it will create devotion. Where there is trust, it will create faith. Where there is affection, it will create love. So the answer to your question is yes and no. The bond takes all that is within a pair—all that could make the bond stronger—and it works to multiply those things exponentially.”

“So if Sookie intrigued me before?” Eric asked.

“You would want to learn everything about her, and you would care about all that you learned.”

At this, Eric stood up and walked toward the window. “The same would be true for her?” the vampire asked.

“Yes.”

Eric nodded as he looked unseeingly out into the dark backyard. All of their conversations—all of the intimate moments when they had come to know each other—had felt sacred to him. Now he knew that they’d not been driven by either of them, but by a bond that had made him completely vulnerable to her—and her to him. That was why he’d opened himself to her—trusted her with memories and thoughts that he’d not shared with anyone else, not even his maker.

No wonder he’d been so twisted up with contradictory feelings about her! His nature had been telling him to kill her—or, at least, to cut all ties with her. But the fairy bond had been compelling him to do the opposite. And, apparently, it could not be fought against.

Sookie was weeping openly now, and Octavia had gone over to her and now held her in her arms.
The witch was rocking her. “Twill be okay, child,” she soothed.

But Sookie did not believe it would be. She’d thought that Eric had wanted to know her—that he’d liked what he’d found inside of her. She’d thought they’d been falling in love. But how could she know anything anymore? All she was sure about was that she’d made a bond that had compelled Eric to want to be with her. She’d taken away his choice, just as much as Bill had ever taken away hers. No—she’d taken it away even more, for the Fae bond couldn’t be broken.

“So if I was attracted to Sookie before?” Eric asked.

“You would become even more enthralled by her beauty—until she eclipsed all others,” Niall responded.

“Do not confuse tings dat are compelled with tings dat are untrue,” Octavia cautioned fervently. “What has grown between you both is no less true dan if it had been formed another way,” she added. “Your feelings for one another can make you stronger. Those feelings will mean dat you are in complete sync with your helpmeet.”

“The witch is correct,” Niall admitted, though somewhat unwillingly. “Bonded Fae couples are often very strong. But they are weaker too in one way.”

“They are each other’s weakness,” Eric said.

“Yes,” Niall said. “If one is hurt, the other hurts.”

“Den again,” Octavia added, “if one is injured, dee other can better heal him or her. You have seen dat more dan once. Eric, why else would you have been able to do all you did in Sookie’s blood? And, Sookie, why else would have been able to heal dee vampire with your light? Only with dee bond were these tings possible.”

Eric seemingly ignored Octavia. “And if one of us dies?” he asked Niall.

“When it is two fairies, the other one dies too,” Niall said. “But the bonded pair tends to live longer together because of the bond. I do not know what will happen to you, vampire. You are undead and may not die if the bond dies.”

“What of Sookie’s lifespan?” Eric asked Niall. “Will it be a human lifespan? Will I be forced to turn her if I wish to guarantee that I live on?”

Sookie whimpered in Octavia’s arms.

Niall responded. “Now that my great-granddaughter’s spark has truly come to life, her aging will slow down. And do not humans also age more slowly if they have vampire blood?”

“Yes,” Eric said.

“Then you should consider giving her blood regularly. That should slow down her aging. Her grandfather died at 714 years of age, but it was not from natural causes. I am over 2,000 years old. My great-granddaughter’s spark is as strong as Fintan’s, but her blood is not as Fae. Thus, it is difficult to know how she will age. But I believe you will have time before you must do anything,” he paused, “drastic. I caution you against turning her, however—unless it is as a last resort. It might kill the spark within her, for fairies are creatures of the light. And that might be enough to kill the fairy bond—and both of you with it.”

Eric took in what Niall had said and looked back at Sookie for a moment before looking once more
out the window. “You said we could not be separated. What does that mean?”

Niall sighed. “You may be able to be apart for a day or two within this realm, but there would eventually be a bonding sickness if you tried to stay apart longer than that.”

“But we have spent many days apart,” Eric said. “And I never felt anything before.”

“The bond was likely still in the maturation stages then,” Niall reported. “But did you not find reasons to seek out each other? To be in each other’s presence if only for a moment? Did you not feel more apprehensive when you were apart?”

Sookie thought about the day Bill had gone missing. She’d wanted to seek out Eric then; she’d wanted to see him and had felt better after having confronted him—even though he’d been naked and screwing Yvetta at the time. The next night, she’d returned to Fangtasia. The next night after that, he’d come to her. A few nights after that, she’d seen him again—at Russell’s mansion—and, if she were being honest—she had been relieved to see him there. No—it had been more than relief; she’d felt as if she could breathe again as soon as she’d laid eyes on him. And then, only one night after they’d been together at Russell’s mansion, Eric had come for her in the hospital, and since then, they’d not spent any nights apart.

Even as Sookie was thinking about their encounters since Dallas, Eric was thinking of the same. He was also thinking about how he’d tried to use Yvetta to drive away his thoughts of Sookie. It hadn’t worked.

Niall interrupted the bonded pair’s musings. “The longer you are together, the less time you can spend apart comfortably before the bonds inside of you begin to stretch for one another.”

Eric sighed. “So you are saying that we will have to be close in proximity to each other for the remainder of our lives?”

“Unless you want those lives to be fraught with illness and pain—and short,” Niall responded, “yes, you will have to stay close to each other.”

“And being close will make further separations even more difficult?” Eric asked bitterly.

“Yes,” Niall said. “And, if you are asking if there is a way to escape from the bond—there is not.”

Eric looked at Octavia. “Do you know a way?”

“No,” the witch answered, still rocking Sookie in her arms a little. “I will look into the matter. But dee fae bond was not touched by my severing spell—and dat is dee strongest kind of separating spell known to witches.”

“I understand,” Eric said resignedly.

Octavia sighed. “Dis need not be a bad ting, vampire,” Octavia said. “There is strength in partnership.”

Eric glared at Octavia for a moment, but said nothing.

“Can you tell when the Fae bond formed?” the vampire asked Niall.

“I cannot be sure,” the fairy reported. “Now that I have recognized what it is, I can tell you that the bond is not quite fully mature—though it is close. But that does not tell me when it formed. It would have had to have been after Sookie first took your blood, for that was when her spark
became active. And it would have had to have been before the severing spell—if the witch’s interpretation of what she felt from you and my great-granddaughter is to be believed.” Niall paused for a moment. “Forming the Fae bond would have required physical touch.”

Eric looked at Sookie and thought back to when he’d first become aware of his “soul”—which was obviously the bond between them. He looked out the window and began musing, just loud enough for the others to hear. “It was before I came to you in the hospital. I am certain of that. I did not know what I was feeling, but I was compelled to go there by more than just my blood. I had felt discomfort when I was not near you even then.”

The vampire looked at Niall. “Would Sookie have needed to initiate the touch?”

“Yes,” Niall reported. “And, as I said, though she was the one offering, you would have needed to accept the bond. You would have felt something even if you did not know what it was.”

Eric nodded and looked back out the window. He seemed to be going through events in reverse order as he talked out loud, seemingly to both himself and Sookie, though he didn’t look at her. “We touched in Jackson, but I initiated that. I do not think it was there. I touched you the night before you left for Jackson—when the Were was in your house. But—again—I initiated that.” He closed his eyes and went back another night. “You came to Fangtasia to speak with me about the marking on the Were you and Jessica had found, but I do not remember us touching. And, even before then, I felt myself being pulled to you in a way I had never experienced before. When you cried that night, I am certain I felt something in the place where I now know the Fae bond is located.”

The vampire shook his head. “No—it was already there then; I know it. The night before that, you came into the basement while I was fucking Yvetta,” he mused, still looking out the window and unconcerned about his vulgar language. “Even then, I was feeling unsatisfied with her; I’d been screwing her for hours and was not yet close to release, and when you left, I couldn’t continue—not with your scent lingering in the air.” He sighed deeply. “It could have only been on the rooftop then.” He glanced at Sookie, who was looking at him as if mesmerized by his reverse telling of their history.

He did not look away from her again, and in many ways, that was more difficult for Sookie.

“Godric had ordered me from the roof, and I knew that I was going to lose him. It was a moment—a second at most—but you reached out for my hand, and we looked at each other. I was not looking at your hand, so I saw no light, but I felt something—something like comfort. And I was,” he paused, “thankful for it. It felt like you were saving my life, for—before that—I’d been determined to return to the roof once my maker was gone.”

Eric looked at Niall. “That was the night after she took my blood. Her spark would have been active already?”

Niall nodded in confirmation. “Yes. And—from what you say—that was likely the time that the bond was forged.”

“So everything after that moment was influenced by the Fae bond?” the Viking asked the elder fairy.

“Yes,” Niall said, even as Sookie began to quietly sob again.

“‘Twill be okay,” Octavia cooed softly.
“What do you mean—okay?” Sookie demanded through her tears, even as she pulled away from Octavia’s comfort and stood up. “It’s not okay. It’s not going to be okay! I was so desperate for a connection to anybody—apparently—that I formed a bond with Eric the first time I touched him after taking his blood! And at the worst moment of his life too! I manipulated him at his most vulnerable time! And that’s the only reason he accepted the bond! That’s the only reason he accepted me!”

“Sookie,” Eric said. “Calm yourself. You are still weak from before, and your heart is beating too fast.”

“Calm down?” she asked now laughing hysterically. “How can you—of all people—tell me to be calm? You have just learned that everything after the rooftop has been manipulated by a bond I pushed onto you at your lowest point! Everything we have become is because of that bond!” She was shaking now. “I’m worse than Bill Compton ever thought about being. Because I’m so defective, I have trapped you forever!”

Sookie wobbled on her feet as her world began to spin and then went black.

Eric had Sookie scooped up into his arms before she could hit the floor. He sat them both back into the chair, and though he was cradling her as he’d done earlier, there was an air of detachment from the vampire. But there was also an air of acceptance.

The way he understood things, they had both been manipulated by the fairy bond, and it had effectively trapped them both forever into its grasp. Moreover, he knew that he was just as much to blame as she was. Had he not given her his blood, she wouldn’t have been able to form a bond in the first place. He had made himself a part of her before she’d returned the favor. But they were now stuck.

Stuck together—forever.

The best he could do was to try to figure out what was coming from him and what was coming from the bond and act accordingly. He was determined not to let the bond govern him anymore. Otherwise, he would lose himself to it. Looking back at the previous weeks, he realized that that had been what had occurred.

“She has fainted?” Niall asked.

“Yes,” Eric reported in an even tone. “Her breathing and heart rate are returning to normal, however. I can feel the bond asking for my aid. Holding her like this seems to be easing her. But I believe that I must give her my blood again for her to awaken.”

“That is the bond inducing you to soothe her—to heal her,” Niall said coldly.

“As she healed you of dee silver,” Octavia reminded, even as she glared at Niall.

Eric nodded at both of them.

“I will be leaving you with this,” Niall said, producing a book seemingly out of thin air. “It will help my great-granddaughter to understand how to use her light. That is why you asked for me to come to begin with—correct?”

“Correct,” Eric said evenly.

“Your fate and hers are now one and the same, vampire,” Niall said. “I wish it were not so, but there is nothing to be done for it. I would ask you to take care of her, but I know it is not required
of me to do so now. If you have survived for a thousand years, then you understand how to do that already.”

“Yes,” Eric responded.

“Do you have any further questions for me before I leave?” Niall asked stiffly, though wearily. “I do not intend to return to this realm again for a while.”

“Can she get help with her powers? Perhaps from this Claudine you mentioned earlier?”

“No!” Niall snapped sharply. “My granddaughter is going to return to Faerie, and I will not risk her by letting her be around you.”

Eric sighed. That was the answer he’d expected from the fairy; however, he had asked for Sookie’s sake. “I ask for a compromise then,” the vampire said.

“What?” Niall asked gruffly.

“It seems that the time difference between our two realms favors Faerie now in that a day here would be less than a minute there—correct?”

“Yes. It is about that now, though the tide will begin to shift again soon enough.”

Eric nodded. “I ask that Sookie be allowed one day—only during the daylight—with her cousin, Claudine, in one week’s time. That will give Sookie time enough to read through the book you are leaving and to generate any questions she might want to ask. Claudine’s interaction with her would mean only minutes more away from Faerie, and then she could go back to your realm.”

Niall considered for a moment. “I agree to this.”

“I will leave word with Cataliades about a location.”

“Claudine will come only during the daytime,” Niall rejoined.

“Of course,” Eric said.

“And Sookie and she must meet in the sunlight—outside—not in a dwelling of any kind.”

“Agreed,” Eric said with a frustrated sigh. “In one week’s time, I will make sure that we are in a secluded place so that Sookie and Claudine may safely meet during the day. Sookie will meet her outside of that place, and Claudine will leave before nightfall. And Claudine will not be allowed into the home since I will be resting there.”

Niall nodded. “Agreed. After that, Sookie cannot expect to have any contact with her fairy kin. Her involvement with you will effectively end our involvement with her.”

“She will not expect more,” Eric said evenly. He caught himself unconsciously stroking Sookie’s hair and immediately stopped the action.

“Is there anything else?” Niall asked somewhat impatiently.

“The child—Hunter. Sookie wants to help him. I have Cataliades searching, but it would be easier if . . . ,” he began.

Niall interrupted. “Fine, I will tell the demon the last known location of the child in order to facilitate your search.”
Eric nodded.

“Is that all?” the fairy asked, looking like he was about to get up.

“Is there something she may have to keep of her grandfather’s?” Eric asked. “She was forced to leave everything behind in her home, and having something from a being that never did her harm would help her. She does not have many memories of him, but those that she has are among her best.” The vampire paused. “She shared those memories with me. She likely sensed that he was like her. She always felt close to him.”

Niall sighed. “I will try to find something appropriate.”

Eric nodded. “Then that is all.”

Niall returned the nod and, after a single glance at Sookie, he stood and teleported away.

Octavia went over to the couch and sat down. She looked into the fire. “I hope dat you eventually see dat what dee bond dat has been made may have been forced, but ’tis no less real because of dat. Dee tings dat you feel are true. And dee moment Sookie made dee bond with you was as much to soothe you as to soothe dee scarcity of love in her own life.”

“You should have told me about the bond before,” Eric said bitterly.

“I was not sure dat a bond was what I felt,” the witch answered honestly. “I thought it might just be your love for each other.” She sighed. “I learned as much as you did tonight about Fae bonds. Plus,” she paused, “would it have changed anything?”

“I could have tried to separate my own feelings from those of the bond.”

“If you do dat, you will hurt yourself, vampire,” Octavia said softly. “And dee child.”

Eric sighed. “I will find a balance. And I will know my own mind. Sookie and I can exist together without being forced to feel what we do not feel.”

“You have not listened to me,” Octavia said sadly. “What you feel is real!”

“Stop, witch!” Eric said harshly.

Octavia sighed but nodded. “I brought more of dee potion to conceal your scents. ‘Twill last for a while—for dee both of you, but be sparing. I will not be able to make more for at least month.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

“I have also made another concealment spell capable of covering a home—as my spell covered dis one. You can use it if you want to stay in one place for a while— for dee both of you, but be sparing. I will not be able to make more for at least month.”

“What of the spell here?” Eric asked, knowing that it was due to expire soon.

“I was able to bolster it a bit. Dee fairy helped. ‘Twas dee only ting he did right,” she commented acerbically. “‘Twill last through the night now, probably until tomorrow evening. But do not count on it past dat point.”

“Very well,” Eric said.

“You should complete a vampire bond with her,” Octavia observed, gesturing toward Sookie.
“Yes,” Eric responded. “I have already thought about the possibility of doing that, but it would add another complication. Still, it might be easier to isolate the emotions coming from the fairy bond and the ones coming from me if I had a vampire bond to confirm what I feel—and what she feels.”

Octavia sighed. “Dee Fae bond isn’t controlled by just Sookie’s emotions, Eric. ‘Tis a living thing in and of itself now.”

“Then we will be able to control the power it has over us to a degree,” Eric said stubbornly.

“Do you love dee child?” Octavia asked.


The witch shook her head sadly. “As I said, a vampire bond would make tings easier between you two. ‘Twould satisfy the Fae bond’s desire to bring you closer. And Sookie will need your blood to remain young for a longer period of time. And you will need hers too.”

“Yes—other blood is beginning to taste almost like TrueBlood to me,” he said dejectedly.

“If you have sex with another, dee bond will likely make you ill,” Octavia said cautiously.

“Yes, I have figured that out on my own,” he responded stoically.

“I am sorry dat you cannot see dee great gift of dee Fae bond,” she said. “I will hope—for both of your sakes—that you do eventually.”

“How can I see the gift in a thing that has taken hold of me and wishes to create a lovesick fool?” Eric seethed quietly, not wanting to disturb Sookie.

“Perhaps dee bond wishes to create dee best of both of you? Perhaps it wishes to give you happiness, Eric Northman.”

He scoffed.

“You are being a little hypocritical—don’t you think?” the witch asked knowingly. “Did you not initially tie yourself to Sookie with your blood so that you could control her?”

He shook his head. “It’s not the same thing, and you know it.”

“No—’tis only similar,” she said, glaring at him. “But you are right. From what I learned today from dee bastardly fairy, the Fae bond seems more powerful than the other kinds of bonds of which I know.”

Eric sighed. “Yes. It is difficult to know what I think and want versus what the bond is influencing me to think and want.”

“Those tings are dee same ting now, Eric,” Octavia said. “And dat could be a very good ting for you and Sookie.”

The vampire shook his head in denial.

The witch could see that Eric as not yet ready to accept—let alone embrace—the Fae bond. She looked from him to the girl in his arms and wondered what their fate would be.

“I believe a vampire bond would help in another way too,” she said after a few moments.
“How?” Eric asked.

“Dee Fae bond will compel you and Sookie to be as close. ’Twill be uncomfortable for you not to be. However, dee vampire bond will—I believe—mitigate dat a bit.”

“How?” Eric asked again. “Won’t it pull us even closer?” In truth, that was the only reason he hesitated in making such a bond.

“Yes,” Octavia answered. “But a vampire bond would allow dee two of you to feel each other—to know each other’s emotions. Knowing dat, you would both be,” she paused, “easier and would not be so uncomfortable if you weren’t physically close. You would be close in another way, and dat might satisfy dee Fae bond even more dan physical closeness.”

Eric considered Octavia’s words. “Would the bonds compete within us? Could making a vampire bond make things worse?”

The witch shrugged. “Nothing like dis has ever happened dat I know of,” she said honestly. “But my inclination is to believe dat dee two bonds would complement each other—just as you and Sookie complement each other. And dee vampire bond might actually help to empower you both in a way. Or—at least—it might help you to understand dee Fae bond better.”

Octavia rose to her feet. “I hope you and she live through your conflict with dee Mississippi king. And I hope you both find your peace. You deserve these things. Both of you.”

With those words, the witch left the house.
Chapter 06: Practical Arrangements

Eric held Sookie close against his body for another hour as he stared into the fire. He thought back to every single conversation they’d shared. Gods help him—he wanted her, despite what he now knew about the Fae bond.

Intellectually, he understood that Sookie forming the fairy bond with him was a great honor. And part of him was just a little more awestruck by her than he’d been before.

But he didn’t like not knowing which of his feelings were his own and which had come from the Fae bond. However, during the hour he spent with Sookie in his arms, he began to understand what needed to be done. On the one hand, he intended to accept what had already passed between them. After all, he had no choice. On the other hand, he would progress forward with more wariness of the Fae bond.

Eric didn’t want to hurt Sookie more than she’d already been hurt, but he couldn’t risk losing himself to the bond—not if he was to stand a chance against Russell. But he was certain that they could find a balance—if they worked together.

It was close to 3:30 a.m. when Eric bit into his wrist to feed Sookie. This time, it did not take her long to respond to his blood, and she moaned into the wound. Her eyes opened even as the small bite on his wrist healed.

“Eric?” she asked as if waking from a dream.

“Sookie?” he gave his familiar refrain out of habit, but his tone didn’t sound quite right to either of their ears.

“What are we going to do?”

“Are they gone?”

“Yes.”

“What are we going to do?” Sookie asked.

“We are going to learn how to distinguish what is real versus what is coming from the Fae bond. We are going to continue with our plan to leave this place, and eventually I will fight Russell. Your great-grandfather has left you a book that you can read in order to better understand your spark and the gifts you may develop from it. We will have to stay together from now on—it seems—but we will figure out ways to retain some independence within that constraint. The bond has made us partners, Sookie, and partners we will be until death parts us.”

“Sounds like a marriage,” she observed with a slight whimper.

“We are more than married,” Eric returned, “at least by today’s standards.”

“Because there’s no possibility of divorce,” Sookie commented somewhat sourly.

Eric nodded. “During my time, divorce wasn’t a possibility either, and arranged marriages were the norm. That is how I choose to think about what we are.”

“As having an arranged marriage?”

He nodded again in affirmation.

“And you don’t see that as a bad thing?” she asked tentatively.

“No. Arranged marriages were often very good. They were based on mutual understanding and benefit. That will be us, Sookie. We will be fine.”

Eric’s words should have soothed Sookie, but the resignation mixed with the resolution in his voice made her want to cry again.

“Do you hate me?” she asked him.

“No,” he said. “I have never hated you. And I will never hate you—or resent you, though I hate the bond that has been forced upon us. However, you are not to blame. I am the one who set all of this into motion by giving you my blood and activating your spark. Do you hate me?” he asked in return.

“No,” she answered.

“Then that is where we will start over,” he said, as he stood up and put her on her feet before bending toward her and placing a deliberate kiss on her forehead. “Why don’t we eat the meal you planned for us last night? I have already packed your things, but you will probably want to shower before you apply the concealment potion to your forehead. Octavia said that the spell covering this place will last until well into tomorrow, so after you eat and are cleaned up, you should rest for a while. I will go to my rest in the car. You can even sleep in a bit, but you should leave here around noon—so that we can be at our next destination before dark.”

Sookie couldn’t help but to notice the distance in Eric’s tone and in his demeanor, but she didn’t blame him. In fact, his somewhat aloof civility calmed her—helped her to gain control of the swirl of her own emotions.

“We can deal with this,” she said, though her voice shook a little.

“We will deal with this,” he responded. “And—to be very clear—I do not blame you for it. If anything, it is your great-grandfather’s fault for keeping you uninformed—or mine for setting things in motion.”

Sookie looked up at Eric and gave him a small smile. “Thanks for saying that.”

“I’m not just saying it,” he said as he bent down to give her another kiss on the forehead. This one was tenderer. “I mean it.”

Sookie’s eyes focused on Eric’s lips as he pulled back, but she didn’t have the courage to kiss him as she wanted to. Instead, when he took a step back, she did too.

“I will go shower and gather some things together while you prepare your food,” he said.

“Sure,” she responded, feeling the awkwardness of their interaction acutely. She was the opposite of hungry, but she knew that she needed to eat nonetheless.

As she watched Eric walking away, she decided that she needed to embrace the numbness that she felt, rather than the pain. She guessed that Eric’s blood was at least partly responsible for her feeling less upset than before. It wasn’t that she felt him controlling her with the blood. No. It was
just the usual burst of energy that accompanied vampire blood. And, for now, she’d take what she could get. As she entered the kitchen, she saw that several of the dishrags and towels were bloody. “Eric’s tears,” she said almost silently to herself as she thought about the hours of suffering that Eric must have endured the night before.

Again, she felt like crying. But, again, she stopped herself. Instead, she gathered up all the bloody rags and took them to the laundry room. She rinsed them in the utility sink and then put them into the washing machine with some bleach to soak.

That chore done, she quickly got her chicken out of the refrigerator. She’d been marinating it before she’d been taken to Faerie, but it was still okay.

She took a long, calming breath and started heating water so that she could boil her potatoes; then she peeled and cut them so that they would soften quickly.

She sighed. When she was feeling down, nothing beat the comfort of Gran’s fried chicken and gravy, and Amelia had gotten all of the ingredients that Sookie would need. The telepath didn’t expect to be able to make meals with as many ingredients for the foreseeable future, so she resolved to take advantage of the stocked kitchen. After dropping in the potatoes, she made herself a nice salad and then started the chicken. The potatoes got done quickly, so she mashed them with a little milk and butter. As she added salt and pepper, she breathed a sigh of relief. Cooking was such a normal task, and it felt good to be doing it.

Yes, she thought to herself, she and Eric would get through this. They were a team now, and—though their partnership had been forced—she couldn’t think of anyone she’d rather be stuck with for life than the vampire upstairs.

The old Sookie might have tried to deny or ignore the obstacle before her, but the one who had survived the severing spell was resolved to move forward—even if it hurt.

Eric monitored Sookie’s vital signs as he showered. Now that his blood was inside of her again, he knew that he could use it to help soothe her, but there were already too many things that were artificial between them, and the thought of that caused him immense pain.

He sighed deeply and decided to allow himself five minutes to let himself mourn the loss of the love he had thought he’d found at long last.

Eric cried.

The penetrating feeling of that emotion was still inside of him, but he shoved it into the bond where it had come from. He chastised himself for wishing that he had never learned the truth about the Fae bond. He chastised himself for wishing that the pure joy of the love he’d felt could be real. He wished that he could simply forget that feeling. Sadly, however, there were no memory charms to be found for vampires.

To avoid watching the blood from his tears going down the drain, he closed his eyes. He tried to concentrate on the feeling of the soothing hot water on his cool body. All he wanted to do was to rush downstairs and take Sookie into his arms—to tell her that none of it mattered and that he loved her—the bond be damned! All he wanted was to kiss her again and then make love to her—at long last.

But Eric refused to live inside of a lie created by the Fae bond, despite the fact that the lie would have been so wonderful to get lost inside of. He knew that no one but Sookie would ever sate him, and he resented that fact—even though he was in awe of it at the same time.
His five minutes of allotted mourning time done, he shifted his mind to try to figure out what he really felt about Sookie. He thought about their interactions before the Fae bond was formed. He had flirted with her and had enjoyed seeing her flustered and riled. She had stood up to him, her fiery spirit calling to his own. It hadn’t been “easy” between them; only the past fortnight or so had been “easy.” But the time before the bond had been forged hadn’t been bad either. Eric had been extremely attracted to Sookie, and he’d admired her courage and her innate acceptance of those different than she. He’d been so intrigued by her, in fact, that he’d tricked her into a tie and had, thereby, inadvertently set into motion all of the things that had happened since the igniting of her spark.

And she’d trusted him—intrinsically trusted him to the extent that she’d “offered” the Fae bond. She’d not known what she was doing, but that didn’t mean the trust wasn’t there. And, in the Dallas church, there had been moments of understanding between them.

No—it had been more than understanding. It had been admiration.

Eric had offered to give himself up for Godric and Sookie; however, the only one who actually needed his help to get out of that church had been Sookie. He had known that even then. He’d been willing to sacrifice himself for her, and that had been before the blood tie and before the Fae bond.

He’d respected her, and he respected few.

He’d liked her, and he liked few.

He’d trusted her to help him find his maker, and he trusted few.

And, of course, Eric knew that Sookie had chosen to walk up to that roof for Godric—and for him. And she’d decided to stay with Godric before she’d touched him. And that was important to Eric.

So curiosity, attraction, trust, care, and maybe even the beginning of something more between them were the true emotions Eric could accept as belonging to them. Somehow, that thought bolstered him; it was—at least—something to build on.

No. It was a lot to build on.

He and Sookie would just have to build slowly. He’d been trying to convey his “hope” and his pragmatism when he compared what they had to an arranged marriage. He could, after all, speak from experience about them. With shared values and motivations, a couple could come to love very deeply, and—though that love might not be as “romantic” as other forms—it was often more enduring than the fleeting passions of the heart.

Yes—the Fae bond was a set-back for Sookie and him, but there was much to build on nonetheless.

Somewhat mechanically, Eric finished his shower, dried off, and dressed. Then he gathered his dirty clothing and soiled towel. After that, he quickly moved Sookie’s sweater from his bag to hers. He also returned her lip gloss to her purse and hid the letter he had written in his duffel bag. He thought about burning it as Niall had burned the other one, but he couldn’t do that. He needed a reminder of how overriding his emotions would become if he let the Fae bond control him. He needed to be careful to keep reign of the feelings within him so that he could concentrate on what most needed to be done: planning Russell’s demise.

Sookie was his partner—his helpmeet. That could not be helped now. However, she could be those things with him thinking rationally!

Eric decided to keep Sookie’s IDs that he’d taken. He didn’t want to have to repack her entire bag,
and he could always return them later. It was also practical to keep some of them in his bag—just in case her bag and/or purse were ever left behind for any reason.

He quickly texted Brady to inform him that he would need to steal the feeds from the convenient stores again that day, but that he could forget about the hotel. Now that Sookie had had his blood, she was no longer suffering any physical ill-effects from the severing spell. And she’d almost healed physically from her ordeal in Faerie—though he could feel that she was a little tired. Eric figured that it was the Fae bond that had actually needed to heal when she got back, and he had a feeling that his blood in her would complete its healing sooner rather than later.

By the time Eric had packed up his laptop and taken his bags downstairs, Brady had texted him back to confirm that he could hijack the video feeds the next day. Eric slipped quietly through the kitchen, where Sookie was mashing potatoes, and put his duffel bag and laptop in the car. He also took a moment to ready Sookie’s Bluetooth communication equipment. He’d made a point to wear his Thor’s Hammer pin. He could now track Sookie with his blood, but she would need the pin if he was separated from her. If they completed a vampire bond as well, she might gain the capability to track him over short distances, but it was still good to have a back-up. And not even magic could hide a GPS signal.

Eric grabbed a plastic garbage bag for his dirty laundry and threw that into the car as well. There would be washing machines at all of the safe houses, so there was no need to worry about washing his clothing that night. It was too close to dawn for that anyway. By the time he got back inside, he saw that Sookie was placing her plate at the table she’d set the day before. She’d grabbed the goblet she’d taken out for him and was warming his blood already. He knew that it would not taste that good to him—especially not after he’d taken Sookie’s blood earlier.

However, he was determined to share the meal with Sookie. He had no doubt that his reaction to finding out about the Fae bond had hurt her. Plus, he was not blind to his own hypocrisy—though his self-awareness didn’t sate his anger.

He’d never doubted that vampires—as the “superior race”—had the right to control humans with their blood, even though it was not a practice in which he’d participated until recently. He’d never particularly supported the idea of taking control of another, and he’d lost respect for “Renfield”-creating vampires, but he had placed his blood into Lafayette and Hadley in order to gain an advantage over them. He’d also tricked Sookie into taking his blood because he was so intrigued by her—because he wanted to try to limit any control Bill had over her. Indeed, though Eric had never wanted to take control of Sookie, he couldn’t deny that he wanted his blood to influence her in some things. So—yes—he was alert to his hypocrisy in hating the Fae bond so much because it had taken control away from him. And he could certainly now better empathize with how Sookie had felt when she’d feared that the vampire blood in her was controlling her.

Moreover, he truly did believe that they’d both been the victims of the Fae bond—that they were in the situation together. And he needed her to understand that—despite his reaction against the Fae bond—he was not reacting against her.

He glanced at the table settings. His and Sookie’s places had been set close to each other the day before, but Eric noticed that Sookie had moved them so that they were now further apart. He didn’t comment on it.

“Hey,” she said to him as she entered the room with his goblet of heated blood. “Uh—good shower?”

“Yes, thank you,” he responded, humoring her in small talk as he took a sip of the blood. He sighed. He’d been right; it did taste inferior to even the night before when he’d drunk some. And
he figured that the more he took Sookie’s blood, the less he would want the blood of others. He would need to talk with her about forming a vampire bond—or at least feeding him on occasion. But that would have to be a conversation for another night.

“Your meal smells good,” Eric said after a few minutes. “That is your grandmother’s fried chicken recipe—is it not?”

Sookie nodded in affirmation. During one of their long conversations, they had talked of the human foods he remembered as well as her favorite foods.

“Her way of making gravy was the best,” Sookie said, “but this isn’t bad. I never can get it exactly like hers though.” She chuckled. “Jason always said that Gran could make the best gravy even if she had only old shoe leather and glue to work with.”

“Your brother has an odd sense of the language,” Eric remarked, taking another sip of his blood.

Sookie was about to launch into a story about Jason’s more outlandish metaphors when she stopped herself. Instead of speaking, she crammed a large bite into her mouth. Eric both saw and felt her change of demeanor.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded quickly as she chewed. After she was done with her bite, she tried to smile. “It’s just that I know the bond made you interested in the stories that I told before, but—now that I think about it—they’re all kind of stupid. Or, at least, not that important. You said earlier that we should try to figure out what the bond is causing us to do versus what we would do if it was just us, and I think you’re right.”

Eric put down his blood. “Sookie, I was interested in you before the Fae bond was formed. Perhaps, that interest was multiplied by the bond, but it was not created by it. So—when you have a story you wish to share—I will be happy to listen to it,” he said evenly.

She put her fork down gently onto her plate and looked at him with shining eyes. “It’s just that it’s hard to know how to behave,” she said quietly.

“I know,” the vampire responded in a gentle tone. “I was trying to figure out my own feelings when I was upstairs—the feelings that were in me before the bond formed. And that has helped.”

“What did you figure out?” she asked curiously.

“I was attracted to you physically. I was intrigued by you and enjoyed the way you would stand up to me. And I did care about what happened to you,” he answered, ticking off the things that he had determined while he’d been in the shower. “I respected your fire; I liked you,” he added with a little smile. “What about you? Can you recall how you felt about me?” he asked.

“Well,” she said, trying to sound as matter-of-fact as he had sounded, “before I drank your blood, I thought you were handsome. I was pissed off by what you’d done to Lafayette, but I think I had already started to understand why you’d done it. I appreciated the fact that you’d respected me enough to make the deal not to kill the humans that I used my telepathy on. Bill had said a lot of negative things about you, but I sort of liked you despite those things.” She chuckled a little, “Or—at least—I wanted to like you. I thought we could be friends, maybe.”

She took a breath. “I was really touched by what you did in that church in Dallas. And—when you asked me to trust you—I did.”
“And I trusted you to help find Godric,” Eric reminded.

“So—we had trust,” Sookie observed, “and not just the innate kind Niall talked about. It was trust on a conscious level.”

Eric nodded and then leered a little. “And we can be assured that our mutual attraction is quite real.”

She chuckled. “Of course, that’s the thing you’d latch onto.”

“Yes,” he said. “Both me’s.”

She nodded, knowing he was talking about his real self and his “bonded” self.

“And we wanted to like each other—at the very least,” she added. “That means we could have been actual friends.”

“I agree,” he responded. “At least as much as I could have a friend.”

“So friends then, who—uh—trusted each other and—uh—flirted?”

“Yes,” he chuckled. “I believe that would have been the case if things had stayed as they were.”

“Good. We can do that,” Sookie said excitedly. “Friends, but maybe without the flirting for a while.” Her face turned a little red.

“I do not know if I am capable of stopping that,” he said, winking at her.

She smiled at him, as well as at the honest conversation they’d had. At least she hoped it was honest. She didn’t think that she was being influenced by the bond, but she didn’t know how to be certain of that.

They finished their meals in companionable silence, and then she got up with her dishes. “I’ll just wash these really quick and then go take my shower. Then I should try to get some sleep. I’ll set my alarm for 11:00 so that I can be out of here by noon.”

“Good. This is all good,” he said a little awkwardly.

She gave him a smile, glad that she wasn’t the only one still feeling a little unsure about their new status. Their conversation had helped, but she knew it would take time before she was truly comfortable in her own skin.

Eric followed Sookie into the kitchen where he quickly rinsed his glass; then he went into the living room to make sure that the fire he’d started earlier was properly put out. He stared at the dying embers for a moment. When he’d lain down in front of the fire with Sookie earlier that evening, he’d felt so full. She’d come back to him, and he’d told her that he loved her. And he couldn’t wait to tell her again when she was awake. He’d been fearful of starting a vampire bond with her because he didn’t want her to doubt her own feelings, but that seemed like a moot point now. Any real feelings they may have had were already being influenced by the Fae bond. Shaking off his thoughts, he quickly picked up the blankets from the floor before returning the quilt to the bedroom. He refused to allow himself to fully enjoy the inhalation of Sookie’s scent as he did so.

He heard that she was in the shower, so he quickly scanned the room to make sure he’d left nothing behind. Finding the maps and addresses to the convenient stores she could safely stop at, he took them downstairs and put them in the passenger’s seat of the car before retrieving the log
and extra potion that Octavia had brought. He took the log and all but one vial of the potion to the car. He noticed on his way through to the garage that Sookie had turned on the dishwasher and was washing a load of laundry. He also noticed that none of the bloody towels he’d used the night before were still around. That meant that Sookie had seen them and had likely guessed how upset he’d been the night before. He decided not to let that bother him, however. Everything had changed since then.

He waited until he heard Sookie in the bedroom and then went upstairs. She’d freshened up her brown hair color two days before since the dye was temporary. She was towel-drying it. Their normal routine was for him to brush and then braid her hair after her shower, but he knew that would be no more.

She cleared her throat, a sound which only added to the awkwardness in the room.

“Uh—all done showering,” she said, stating the obvious. “Thanks for packing my stuff, she added as she returned her bag of toiletries to her suitcase.

“You’re welcome,” he said, seeing no need to tell her about the time he had spent carefully packing her things the night before. “Amelia brought you a few new things. I packed those first.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Uh—should I wear this?” she asked holding up the ponytail holder.

“Yes,” Eric responded. “The tie allows me to track you, but if you were concealed by magic, it might not work. The GPS would.”

“Technology and magic.”

“A good mix,” Eric said.

“Smart,” Sookie commented.

Eric held up the small vial of potion in his hand. “We will use this to conceal our scent,” he said.

She nodded. “Right. Water washes it off—right?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “But the potion lasts for only a day or so anyway. We will conserve as we can, and will be well away from here before it runs out. I will keep some in reserve for when we come back to face Russell.”

He opened the lid. “It takes only a couple of drops,” he said as he demonstrated by putting the potion on his forehead. He put the lid back onto the vial and then handed it to her. “Keep this one in your purse in case you need to use it unexpectedly. You can put it on right before you leave the house.”

She nodded and dutifully put the potion into her purse.

“It is nearing dawn,” he said. “I will go to the car now.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, pulling her phone out of her purse. “Are you going to be wearing the wristband?”

“Yes. And I will have the Bluetooth in. I will likely be awake for another half hour if you have questions.”

“Okay.”
“I can take your suitcase down,” he offered.

“Sure, just let me grab my sweater,” she said, pulling out the garment that was right on top before re-zipping her bag.”

“Everything else is packed and ready. The cooler is on the counter. Be sure to take any food you wish for tomorrow. The fewer stops you have to make and stores we have to go to, the better.”

“Uh—did you remember to pack that case of TruBlood Amelia brought?”

He nodded. “Yes. The codes for the house in Houston are with the maps and your Bluetooth, which are in the passenger’s seat of the car.”

Sookie nodded. “Okay. I guess we’re ready. I’ll see you tomorrow night in Houston.”

“The Beaumont hotel is no longer an option,” Eric said. “But my blood has removed the last bit of the illness left behind by the severing spell.”

“Uh—thanks. I’m sure I’ll be able to get to Houston. It’s really not that far.”

“I will put the book Niall brought into your suitcase.”

She nodded.

“Sleep well, Sookie,” Eric said as he turned away.

“Uh—you too,” she said.

“I shall sleep like the dead,” he responded, throwing a smirk over his shoulder. That one gesture made her feel better than the rest of their rather stiff conversation had.

“Wait,” Sookie said. “Don’t I need to be close to my clothes and stuff so that the potion works to cover my scent on them too?”

Eric was proud of her for remembering. “The garage is actually right under this room, so if you do it here, it is close enough. Or wait until you are in the car—if you wish.”

“Okay,” she said as he turned again to walk away.

She lay down on the bed and wrapped herself into the quilt, inhaling Eric’s scent deeply.

She already missed him.
Sookie groaned and looked at the clock. It was only 6:30 a.m., but sleep hadn’t found her yet. She contemplated just leaving Slidell early, but she felt tired to the bone, and she knew that a nap would help her to drive more safely.

The only problem was that she couldn’t sleep.

She tossed and turned—for what seemed like the millionth time since she lay down.

Her whole body felt like it was twitching a little—like it was looking for something. She knew exactly what that something was—who it was.

She knew that Eric was dead for the day in the garage that was apparently right below her room, but he didn’t seem close enough. She groaned again and then gave up any semblance of control or dignity. She figured that she didn’t need to pretend that the Fae bond wasn’t at least somewhat in control of her actions while Eric was dead for the day. She sighed and grabbed the quilt off of the bed she still thought of as belonging to Eric and her. Their first kiss had taken place there. The most important conversations of her life had occurred there.

“Too bad they were fake,” she sighed out loud. There was no one who would be listening to her anyway. She put the quilt under her arm, grabbed Eric’s pillow, and put her phone in her pocket, thankful that it had an alarm despite the fact that it was mostly designed as a communication and location device for Eric and her. She left everything else in the room and went downstairs to the garage. Mercifully, only her suitcase and the fake box hiding the structure of Eric’s resting place were in the backseat of the car. She removed them and then settled in so that her pillow was right over where Eric lay. Immediately, she felt more relaxed, knowing that it was his proximity that was making the difference.

“I wish I could touch you,” she whispered toward the front seat, where she figured his head was. “I think that—when I can—I will have to touch you when you are sleeping. I mean—I won’t do anything dirty,” she chuckled to herself. “But I don’t think I’ll be able to truly sleep unless I can be next to you. And maybe if I hold your hand while you’re asleep, it’ll be enough to get me through everything—you know? And maybe—when you’re dead for the day—I can still talk to you sometimes. I know a lot of what we had wasn’t real, but you helped me, Eric. It helped me to talk to you.”

She sighed deeply. “I’m sorry that I did this to us. I appreciate the fact that you don’t blame me. But I blame me. If I hadn’t been so weak and needy, maybe I wouldn’t have done this to us.”

She sighed and brought the quilt around her snuggly. She placed her hand flat onto the box that held him. “I just thought it was real this time—you know? Or I thought that it could be. I know that what I had with Bill wasn’t real, but it felt like . . . .” She paused for a moment. “I thought you and I were building something. And, when we kissed for the first time, I felt like my life might be starting—brand new. I thought that maybe someone really loved Sookie Stackhouse.” She let out a sob. “But you didn’t—not really.” She wiped her eyes. “Anyway, Sookie Stackhouse doesn’t even
exist—does she? Am I Sookie Brigant now? No,” she answered herself. “The fairies haven’t really claimed me as family either.” She sighed. “Maybe I’m nobody.”

She snuggled into the pillow, enjoying Eric’s scent that lingered in the pillowcase.

“It’ll never be real now—will it?” she asked in a small voice. “Every day from now until the day I die, I’ll fall more in love with you, but I’ll always know it isn’t real—that it’s all because of the bond I made with you during the only day that you’ve ever been just as lost as me, except for maybe the day your parents died. And you’ll know it too,” she added sadly.

She laughed ruefully. “As it turns out, I was the reason my own parents died. I always blamed myself for them being on that bridge, and now I know that I’m even more responsible—that the fairies had wanted to kill me.”

The guilt ate at Sookie’s heart, but she tried to push it back. “No,” she said aloud, “I need to be strong. I can’t wallow. I need to develop my light so that I can help you beat Russell. Maybe then—just maybe—I will have made up for all this—at least a little.

She closed her eyes. “Gran always told me that the past had the ability to smother us if we refused to live in the present. And she still believed that after the man she loved disappeared.” Sookie sighed. “I’m glad you didn’t disappear, Eric. And even though it makes me feel guilty, part of me is glad that I made a bond with you. Maybe it’s wrong, but when you are asleep, I’m gonna let myself feel all the love I have for you because . . . .” She paused and sobbed into the pillow for a moment. “Because no matter how my love for you was made, you’re a wonderful man—a beautiful person inside and out. And if you don’t deserve all of the love I have to give, then there’s no one in the world who does. I might not deserve yours back, but that doesn’t mean you won’t have mine—that it won’t be as real as I can make it.”

After wiping her tears one last time and checking her alarm, Sookie let herself sink into a sleep where the Eric in her dreams cradled her all morning long.

The jarring sound of ringing woke Sookie up. For a moment, she was disoriented, but she soon recognized where she was—in the backseat of the Prius. She grabbed her phone and shut off the annoying noise before sitting up. She was surprised when she felt well-rested.

“Thanks,” she said, patting the box that held Eric. “I needed that.”

It was 11:00 a.m., and she had a lot to do, so she quickly got up. She put the fake box back into the car so that Eric’s enclosure would be concealed, and then she returned her suitcase to the back seat. She was about to take the quilt and pillow back inside when she thought better of it. She folded the quilt and stuck it next to her suitcase, running her fingers over the stitching lovingly.

It was one of those quilts that looked simpler to make than it had been. It was made from a patchwork of fabrics and had immediately reminded Sookie of Gran. Sookie closed her eyes and pictured Gran sitting at the old dining room table and gossiping shamelessly with her friends as they quilted. Sookie sighed; eventually Gran’s arthritis had prevented her from being a part of the quilting group, but at least she’d gotten to do it for most of her years.

For Sookie’s eighteenth birthday, she had been given the last quilt that Gran had helped to construct. It was a double wedding ring pattern, done in reds and browns and on a field of crisp white. It was the most beautiful quilt Sookie had ever seen. Gran had also passed along her own hope chest to Sookie that day—a piece of furniture that had once belonged to Gran’s own grandmother. The gifts had touched Sookie’s heart.
And broken it a little.

By then, Sookie had already given her own hopes of ever getting married. Oh—she’d ached for love—just like anyone else. She would lie in her bed for hours, just imagining what it might feel like to hold someone’s hand without his thoughts invading her mind. Or she’d imagine only nice thoughts coming through—thoughts that said she was beautiful just as she was. Of course, by the time she’d turned eighteen, Sookie had already realized that her fantasies were just that—fantasies.

Still, Sookie had appreciated Gran’s gifts, even as she’d lamented that she wouldn’t be able to fulfill her Gran’s hopes for her. Sookie closed her eyes tighter and remembered back to the morning of that birthday. Gran had been singing loudly in her head; she always did that whenever she wanted to make sure that Sookie couldn’t listen to her thoughts. That morning as she’d made blueberry pancakes, Gran had been stuck on a loop of “Light My Fire” by the Doors.

Though Sookie hadn’t had the heart to tell her matriarch, Gran’s strategy to keep Sookie out of her head had never worked. By the time Sookie was eighteen, she’d begun developing her shields, but whenever her Gran mentally “sang” so loud, it caught Sookie’s attention. And—Sookie couldn’t help but to listen until she could rebuild her shields, which—at the time—was still difficult for her. Under the song that day had been Gran’s biggest worries concerning Sookie—and her biggest questions. On the day of the birthday that marked Sookie as an adult by most standards, Gran had been questioning whether Sookie would even have need of a hope chest. Gran was kicking herself for letting Maxine talk her into making the traditional marriage pattern for Sookie, for she was almost certain that Sookie would never find love because of her “disability.” Indeed, even as she internally sang the lyrics, Gran was resolving to wait ten years and then just encourage her granddaughter to begin using the quilt whether she was married or not.

Sookie would never forget the words in that song, which had precipitated Gran’s resolution:

The time to hesitate is through
No time to wallow in the mire
Try now we can only lose
And our love become a funeral pyre
Come on baby, light my fire
A funeral pyre indeed.

Sookie felt a warm tear slip down her cheek and hoped it would be her last for a while. She’d already cried enough tears over the idea of being an old maid. Hell—she’d started doing that when she was thirteen and had tried to hold a boy’s hand for the first time! Yes, by eighteen, she’d been able to accept the quilt and Gran’s “hope” without shedding any tears—at least not in front of Gran.

Sookie sighed and shook her head a little. Ironically, when it came to love, Sookie had actually gotten much farther than she’d ever thought she would! After all, she’d not died a virgin, and—before meeting Bill—she had been pretty sure that would be the case. And lots of girls lost their virginity to guys with ulterior motives. And a lot of people’s relationships were based on lies and false affection. The only difference was that they generally didn’t know it.

Sookie did.

Luckily, she had found out about Bill’s duplicity before she was tied to him in marriage. And—no matter how painful things were between her and Eric now—there was openness between them. All
of their cards—even the ones that had been dealt to them without their knowledge—were now on the table.

Sookie took a deep breath as she glanced once more at the quilt from the house. The quilt Gran had given to her had been destroyed by the Maenad, as had Gran’s wedding dress, which had also been residing in Sookie’s hope chest before Maryann had taken it. As she’d gone through the tatters of the hope chest after Sam killed Maryann, Sookie had believed that what she’d had with Bill was real, and she’d mourned the loss of those items that she had hoped to use when she made a home with him. However, it turned out that it didn’t matter that those items had been lost, after all.

However, Sookie was determined that she would keep the quilt from this house—this home that she and Eric had shared when the possibility of love had seemed so real to her. Maybe it was her just torturing herself with what could never be true, but if she was going to live as long as Niall thought—and maybe even be turned one day so that Eric could live on—she needed to have something to remind her of the days before she knew she’d trapped Eric because of her desperate need to have a connection with someone.

She knew that despite the pain and illness she had suffered there, her time in the Slidell home had been the best time of her life. She left the pillow with Eric’s scent as well and went into the house. She started coffee and quickly ate a bowl of cereal before packing the left-over food she would be taking with her. There were a couple of TrueBloods in the refrigerator as well, so she grabbed those too. She put the cooler and the grocery bag she’d filled into the car before quickly tidying up the kitchen and throwing her load of linens into the dryer. She knew that Octavia and Amelia would be coming by to eliminate all traces of her and Eric from the house, but she didn’t want to leave it a mess.

Noticing that it was 11:30 a.m., Sookie went upstairs and brushed her teeth with the travel toothbrush she’d decided to keep in her purse. She did a last, quick scan of the room, making sure to look in the dresser and closet too. The only things she had left in the room were her purse and her sweater, which she put on over the T-shirt she was wearing. The weather was too hot for the garment, but she was starting to feel cold from the thought of leaving the house behind.

She did a quick walk around the living room and dining room, marveling at the fact that there was no evidence of her and Eric’s stay there. There were no pictures. There were just shared memories. There were no artifacts. There was just the artifice created by the Fae bond.

She quickly used the bathroom one more time, refilled her travel coffee mug, unplugged the coffee maker, and grabbed her purse and the small lunch she’d made for herself before leaving the house. She settled into the car, and as the garage door opened, she placed her hand over where Eric was sleeping as she said a little prayer that she would do her job and keep him safe that day. She applied the potion that would conceal her smell once she left the safety of the home and then carefully backed out of the garage, making sure that she closed the garage door behind her.

She’d learned from Eric that most of the places they would be using as safe houses had codes to get into them. And that made sense. After all, carrying around dozens of garage door openers would be cumbersome to say the least. Sookie knew that the basic plan was for Eric and her to make their way West. Getting through Texas would take several days, as Eric planned for them to travel only about 6 to 8 hours each day, and their path wasn’t linear. They would also take a few days in New Mexico, again not traveling linearly. According to Eric, both states were run by monarchs who were not particular fans of Russell Edgington, so the Mississippi and Louisiana king would have no help from them.

On the other hand, they would travel through Arizona in a single day. The king there was named
Sampson, and he was the child of Felipe de Castro, who was the king of Nevada. Felipe and Russell were quite friendly, according to Eric.

Their ultimate destination was California, which Eric had told her was the best state in the United States to hide. Not only was it large, but also the king and queen of the state were quite isolationist and preferred to think of their large territory as separate from the rest of the territories in North America. King Edwin had ruled over Washington and Oregon before marrying Queen Agnes of California. The two controlled the Western coast with a mix of efficiency and tolerance. In fact, Eric had even considered settling there when he came to the United States, but had opted for Louisiana because Godric was closer and because Sophie-Anne had a vacant sheriff’s position at the time.

Although Eric had explained that he would not ask Agnes and Edwin for direct help, they would not help Russell or his agents either. They also had a distaste for and distrust of Felipe, and they used Weres to very carefully monitor their borders with Nevada and Arizona.

Once in California, Eric said that he had a secluded home in the mountains where they could stay for a while as they planned their move against Russell. Sookie intuited that Eric really didn’t know where to start with that planning, but she trusted that he would figure out something. And—hopefully—she could get her microwave fingers to work better so that she could help more.

She turned on NPR and was quickly on Interstate 12 heading west toward Baton Rouge. Not needing to use the restroom, she decided not to stop at her first “approved” rest stop, which was just before Baton Rouge. She transitioned to Interstate 10, which would take her all the way to Houston.

About three hours into the trip, the coffee in her bladder was demanding her attention, so she stopped at the second “approved” stop, this one in a little town named Crowly, which was between Lafayette and Lake Charles.

Just as Eric had taught her, she drove by the little store once in order to determine where the best place to park would be. Eric had told her that gas stations and convenient stores often had cameras placed in various places around the building, but there were usually ways to fly under the radar. Despite her screaming bladder, she did another turn around the block until she noticed a woman going into the bathroom. Immediately, Sookie parked at the side of the building where the bathrooms were.

Listening into the thoughts of the customers at the small gas station, she waited a couple of minutes and then put on her sunglasses and a baseball cap before exiting the Prius. As she knew she would be, she was just in time to meet the woman coming out of the restroom with a key attached to a brick, which was a standard feature at roadside gas stations like this one. Sookie smiled and the woman handed her the key with a polite smile of her own.

Sookie quickly did her business and then waited until another woman was waiting outside the door to receive the key from her. She passed it along and then got back into her car. She made a note of all the cars around her and then got back onto the highway. She spent the next thirty miles with her eyes in the rearview mirror, altering her speed every five miles or so. As soon as she was certain she wasn’t being followed, she set the cruise control and found a station playing classic rock-n-roll.

Eric had taught her a lot about how to avoid cameras. One way was to pick the “right” kinds of places to stop at. Instead of the larger chain convenient stores, he’d said to pick smaller gas stations. These often had some food options as well, but—if possible—Eric told her to avoid going into the stores themselves. The best option for her would be the kind of place that had restroom facilities with entrances on the outside of the building, like the one she’d just been in. A place like
that likely had close-circuit cameras around the building, but Sookie could prevent the cameras from getting a good image of her by keeping her head slightly lowered and pointed away from the corners of the building—as if she were checking for a hangnail or needing to tie her shoes. If necessary, Sookie would have to go into the store itself to retrieve the key to the restroom, and—if that were the case—she couldn’t help but to have her face captured by a camera. However, if she could use her gift to wait until she heard the thoughts of another woman using the facilities, then she could avoid going into the store altogether.

According to Eric, most little gas stations had close circuit systems and kept footage for only 36 hours or so before recording over it. The cameras, therefore, were only for internal use and were primarily utilized to catch shoplifters or dishonest workers. Thus, if Sookie had to go inside of one, it was okay—not ideal, but okay.

The problem with larger chains, according to Eric, was that their security footage was often Internet-based and patched into a corporate system. The footage would, therefore, be stored longer. Also, hackers could use the footage to run through face-recognition searches. With a picture of her, a hacker could—within only a few hours—determine if she’d been in any of the chain’s locations. With this in mind, Eric had told her of many chain stores to avoid.

Feeling good about her first pit-stop, Sookie sang along mindlessly to the music on the radio, only pausing her singing long enough to eat the sandwich and chips she’d packed for her meal. Not wanting to have to stop again before she reached her destination for the day, she sipped her Dr. Pepper slowly. However, thinking about not wanting to stop made her bladder insist upon doing just that, so she did stop at the “approved” place that was a little past Beaumont. This time, instead of a gas station, it was a little café, which Sookie immediately loved for its homey feel.

Sookie saw some fresh pies in the case and, feeling nostalgic, she asked if she could have a whole pecan pie and a coffee to go; then she used the small bathroom while the kind-faced middle-aged woman running the café packed the pie up for her. Sookie used her telepathy to double check the thoughts of the customers before leaving the little place.

Of all the kinds of places she could stop, Eric suggested small, private businesses as being the best. A little café that was several miles from the Interstate was the perfect choice, according to Eric. If there was a camera system, it would likely be older and most certainly close-circuit. But—more likely—there would not be one in a place that small. To avoid suspicion, Eric had suggested that she always buy a little something—either food or some kind of a trinket when in places like that.

Once back on the road and confident she’d not been followed, Sookie understood what Eric had been doing when he planned her route for the day. He’d researched a variety of types of places that would be relatively safe for her to go to. He knew that she might have to one day select her own spots, and he’d wanted to give her the training she would need to stay safe. That thought warmed her up more than her coffee did as she traveled the final leg to Eric’s house just outside of Houston.

Given that she’d left Slidell just before noon, it was no surprise that she pulled up to her destination just after 6:00 p.m. The sun would be down in a little while, and Sookie was glad that Eric would rise soon.

She parked the car in front of the garage and got out. She quickly grabbed her keys. According to Eric, she would use the same process to enter all the safe homes from then on. There was a master key—the one now on her key ring—that would unlock all the doors. In addition, there was a new code to enter for each house. She put the key into the lock and noticed that a panel opened to the left of the doorknob. From memory, she entered the code and then went quickly inside before entering another code to disarm the security system. Without taking a look around, she went into
the garage and found the button to open the garage door before quickly going back to the car and driving in. Once the garage door was closed, she reset the house alarm and sighed with relief, knowing that she and Eric were once more under cover and that her “shift” would soon be over and that Eric would take over their security for the night.

Despite her relief, she stretched her telepathy out as far as she could. The houses in the modest neighborhood were pretty close together, so she “heard” several humans. None of them were thinking anything of concern. Given the fact that there was no concealment spell around this house, Eric had asked her to make a scan of the area every half hour or so, and they’d intended to work together on controlling and strengthening her telepathy.

Sookie hoped that was still the plan, but she decided to wait for Eric’s cue on that subject.

According to Eric, the sun would set around 7:20 that night, give or take a few minutes. Thus, Sookie decided to use the hour before then to get settled. She scoped out the house, finding that it had a basement, but—unlike the Slidell home—it was only one story otherwise. There were two bedrooms on the main floor, but one was completely empty. Although she knew that they’d only be staying the night and that they’d be moving on the next day, she still brought in her suitcase and the quilt. She placed them in the furnished room. Next, she took the cooler out of the car and put the perishables into the otherwise empty refrigerator and the cooling blocks that took the place of ice into the freezer. That done, she milled around the house for a little while. There was no television, so—after another mental scan of the area—she got herself a piece of pie and took out her book from Niall.
“If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.”—Rene Descartes

Eric woke up about half an hour before sunrise. The car was parked, but he still felt some residual heat from the engine, so he estimated that they’d been parked for less than an hour. Sookie wasn’t far from him, and his first impulse was to go to her.

However, Eric quelled his instinct and refrained. The garages at his safe houses were not always light tight, nor were the main rooms.

He closed his eyes and assessed his surroundings as he always did upon waking. About twenty human scents were distinguishable in the area, but nothing seemed suspicious, and no one had come too close to the safe house for a while. He smelled the slight odor of Were, but it was faint—likely more than a week old—and the scent was not from a full-blooded Were. Still, he would track it later to make sure there was no threat.

His assessment of the smells around him done, Eric settled his nose onto the smell that most captivated him: Sookie. He’d had a difficult time falling into his day-rest that morning and had even suffered from the bleeds because he’d been unable to sleep. That had never happened to him before. He’d had to force himself to stay awake throughout the day before, but he’d never had trouble dying for the day when he wanted to.

And, as far as he knew, no vampire had ever had insomnia.

Until that morning.

Only Sookie’s coming to the car had eased the tension that had been building up in his body.

He’d thought about speaking to her on the Bluetooth once she was there, but when she’d started speaking—talking to him as if he were awake in the casual and confessional way they’d become accustomed to—he’d listened in silence and had taken solace in her voice. His only action had been to raise the palm of his hand to the top of his container, imagining her hand in his.

Like her, he had been happy to feel their connection—with her not knowing that he was feeling it.

Sookie had confessed many things to the “sleeping” him. She’d confessed her desire to touch him and had spoken of her intentions to touch him when he slept. He had almost laughed aloud when she’d qualified that she wouldn’t touch him in a “dirty” way. He’d imagined her blush as she’d said that.

She’d next spoken of how she had hoped that the love she’d felt for him was real, but then she’d acknowledged that it wasn’t—and never would be. Eric wondered if she was correct in her supposition that they would fall more and more in love with each other every day—even as they continued to recognize that those feelings were constructed by the Fae bond. Certainly, she was trapped just as much as he was—trapped inside of a “fairy tale,” as it were.

In the end, he’d felt her resolution in her blood, and he’d heard it in her voice too. She’d resolved to
follow her Gran’s teachings and live in the present. And she’d said that she was grateful he’d not disappeared—presumably once he’d learned about the Fae bond. She’d confessed that she would let herself feel her love for him when he was dead for the day. Finally, she’d said that he deserved her love because she found him beautiful—both inside and outside—and she’d endeavored to make her love for him as real as possible.

Eric had felt a mixture of sadness and contentment coming from Sookie as she’d spoken. He knew that the contentment was because of their proximity to each other, for he had felt it acutely as well. But then her feelings had turned to guilt as she’d spoke of being responsible for her own parents being killed. Resolution had overcome her guilt, however, as she had settled into her sleep. And it was only when he’d heard her even breaths that he had been able to sleep as well.

Eric couldn’t help but to compare the many ways that Sookie and he were alike. Both of them blamed themselves for their parents’ deaths—even though they were both rational enough to know that they couldn’t have done anything to stop those deaths. However, he and Sookie were, first and foremost, creatures of the heart—instead of the head—even if he’d always tried to deny that fact as a vampire. Some of her impetuous actions had reminded him of his own human days—when he’d been prone to run into battle without thinking things through fully. Yes—in his younger days—he’d survived on luck, audacity, and sheer willpower. The same could be said for Sookie Stackhouse.

They were alike in another way too. Neither of them had any reason at all to trust in love. However, as Eric had listened to Sookie speaking in the car, he’d come to understand something very important: he could trust in a bond. And hadn’t all of his own “loves”—as both human and vampire—been fueled by bonds? He’d loved his parents because of familial bonds. He’d not chosen them, but he’d loved them nonetheless. Then he’d loved Godric for a thousand years; he’d certainly not felt this emotion for him when he’d appeared at his funeral pyre in the dark. But the bond between maker and child had supplied devotion and love, which Eric had felt as soon as he’d awoken to his vampire life. And those emotions had only grown from there. Pam certainly hadn’t loved Eric when he’d sucked the lifeblood out of her, but she’d awoken loving him, and he’d loved her back because of their bond.

In all his days, he’d never questioned whether his love for Godric or Pam was real because it had been formed through vampire magic. He recognized that he questioned the love from the Fae bond because it had been wrought from Fae magic. He closed his eyes tighter, recognizing his own hypocrisy. However, even as he did, he still felt the need to resist the effects of the Fae bond—at least until he fully understood it.

He couldn’t help but to wonder if that resistance would be ultimately futile.

Eric tried to go into downtime to await the last ten minutes before sundown, but he felt pensive and knew it was because he was farther away from Sookie than he was comfortable with. He shook his head and ran through his list of things to do. He needed to watch the video feed from Brady. After that, he would need to discuss with Sookie how she had done in avoiding the cameras at the places where she’d stopped. Next, they would need to make a list of any items they needed. Eric had learned long ago that the best way to get what he needed and to avoid detection was to glamour a human to do the getting for him. He intended to do just that in order to secure more gasoline and any other needed items.

After that, he was determined to go on with one of the things Sookie and he had planned: working on her telepathy. The Slidell house had been quite far from their nearest neighbors, as well as at the end of a cul-de-sac, so she’d been able to relax as she’d healed, but she would need to build up her gift. He also needed to tell her about the planned visit from Claudine in one week’s time, as well as
to go over the next day’s route with her. Finally, he wanted to speak to Sookie about forming a vampire bond. Octavia’s words from the night before gave him hope that a vampire bond might help to shift the power away from the Fae bond a bit.

Eric had just finished making his plans for the night when he felt the sun go fully down. He exited the car without making a sound and made his way quickly into the house until he was in the same room as Sookie—his bonded. Had he needed to breath, he would have exhaled in relief at being close to her again.

She had sat up straight as if she’d heard him—though he knew that was impossible, despite the fact that she’d recently had his blood.

“Eric,” she said in barely a whisper, the relief clear in her tone.

“Good evening,” he returned. “Were there any problems as you traveled today?”

She turned around from her place on the couch and shook her head. “No, the trip was fine.”

He nodded.

“You hungry?” she asked. “I mean—I was gonna fix my dinner, and I could warm you a TrueBlood?”

“That would be nice,” he responded. “I will just do a quick scout of the area while you prepare things.”

She nodded and got up, moving toward the kitchen. She grabbed a Tupperware container of leftovers she’d brought from Slidell and quickly warmed up her meal. Next she warmed a TrueBlood. She set her own plate at the breakfast bar and then took Eric’s blood out of the microwave before putting the lid back on it and shaking it so that the heat would be evenly distributed. However, she wasn’t sure where to set down the bottle, for she didn’t know if he’d want to eat with her.

He stepped into the kitchen from the garage and helped her with her dilemma.

“I will eat with you if you find that acceptable,” he said a little awkwardly.

“Sure,” she responded quickly.

He could feel her happiness in their tie, but she immediately worked to stifle it.

He lifted his laptop case a little. “Do you mind if I do a bit of work as we have our meal?”

She shook her head, grateful that he’d be close to her, but glad that he wouldn’t feel obligated to speak with her now. Imagining him interacting with her only out of pity was too much for her to bear.

Eric flipped open his laptop and plugged in a devise that would give him untraceable Internet access. He was once more thankful for Brady’s ingenuity. Quickly, he opened one of his encrypted email accounts and was glad to see an email from Rasul, who’d been his spy in the queen’s court for decades.

Eric had contacted Rasul the night after the severing spell as Sookie had slept in his arms. Rasul had promised to help by continuing to be a source of information for Eric, but the Viking had cautioned his ally. Russell would be immediately suspicious if Rasul went looking for information.
The queen had been easy to spy upon, but Russell was different.

However, Eric needed to begin looking for patterns in Russell’s movements and behavior, and he hoped that Rasul could help with that. The Viking quickly read through the email. It seemed as if he and Sookie had left Slidell at a good time. Victor Madden, as well as the witch named Hallow, had been brought into the equation by Russell, and they were currently concentrating their efforts in the New Orleans area.

“What is it?” Sookie asked.

“What do you mean?” he responded.

“Uh,” she started, “it’s just that your shoulders got a little tense. Did you get bad news?”

“Rasul,” he said, motioning toward the screen. He’d told Sookie all about his vampire associate during one of their long nights together. “He has reported that Victor Madden is helping Russell in the search for us.”

“Who’s that?”

“Felipe de Castro’s lieutenant,” Eric responded. “Victor is an asshole, but he’s also a very good tracker. However, I am not as concerned with him as I am the witch.”

“Witch?”

“Yes,” Eric nodded, taking out his disposable cell phone. “Hallow. She is a Were-witch and is quite powerful. She tried to poach in Area 1 a few years back, but she lost interest after Katrina hurt her chances for profit there. I believe she turned her attention to Florida after that. But she has had a long association with Russell. He pays her well to use her gifts on occasion and then pays her even better to stay out of Mississippi for the rest of the time. He is also one of the few vampires she likely fears. She certainly didn’t fear Sophie-Anne.”

“Shit,” Sookie said.

Eric smiled and leaned in to kiss Sookie’s forehead before he realized what he was doing. He pulled back from the affectionate gesture immediately.

“Sorry,” she said awkwardly.

“For?” he asked.

“The bond. Making you do things like that.”

“As I said last night, Sookie, you are not to blame for that,” he said, his eyes blazing with sincerity. Sookie just didn’t know if his look was coming from his heart or the bond.

He could feel her uncertainty—as well as his own—but didn’t comment on it. “I should call Octavia,” he said instead. “According to Rasul, the witch is using a remnant of magic found near Pam’s residence to try to track down the source of the magic I’ve been using.”

“Oh God!” Sookie said in horror. “Octavia’s not in trouble is she?”

Eric shrugged. “I don’t think so, but it would be best to warn her of the possibility since Victor and Hallow are in the New Orleans area. I will put the call on speaker so that you can hear.”

Sookie looked at him in surprise.
“Sookie, you and I are partners in this,” he paused, “and in all things.”

He felt equal parts happiness and hesitation from her as he connected the call.

“Octavia,” he said when the witch answered.

“I did not expect to hear from you dis soon,” she said by way of a greeting.

“I am calling to give you information. Russell has called in Hallow, and a trace of magic was found at Pam’s home.”

Octavia cackled. “Excellent!”

“What?” Sookie couldn’t help but ask. “How is that a good thing?”

As Octavia spoke, her amusement was clear in her tone. “I placed a spell around dee pouch dat contained dee concealment potion I knew was meant for your child.”

“Why?” Eric asked.

“So dat she would have to drop it—of course,” Octavia said as if the answer were obvious.

Realization could be seen on both Sookie’s and Eric’s faces at the same time.

“A red herring,” Eric stated.

“Indeed,” Octavia cackled. “Dat pouch will lead Hallow to a witch named Dilmeanna Rose.”

“Never heard of her,” Eric said.

“’Tis because she’s been dead since before you came to Louisiana,” Octavia laughed. “Dilmeanna was quite powerful and was one of my mentor’s mentors—though no one will be able to trace her to me. Her being in dee equation will keep Hallow scratching her head—and her ass—for quite a while,” the witch added with another gleeful chortle.

“But—what if the connection is found?” Sookie asked, biting her lip worriedly.

Octavia scoffed a little. “Don’t worry ’bout me, child. Even if Hallow could match my magical ability—which she cannot—she certainly doesn’t have dee intellectual capability required to track dee pouch to me. No—she will run around in circles for a while chasing her own tail.” Her tone turned a little darker. “And—if she does happen to get lucky when she stops spinning—I will finally have dee excuse I need to send her boney ass into oblivion.”

Eric smirked. “It sounds like you have no love lost for Hallow.”

“She is a blight on witches,” Octavia scorned, but then her tone softened. “And don’t worry about dee home in Slidell being compromised either. I have already removed all traces of you, Sookie, Amelia, Niall, myself, and my magic from dee dwelling.”

“Good,” Eric said.

“Be careful, Octavia,” Sookie said.

“Ah—child,” the witch responded, “do not worry ’bout me. Hallow is strong, but she has no idea what I could do to her. I would have taken her out years ago—when she was in New Orleans—if I held any affection for Sophie-Anne.”
“Be cautious of Russell,” Eric said.

“Dat I will do,” Octavia said as she disconnected the call.

Sookie took a deep breath. “Did Rasul say anything else?”

“The king believes I killed you—rather than let you get close to me—and Bill has joined with Russell and is very anxious for my demise as well.”

“Is that what you would have done if it weren’t for the Fae bond?” Sookie asked, her voice shaking. “Kill me?”
“The king believes I killed you—rather than let you get close to me—and Bill has joined with Russell and is very anxious for my demise as well.”

“Is that what you would have done if it weren’t for the Fae bond?” Sookie asked, her voice shaking. “Kill me?”

“No,” Eric answered honestly and quickly. “No,” he reiterated. “Perhaps I should have, but . . . .” He stopped midsentence.

“But?” Sookie asked.

“Russell is correct that it is dangerous for a vampire to let anyone close to him or her—to let anyone know of his or her vulnerabilities.”

“And you’ve let me in,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he said, his look unreadable. “No human has ever known as much about me as you do. And no vampire either—not even Godric.”

Sookie blinked as she tried to soak in that information. “Not even Godric?”

Eric’s eyes lightened a little. “Godric was many things to me, but first and foremost, he was my maker. As such, he was always in ultimate control of me, so our relationship could have never been balanced. Plus . . . .” He stopped for a moment.

“Plus?”

“Godric held much back from me,” Eric said. “It is the vampire way.”

“You and I held nothing back from each other,” Sookie stated as she thought about their time together in Slidell.

“No,” he agreed, “we didn’t hold anything back.”

“Do you regret it?” she asked, worrying her bottom lip a little.

“I should,” he said. “The harsh truth is that I should have killed you when I first felt myself wanting to share myself with you.”

She sighed. “Because of the Fae bond.”

He shook his head. “Not just because of the bond, Sookie.”

She looked at him with a little confusion.

“The night Bill brought you into Fangtasia after the Maenad had almost killed you—that was when I knew that I could never bring harm to you.”
“But you barely knew me then,” Sookie whispered.

He shrugged. “Once Dr. Ludwig said that you would be well, I realized just how much I would have missed you in this world if you’d not recovered,” he answered candidly. “And that was before the blood tie or the Fae bond.”

She smiled a little. “Thank you for telling me that. And thanks for . . . .” She paused for a moment, chewing on her lower lip again.

“For what?”

She chuckled. “For not killin’ me even though I discombobulated you.”

He chuckled heartily. “That you did do. And thanks to you too.”

“For what?”

“Did I not discombobulate you as well?” he asked with a lifted eyebrow and mischief in his eyes.

She snorted out a giggle. “Yep.”

“Well—then thanks for not staking me,” he intoned.

She bit back her smile. “You’re welcome.” She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “That was from me to you. The bond had nothing to do with it.”

He leered playfully at her. “Can I kiss you back, Sookie?”

“If it’s from you,” she said as she jutted out her chin a little.

“It is.”

“Then yes,” she whispered.

He leaned in and gave her a lingering kiss on her cheek to match the one she’d given him.

“Thank you,” she said with a little sigh.

He nodded as he leaned back.

“So—uh—anything else from Rasul?” she asked, trying to change the subject before she launched herself into a full-blown kiss with him. She didn’t think either of them were ready for that.

“Just that he’s made contact with Chow, whom Russell has planning a Fangtasia-like bar in Jackson,” Eric reported.

Sookie smirked. “As if there could ever be a Fangtasia without you on a throne,” she intoned.

Eric chuckled. “Indeed. Chow on a throne won’t have the same effect.”

She giggled, but then sobered a bit. “And you know you can trust them? Chow and Rasul?”

Eric nodded. “I know I can trust Rasul, and Chow seems content to give information to Rasul without asking any questions. And it doesn’t hurt that Chow owes me his life—several times over. He won’t risk his own skin, but—if he can safely do it—he will help.”

Sookie nodded. She still didn’t understand a lot about vampire politics, but she was coming to
understand that Eric inspired a lot of loyalty from those around him.

Eric sighed. “Unfortunately, Rasul has spent only one night in Mississippi since Sophie-Anne and Russell were married. Sophie-Anne was always sheriff of Area 1 in name, but Rasul ran everything. Russell has kept him in that role. According to Rasul, the king is now traveling to New Orleans with Bill in order to meet up with Victor and Hallow, so—hopefully—Rasul will be able to get a better sense of the security forces traveling with Russell.

Sookie shivered. “It’s frightening to know that Victor and Hallow were that close to us,” she whispered. “And Bill and Russell were only a night behind.”

“It just confirms the efficacy of the severing spell and the power of Octavia’s other spells,” Eric comforted.

Sookie scoffed a little. “Well—I don’t think Bill’s bein’ with Russell will help him out much anymore.”

“Why’s that?” Eric asked with some amusement.

“Cause crazy doesn’t help crazy to be less crazy,” Sookie drawled.

Eric chuckled at Sookie’s choice of words as she went to rinse her now empty dish.

“Where did you stop today?” Eric asked as she turned off the water.

“Uh—the gas station in Crowley and the little café outside of Beaumont.” Remembering that, Sookie got a piece of pecan pie before warming up another TrueBlood for Eric. Once she was back in her seat, she took a bite of her dessert and moaned in appreciation.

“Good?” Eric asked with a smirk as he took a drink of his blood—which tasted like cardboard to him. At least the foul tasting liquid helped him to ignore the twitching of his cock at the sound she’d made.

She blushed a little. “Yeah. I—uh—hadn’t had pecan pie since Gran died, but I got some at the café. It isn’t as good as hers, but it’s still good.”

Eric nodded and quickly scrolled through the encrypted site that Brady had set up. Estimating the time Sookie would have been in Crowley, he searched through the video feed Brady had gotten from the gas station. It didn’t take him long to find the image of Sookie parking the Prius. He paused the footage and turned the laptop toward her before getting up to stand behind her so that they could both see the screen.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“You at the gas station,” he answered. “I had Brady send me the video feed from it. He was tapped into the systems of all the places where you might have stopped today.”

“A test?”

“Yes,” Eric confirmed. “But a safe one.” Eric reached around Sookie’s shoulder and restarted the feed. She sighed as his hand brushed against hers, but she quickly pulled both her hands into her lap.

“Try to park as much in the middle of the building as you can,” Eric said, pointing to the screen. “The outside cameras tend to be along the corners of the building. If you had parked two places
down, the car wouldn’t have been captured in the image.”

“Okay,” she said as she looked at the screen, which showed eight different camera views. Five of them were feeds of the interior of the store, which she’d not entered. She kept her eyes on the cameras that showed the exterior of the store. She saw herself get out of the car and then move out of the frame of the camera. All that anyone would have been able to see was a brunette wearing an innocuous dark baseball cap.

“Good,” Eric said. “You kept your head down and to the side. “Excellent. Be sure not to wear that sweater when the temperature is warm though. It makes you stand out. If you are cold, wear the gray hoodie. That style is more common.”

Sookie nodded. “Okay.” She didn’t tell Eric that she had worn the sweater only in order to breathe in his scent, which clung to the garment like a second skin.

They continued watching as Sookie came back to the car and quickly got in. She pulled out of the parking space just as Eric had instructed so that the license plate was not picked up.

“Regardless, I will change to a Texas license plate later tonight,” he commented.

Sookie nodded as he changed the feed to show the single camera from inside the little café. It showed a side view of the counter. Again, estimating her time of arrival, he quickly found Sookie on the feed.

Eric smiled, pleased by what he saw when she entered the café.

“You saw the camera?” he asked.

“No,” she responded. “But I guessed where one would be if they had one.”

“You have good instincts,” he commented as he studied the way that Sookie had kept the camera from getting a good image of her, even as she interacted with the cashier in a friendly manner.

“Thanks,” Sookie smiled proudly as she watched her image. “You’re right about the sweater. Everyone else is in a T-shirt.”

“It is a little thing, Sookie. Do not concern yourself with it.”

He sat back down next to her and closed his laptop. “Tomorrow, we will be beyond Brady’s scouting, so you will have to find your own places to stop.”

“Okay,” she said a little nervously.

Stifling his desire to kiss her forehead to comfort her, Eric gave Sookie a little smile. “Do not worry. You did well, and you will do even better tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

“Now,” he said as he packed up the laptop, “tell me of the humans you can hear. Start with the house next door to our right.” He pointed in the direction he wanted her to listen in first. “And try to target just in that direction—if you can.”

Sookie nodded and then stretched out her telepathy. She closed her eyes. “There are two people inside. They are both thinking about a movie they’re watching. The wife is thinking about how handsome one of the actors is, and the husband is thankful that his wife chose a war movie to
watch instead of a chick flick.”

Eric chuckled. “Good. How about the house beyond that?”

She concentrated and tried to expand her range. “Uh—I can’t be sure, but I don’t think there is anyone there.”

“You’re right,” Eric said, causing Sookie’s eyes to pop open.

“How can you know?”

“I have a very acute sense of smell,” he said. “Like flight, it is one of my vampire gifts. None know of it now, except for you. Godric knew, but he is gone.”

“What about Pam?”

“She knows my sense of smell is strong, but she doesn’t know it is beyond what a normal thousand-year-old would have.”

“Thanks,” Sookie said.

“For?”

“Trusting me with that information,” she said.

He couldn’t stop himself from resting his hand on one of her knees. “We will eventually have no secrets from each other, little one. That is inevitable.”

She nodded.

“Can your gift go beyond that house?”

Sookie closed her eyes. “In the third house over, a teenager is babysitting an infant. She’s trying to decide what color to paint her toenails.” She took a deep breath. “I can tell there’s someone in the fourth house over, but his thoughts are fuzzy—not like a Were’s thoughts, but just not quite in my range.”

“Try on the other side of us.”

Sookie nodded, and then continued to tell Eric of the thoughts she heard from the people living all around the safe house.

“Good,” Eric said after she’d pushed the range of her telepathy to its limits. “We will practice each night.” He smiled. “Plus, as a bonus, your telepathy will help me to know whom to glamour to run our errands for us. Go ahead and write down any food items you need for the next few days. I assume the cooler kept things from spoiling?”

“Yeah—those re-freezable blue blocks kept things nice and cold,” she responded. “I have them in the freezer getting them ready for tomorrow.”

“Good,” Eric said again. “I will return in a moment.” The vampire pulled his hand from Sookie’s knee and went to unload the car. He put most of the things in the garage and then brought in his bag. He could have left the other things in the vehicle, but he didn’t want to chance them being lost if something unforeseeable such as a car accident occurred while the human he planned to glamour was getting gasoline. He took his bag directly to the basement where he found his small, light-tight room. He would not be resting there for the day, but he would shower and change there.
When Eric got back to the kitchen, Sookie was doing the few dishes she’d used. “Why do you have things like pots and pans in your safe houses?” she asked as she wiped the counter.

“The more it seems like a human could live here, the better.”

“But don’t the neighbors know there’s no one living here?”

“No,” he smirked. “This home is officially owned by the couple next door, though they have been glamoured to forget that. Their names are Mike and Diane Aldridge.”

“Huh?” she asked. “You don’t own this house?”

He shook his head. “No—though I did pay for it. When I buy a new residence for one of my escape routes, I glamour a human to do it,” he responded. “I have to visit in order to initiate the purchase, and then I must return in order to be invited inside the home. The Aldridges have also been glamoured to tell others around this neighborhood that the person who lives here—a man named Jacob Brown—likes to keep to himself and travels a lot. The lights are on a timing system and turn on and off at various times throughout the month. And Diane is glamoured to clean this home every other month, while Mike oversees the yard. In return, I send them a money order from ‘Jacob Brown’ each year which more than covers their expenses, time, the house’s bills and the property taxes. I have similar arrangements for most of the residences we’ll be using. In fact, all of them—except for the one where we’ll stay in California—were bought before the Great Revelation, so I thought it best to place human items in them.”

Sookie shook her head a little. “It all sounds really complicated and must be time-consuming to pull together.”

Eric smiled. “Sometimes it is. However, Godric taught me the value of having an escape route.” He paused. “When I was a young vampire—probably a hundred or so—an enemy of Godric’s hunted us down. It was then that I came to understand the use of having a well-thought-out plan to follow if need be. Godric and I hid and bided our time until his enemy—who was quite a bit older than Godric—let his guard down. And then we struck. When I separated from my maker, I always made sure to have my own route in place, and I try to update things every five years or so, especially the security of the residences. Pam had another route to follow—as I told you before.”

“Yeah—but she gets to stay with Elvis,” she pouted a little.

“Bubba,” Eric corrected.

Sookie nodded as she recalled what Eric had told her about Elvis’s transformation. “Well,” she said, “at least, all of your places have coffee makers.”

Eric chuckled. “Indeed—that is one of the things that humans always seem to have in their homes; however, as I said, our last destination will require that we get furniture and supplies. In fact, I thought that you might enjoy furnishing it.”

“How about me?” she asked with surprise.

“Yes. You can order most things online so that they arrive the evening after we arrive. I will glamour the deliverymen so that they do not remember us. You can get anything you want. I will draw you a layout of the house so that you can begin shopping as we get closer.”

She smiled a little. “That actually sounds fun.”

“Good,” he remarked, picking up the short list she’d made for the grocery store. “Check on the
person across the street again for me?” he requested.

She stretched out her telepathy. “He’s still alone and watching the baseball ballgame.”

Eric quickly opened the door to the garage. “Come,” he said, reaching out his hand. Sookie, who had just dried her hands, took his. He led them out of the house through the garage and inhaled deeply to make sure no one was around before picking her up into his arms and flying them swiftly across the street.

She gasped and her fear rose as they were in the air.

“I have you, little one,” Eric assured before landing and setting her softly onto her feet. “You know what to do?” he asked in a whisper.

She nodded, steeled her resolve, and went up to the front door. She rang the doorbell and stepped back. About thirty seconds later, a man opened the door.

“Can I help ya?” he asked.

Within the next instant, Eric had zipped in front of Sookie, and had captured the man’s eyes.

“Invite us in,” Eric said.

“Would y’all please come in?” the man said in a deep Texas accent.

Eric and Sookie quickly went inside. The vampire immediately began to speak. “Are you expecting anyone to come here during the next two hours?”

“No,” the man answered, with the glazed-over expression that Sookie associated with glamour. “My wife works the night shift at the hospital. She won’t be home till 4:00 a.m.”

“Good. You will take these keys,” Eric said, handing the man a spare set of keys for the Prius, “and walk across the street. There is a car in the garage, and you will drive the car to the nearest gas station to fill it up. After that, you will go to a nearby grocery store and get these items.” He handed over Sookie’s short grocery list. “If you see someone you know and they ask you about the vehicle, you will say that your own car is in the shop, and you are borrowing a friend’s car. You will not recall us and will believe that this errand is for you and your wife.”

The man nodded again as Eric handed him enough cash to cover the purchases.

“After your errands, you will return the car to the garage across the street, leave the keys and items you purchased inside of it, and return here. You will not remember that you had visitors or that you left your house tonight.”

The man nodded mindlessly and then walked out of the front door. Eric waited until the man had pulled the car out of the garage before he grabbed Sookie’s hand again. He made sure that the front door of the man’s house was unlocked before quickly flying Sookie back across the street and into the safe house. He quickly closed the garage door. He would open it again when he heard the car approaching.

Sookie breathed out a big sigh of relief.

Eric squeezed her hand before dropping it.

“Is that how you always do stuff like that?” she asked with a little awe in her voice.
“Only when I don’t want to be seen—though it is easier with you along,” he chuckled.

“How so?” she asked.

“As I indicated before, with your telepathy, you can help me to make sure that I choose the best human for the job. And your presence at the door at night is much less threatening than my own.” He winked at her.

She giggled. “Well—it is good to be of use.”

“You are,” he said smiling sincerely. “You know—if I had to be stuck in a Fae bond, I am glad it is with you,” he said, remembering her words from that morning when she’d thought that he was dead for the day.

She felt her lips rise into a little smile. “I’m glad it’s you too, Eric.”

“I saw that you were reading the book Niall left you,” he said breaking them out of the tender moment. “Did you learn anything?”

She sighed. “Not much yet, but I read for only a little while. It was talking about how the light I can shoot from my hands is connected to my spark, which seems to be connected to my emotions. I guess that’s why I’ve been able to use it only when I’ve been scared or mad. But the book also said that I could learn how to control the light without my emotions.”

Eric nodded. “Good. You should read as much of it as you can during the next week, and we will soon be in secluded places where you can practice your gift too.”

“Is there something happening in a week?” she asked.

“Yes,” Eric nodded. “Your great-grandfather will likely not be back in this realm for a while, and I get the impression that he has cut off all ties with you since you are,” he paused, “bonded to a vampire.”

Sookie’s face fell. “I guess I already knew that—or guessed it.”

“I’m sorry. I know you treasure your family,” Eric said softly.

“Niall’s not my family,” Sookie said quickly. “Jason is. Tara and Lafayette are. And you.”

The vampire smiled a little and nodded in acknowledgment of her words. “Your cousin, Claudine will also be leaving this realm—as Niall no longer feels she can protect you with me around.” He scoffed, “Niall seems to forget the fact that I cannot protect you during the day and that your cousin could help you then.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” she said sadly.

Eric wanted to take her hand again, but refrained. “After meeting your great-grandfather, I’m not either. But you will meet your cousin Claudine for one day next week.”

Sookie’s eyebrows raised in question.

“I negotiated an agreement with Niall. Claudine will be meeting you during the day in six days’ time. She will come at sunrise and stay until sunset. During that day, you can train with her and ask any questions that you have about your fairy family. She may be instructed not to answer some things, however.”
“So I’ll get to meet Claudine?” Sookie asked with a mixture of surprise and hope in her voice.

“Yes,” Eric responded. “I suggest that you learn what you can from the book Niall gave you so that your time with her will be better spent. I will make sure that we are in a secluded place for your meeting. It will add a bit of time to our trip to California, but I think it will be worthwhile.”

Sookie smiled at the prospect of meeting another member of her family. “I just hope she’s not like Niall.”

“Me too,” Eric smiled.

“Thanks,” Sookie said sincerely, reaching out unconsciously to take his hand.

Eric smiled and brought her hand to his lips. “It will be good for both of us if you learn to master your light.”

She nodded in agreement.

“On another topic, there are also some things concerning Hunter that I have arranged.”

She tensed a little.

“I believe you will approve,” he said comfortingly, squeezing her hand. “The night you were taken, I arranged with Mr. Cataliades to find the boy. And Niall agreed last night to pass along Hunter’s last known address to Cataliades.”

“Okay,” Sookie said. “What about after he’s found? I mean—I assume we can’t make direct contact with him.”

“No,” Eric said regretfully, “at least not until the Russell problem has been solved, but I have made arrangements regarding him nonetheless.”

“What arrangements?” she asked.

“Just a moment,” Eric said as he quickly zipped from the kitchen to the garage, opening the garage door. The vampire stayed in the shadows as the man from across the street drove the car into the garage and parked. The man quickly exited the vehicle and then walked out of the garage and across the street. Once he was inside his own home, Eric lowered the garage door.”

The vampire took the two bags of groceries out of the car as well as the extra keys out of the ignition before going into the kitchen where Sookie was waiting.

“Can you read his thoughts?” Eric requested.

“I already did,” Sookie responded. “He’s returned to watching the game on television, and nothing seems out of the ordinary to him. He thinks that he must have dosed off for a while.”

Eric nodded and placed the groceries on the counter. “I will do a quick scan of the area while you put these away, and then we can talk more about Hunter. Shall we meet in the living room in ten minutes?”

Sookie nodded and then put away the perishable groceries while Eric went out into the backyard. He flew in a carefully constructed pattern around the neighborhood in order to make sure that there was nothing amiss. On his earlier sweep, he’d already determined that the faint Were scent he’d picked up on was nothing to be concerned about. Then he returned to the garage to quickly change
the license plate on the Prius.

Meanwhile, after putting away the groceries, Sookie decided to get comfortable by changing into her nightgown. She paused momentarily before doing this, but Eric had seen her in her sleeping garment so many times that it didn’t make a difference. She grabbed the quilt she’d brought from Slidell since there were no throw blankets in the living room and the house was cool due to the air conditioning she’d turned on when they arrived.

When she got to the living room, Eric was already sitting on one end of the couch.

“You brought the quilt from Slidell,” he observed.

“Yeah—uh—Gran always said you should have a blanket in the car,” she stammered.

Eric nodded and gestured toward the other end of the long couch.

She got herself comfortable.

“So—concerning Hunter,” he began again. “After finding him, Mr. Cataliades will have someone make an assessment of the father. If he is found to be of adequate nature to care for a telepath, he will be approached by an acquaintance of Mr. Cataliades who teaches demon children who are telepaths. The teacher, Finola, is half demon and will stay with or near Hunter until he is trained adequately.”

“What about if Hunter's dad isn’t . . . .” She stopped midsentence. “What if his dad is like my mom was?”

“If that is the case, Mr. Cataliades will arrange for guardians for the boy—Weres or demons since he’d have a harder time reading their thoughts. Finola will still train him. There is also to be a trust set up for Hunter. He will be taken care of financially—no matter what happens to us—and Cataliades will do what he can to make sure Hunter’s telepathy remains a secret.”

Sookie looked at Eric with wonder. “You did all this? When?”

“The night you disappeared,” he answered quietly.

“Before you learned of the Fae bond,” she said with a bit of resignation in her tone.

“Yes.”

“If you want to take it away, I’ll understand,” she said evenly. “It sounds like all this will cost a lot of money, and I don’t know how I could ever repay you.”

“I have more money than even Pam could spend,” Eric answered evenly. “Plus—we are together now, and your concerns are my concerns.”

She inhaled deeply. “I don’t know how to thank you—not just for this with Hunter, but for the way you haven’t blamed me for what’s happened.”

“You will never have to thank me for anything,” he said, his eyes boring into her.

Sookie caught her breath. It seemed as if he were looking right into her soul.

“We have one more thing to discuss, and then you should get some sleep,” he continued quietly.
“Tomorrow, we will leave here around dawn. I will wake you an hour before we go so that you can eat your morning meal and so that we can discuss tomorrow’s route before I get into the enclosure in the car.”

She nodded and they were silent for a few minutes.

“Okay. What else do you want to discuss?” Sookie finally asked.

“Forming a vampire bond,” he responded.
Chapter 10: Magnitude

“We are each other’s magnitude and bond.”—Gwendolyn Brooks

Sookie exhaled loudly.

“It will be your decision—whether or not we form one,” Eric said. “But I want you to begin considering it.”

“Will you tell me about it? What it will do?”

He nodded. “Yes. A vampire bond is rare—probably just as rare as a Fae bond.”

“Why?”

“It creates equal footing between a bonded pair. Plus, long separations are impossible between a bonded pair.”

“And vampires like control—and independence,” Sookie observed.

“Yes.”

Sookie took a deep breath. “How is a bond different than a tie?”

“Well—as you know, a tie occurs when a vampire gives a human blood. In essence the vampire’s blood ties itself to the human’s blood. That tie will eventually die if it is not renewed. Ties are made for a variety of reasons.” Eric paused for a moment. “Would you like to hear them?”

Sookie nodded.

“Okay,” Eric explained, “generally, a vampire will tie with a human in order to control the human to a certain extent. The more blood, the deeper the influence. The older the vampire, the deeper the influence.”

Sookie shifted a little, stretching out her legs until they were nearer the center of the couch.

Eric went on. “There are really two schools of thought among vampires—as far as controlling humans goes. There are those that use glamour almost exclusively and those that rely on ties. Godric was of the former school of thought. However, ties are thought to be better by many—stronger than just glamour alone—but a vampire gives something of himself when he gives his blood. Most vampires use glamour or a tie to control at least one human in their lives. These are called ‘day-men’ or ‘day-women.’ As I told you, I have—or had—a day-man named Bobby Burnham, and I have had other day-men before, such as Brady’s grandfather. Until Lafayette, I have always used glamour with humans I needed to control in some way.”

“Can you glamour Weres?”

“Not as easily as humans, but—yes—I have developed that skill over time. I have used glamour
with Werewolves in order to make sure they cannot speak of my businesses or my resting places if they know of them.”

“What about Brady?”

Eric smirked. “You are clever to think of him, Sookie. Yes—Brady has been glamoured to keep my secrets too—and to give me a call if he ever decides to betray me.”

“A call?” Sookie asked.

Eric nodded. “It is a failsafe I have used with all my day-people too. It is impossible to anticipate all situations that might make one person betray another. So glamour can’t be used as a deterrent for all potentialities.”

“But—if someone ever did decide to betray you, you’d be the first to know,” Sookie observed.

“Indeed.”

“Can vampires glamour other types of beings—other than humans and Werewolves?”

Eric shook his head. “No. We cannot glamour other vampires or fairies, which is likely why you are immune. Also, we cannot glamour demons, and I couldn’t glamour Octavia even though she is only part Dae. In addition to not being susceptible to glamour, demons are also able to conceal their secrets with other forms of magic. That is why they make such good lawyers,” he said with a chuckle.

“Wait. Octavia is part demon?” Sookie asked, stretching her legs out a little more.

“I thought I’d told you that she was,” Eric said.

Sookie shook her head. “No—you said that Desmond Cataliades was her godfather, but I didn’t know she was part demon.”

“Sorry,” Eric said, unconsciously reaching out and taking her foot to begin rubbing it. “I didn’t mean to keep it from you.”

“I know,” Sookie said. “Funny. I could ‘hear’ Octavia with my telepathy,” she mused, “though she was a bit harder to read than others. I had speculated that was because she was a witch.”

“Maybe it was,” Eric shrugged. “Since she is both witch and part-Dae, she is formidable. Octavia—because of her practice in human magic as well as her inherent Dae magic—is able to cover her demon scent. Thus, she has the ability to pretend like she’s only a human.” His eyes filled with humor. “She can also pretend as if she’s been glamoured. I’ve seen it firsthand.”

Sookie grinned. “Lemme guess. She tricked you with her performance.”

Eric chuckled. “Yes—the first time I met her.” He shook his head. “In fact, she had me believing that she could be glamoured for quite some time. And it was decades before I knew about her demon lineage.”

Sookie giggled. “You’ll have to tell me more about her sometime.”

Eric smirked. “Maybe. Anyway, though hardly anyone knows of Octavia’s Dae blood, many supernaturals know that her husband is part demon. And trust me when I say that no vampire wants to fuck with demons. They are known to hold grudges for generations.”
“I’ll remember that,” Sookie smiled. “So are you saying that vampires will ‘think’ they have glamoured Octavia, even when they haven’t? Or are you saying that they will just leave her alone because of who her husband is.”

“A little of both,” Eric answered, smiling at Sookie’s astuteness. “That is another reason why Octavia’s not really worried about Hallow. If Hallow does track her down somehow, she will hold back because of Octavia’s connections. The most Hallow could do would be to tell Victor or Russell that Octavia was involved. Thinking she was a human witch married to a demon, Russell would likely contact the demon and ask for his permission to glamour Octavia so that he could question her about me.”

“And not having anything to hide, she would agree without hesitation,” Sookie intoned.

“Of course,” Eric said with a wry smile.

Neither she nor Eric had taken note that they’d inched a little closer to each other and that he was still lightly stroking her foot through the quilt.

Sookie thought for a minute. “Why else do vampires make ties?”

Eric sighed. “As I suggested, it is most often to maintain control over the emotions of humans—especially day-people. But sometimes they create ties to keep pets in line as well.”

“Pets?” Sookie asked.

“Yes. A pet is a human that the vampire claims as his or her own. Other vampires cannot use the pet without the permission of the pet’s master or mistress. Pets are kept for blood and sex—and for vampires to demonstrate their power upon,” he added with disdain. “The practice of making pets has been around for as long as vampires have been. Pets used to be called sanguinem iumenta.”

“What does that mean?”

“Blood livestock.”

“Was Bill marking me as his ‘blood animal’ when he said I was ‘his’ at Fangtasia?” Sookie asked, disgust tinging her tone.

“Yes,” Eric answered. “As his superior in rank, I could have taken you from him, but I intuited that that action would not have helped my cause to win you,” he smirked.

“It wouldn’t have,” she chuckled. “So—a tie helps a vampire track a human, allows the vampire to feel the human’s emotions, lets the vampire control those emotions to a certain extent, enables the vampire to send dreams of various kinds to the human, and causes the human to be more attracted to the vampire. Does that about sum things up?”

“Yes,” Eric smiled. “That is a good summation.”

“And bonds?”

“Well—as I have said, they require three mutual blood exchanges.”

“You and I had our first exchange already—right?” she questioned. “After Niall brought me back from the fairy world?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Making an exchange was what Niall and Octavia counseled for me to do in
order to wake you up. I now know that they also suggested it because it somehow healed the Fae bond, which had been,” he paused, “traumatized by our sudden separation.”

She let out a shaky breath. “And—later that night—I had your blood again?”

“Yes. But since that was not a mutual exchange, it just made our tie a little stronger. Thus far, all we have is a tie. It would not be termed a bond until after a third exchange.”

“So with two more exchanges, we would have a vampire bond,” she said.

“Yes,” he confirmed.

“You’ve told me why vampires make ties, and I see how ties could benefit them. But why do vampires create bonds?”

Eric sighed. “A vampire makes a bond for only one of two reasons: affection or obsession.”

“Obsession?”

“Yes.”

“So I’m lucky Bill didn’t force one on me?” Sookie asked with a little shiver.

Eric nodded in affirmation. “Yes. Ironically, you were fortunate that Sophie-Anne was Bill’s master and had ordered that you be procured for her. Left to his own devices, Bill would have likely forced or manufactured enough blood exchanges to bond with you.”

Sookie took a long, shaky breath. “And bonds for affection?” she asked.

Eric’s expression relaxed, and for a moment he looked at her with an expression that could only be described as longing. “A bonded human would be a true sharer with his or her vampire; the human would feel the vampire’s emotions as much as the vampire would feel the human’s. If close enough, the human could also track the vampire, which could—potentially—be very dangerous for the vampire. However, the vampire would have the ability to shut down the bond to prevent the tracking. I don’t know if you would have a similar shielding ability. Being part-Fae, you might.”

“Okay,” Sookie said. “What else is different about a bond?”

“We would both be able to control each other’s emotions to a certain extent, but from what I have heard, it is not as we might think—and not nearly as,” he paused, “subtle as a tie.”

“Subtle?”

“Yes. As you know, it is difficult for a human to know when a vampire is affecting a tie, though I think the fairy in you helped you to intuit, to a certain extent, when you were being manipulated by Compton—at least once you knew what you were looking for.

“With a bond, you would definitely know what was coming from me,” Eric continued. “I could send you emotions—like caution or comfort. But you would feel what was coming from me, and you could accept the emotions or reject what I sent. You would have choice. And—you could do the same for me. And we would not be able to lie to one another—at least, not without our deception coming through the bond.”

“So it’s not like the Fae bond or a tie because we would know what our own emotions were?”

“Yes. And we would not have to accept what the other was sending,” he reiterated.
“Well—that actually sounds preferable to what the Fae bond does,” Sookie observed.

Eric nodded. “But there are other things too—things you might not like much.” He sighed. “A vampire bond would make us even more sexually attracted to each other—probably to the point that we’d be in physical pain if we resisted the urge to have intercourse.”

Sookie immediately reddened. “Uh—okay.” She giggled to cut the tension she felt. “Not that I wasn’t already attracted to you.”

He smirked. “And I you.”

“So it would be like the attraction a tie creates—but on crack? Plus, the attraction that’s been between us all along?”

Eric chuckled. “Yes. Everything that a tie can do, a bond does stronger or slightly differently. The main difference between the two is that the vampire shares control with the human, thus accounting for the rarity of bonds—as I indicated before. There are other benefits for the human as well. A bond helps the human to live longer, especially if blood sharing is regular. A human’s senses are sharper, and he or she is stronger. The human is less likely to get sick.”

“What does the vampire get out of a bond?” Sookie asked skeptically. “Vampires always seem to get the upper hand in things like this.”

Eric chuckled. “You are learning. However, in a bond, the vampire doesn’t get an upper hand; I think there is more of a balance achieved. The main attraction is that the vampire gains a human companion for a long while, a companion who is incapable of betraying his or her vampire. Most often, a bond is a precursor to a vampire turning a human with whom he or she wants to maintain an enduring relationship. However, according to Niall, we would not have to consider the option of turning you for a long time because your lifespan will be much longer than that of a full-blooded human.” He paused. “Octavia also believes that if we had a vampire bond, it might counter the power of the Fae bond to a certain extent.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“This,” Eric said, pointing to their hands which had now become entangled without either of them realizing it sometime during their conversation.

He sighed. “I just realized that we were touching a few moments ago. I do not recall initiating the touch. I do not recall returning the touch. But I feel better for having it, and I am loath to break it.”

She looked at their hands, registering for the first time that they were touching. “Oh!” she said with surprise. However, she couldn’t bring herself to break the touch either.

“Octavia thinks that a vampire bond would help us to not be so dependent upon physical contact—because we would feel each other’s emotions. When two fairies bond, they would likely be able to communicate through their telepathy—even if they were out of each other’s sight. And that likely helps them to be assured that their mate is safe and secure. A vampire bond could do something similar for us—only, instead of thoughts, we would feel each other’s emotions.”

“So—if we could feel each other through the vampire bond, we’d be able to be more independent from each other?”

Eric nodded. “Theoretically—though we would still probably feel better when we were in close proximity.”
Sookie contemplated for a moment. “What else are you thinking?” she asked astutely.

“Do you want honesty?”

“Yes.”

“I am thinking that a vampire bond might help us to distinguish our own feelings from those of the Fae bond. I am thinking that a vampire bond would allow me more equal footing in whatever it is that we are making together.”

She sighed. “You’re probably right.”

He squeezed her hand. “But it would take away one of the things you like best about me?”

“What’s that?”

“Mystery,” he smiled. “You would not be able to hear my thoughts, but you would feel what I felt. The silence you crave—and the peace—would be replaced by your knowing my emotions unless I was actively blocking them from you. And I would sense yours even more strongly than I do now. We wouldn’t have the ability to keep secrets from each other, Sookie.”

The telepath exhaled loudly. “Is there anything else?”

“If you were in pain, I would feel it as if it were my own. If I were in pain, you would feel it—though I could shield some of it.”

“And there’s no way to break a vampire bond—right? You said before that even Octavia’s spell wouldn’t have done anything to a bond—if that’s what I’d had with Bill?” she asked.

Eric tensed, and Sookie squeezed his hand.

“A vampire bond is breakable in only one way: death,” Eric reported. “Of what I have heard, the vampire would survive such a breaking; however, the human usually doesn’t.” He sighed. “And even if magic could be found to break it, I have a feeling that it would be extremely dangerous for us to try because of the Fae bond. Once we are closer, the Fae bond will fight to keep us that way.”

Sookie considered for a moment. “What if another vampire tried to give me blood?”

“Your body would expel it to prevent a tie.”

“What about the blood between us? Would we have to keep exchanging?”

Eric sighed again, sounding very human at the moment. “Sookie, I already crave your blood like nothing else. Even as we sit here, I thirst for it, and that feeling is coming from my own instincts as well as from the Fae bond, which wants me to take it so that we will be closer—more connected. TrueBlood and even the human blood I drank last night pale in comparison, but they still nourish me, which is good. If we had a vampire bond, I would have to take your blood on occasion; otherwise, I would be driven mad by my cravings—to the point that I would hurt you. If we formed a vampire bond, we would have to feed from each other at least once a week in order to slow your aging. We could try to refrain from sex, but that would be difficult.”

Sookie was somewhat astounded by the evenness of Eric’s tone as he explained everything to her. However, she could tell from his eyes that there was a storm inside of him—at least until he noticed that she was looking at him with a little trepidation. Then, he reigned in his emotions.
“You should think about all of this for a while,” he said. “When you are ready, we can talk again.”

She nodded. “Okay. I guess I’ll try to sleep now. I should take a shower when I get up in the morning and then reapply the potion—right?”

“Yes. While you sleep, I will do another sweep and then get your route information ready. I’ll leave it on the kitchen counter for you.”

Sookie sighed as Eric broke their shared grasp and got up. She also got up, grabbed the fairy book and her quilt, and went into her bedroom. She used the en-suite bathroom to take care of her human needs and to brush her teeth. Then she went to the bed and wrapped herself into the quilt. It was a comfortable bed—not as big as the one in Slidell—but the mattress was obviously of good quality and new. Still—she knew that it would likely take her a long time before she could sleep.
An hour later, Eric was pacing in the basement. It hadn’t taken him much time to do what he needed to do that night. He decided that he would use his home just beyond Fredericksburg, Texas, for their next stop. It was more of a duplex than a stand-alone home, but it would be good for Sookie to practice her telepathy and shields in such a place. Also, it would take her only four hours to get there. Eric liked to space his homes 4 to 6 hours apart by car. Had he been traveling alone, he would have needed to drive or fly at night, and he didn’t like to be out in the open for too long at any one time.

He sighed heavily and looked at the ceiling. After planning the route and plotting it on the map for Sookie, he had written down the codes for the Fredericksburg residence. Then he’d made another sweep of the surrounding area, hoping that he would hear the even breathing of Sookie’s sleep when he got back.

Sadly, he had not. She was tossing and turning.

Hoping to get good news about Hunter—and to distract himself from the restless woman upstairs—Eric pulled out his phone to check in with Cataliades.

The demon answered on the first ring. “Cataliades here,” he greeted.

“Is there any news on the child?” Eric asked the lawyer, not bothering with a greeting of his own.

“Yes,” Cataliades responded. “Niall contacted me with Hunter’s location. I am sending someone to make contact with the father—a Remy Savoy—tomorrow.”

“Good,” Eric said. “Anything else?”

“No,” Desmond reported. “But I will have to provide him with something soon,” he said somewhat hesitantly. “If I don’t, he may begin to suspect that I am impeding rather than helping in his search for you.”

Eric sighed. “Understood. I will leave behind a trace of myself where I am today, and I will contact you again in two days’ time to give you the location. At that time, you can tell Russell that you have discovered a new property that I own through a human couple—a home where someone matching my description has been spotted.”

“That will be satisfactory,” Cataliades said. “After you tell me the location, I will have Octavia conduct a sweep in order to ensure that Sookie’s scent has not been left behind before I contact Russell.”

“Good,” Eric said, looking again toward the ceiling. “It is best if no others find out Sookie is alive.”

There was a pause in the conversation.

“Just tell me that I will be sending Russell and Victor somewhere they will hate visiting,” Cataliades said with an amused tinge in his voice.
“Oh—it will be,” Eric said with a smirk. “And I think I can arrange for a little surprise for them as well.”

“Good,” Cataliades remarked. “I will speak to you in two nights, Eric,” he added before hanging up.

Eric once more looked at the ceiling as he heard Sookie tossing and turning again.

At least now he had a reason to go up to her. He quickly zipped up the stairs to see that she’d left the door to her room open.

“Sookie?” he asked from the doorway.

She sat up in bed and looked at him, a bit startled by his voice. “Was I bothering you? Sorry. I guess I’m not tired yet.”

“No, you weren’t bothering me,” he conveyed. And she wasn’t—not really. Or, at least, not intentionally. “We just need to talk about something. Cataliades is feeling pressured to give some information to Russell.”

Sookie tensed. “Okay.”

“In two days’ time, Cataliades will tell Russell and Victor of this location, but that means that nothing of you or your scent can be left behind. You haven’t washed your face since you arrived at this house—have you?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Good. I’m afraid your shower will have to wait until our next destination, but it is only a four hour drive.”

“Oh—okay,” Sookie said. “That’s fine. My clothes and things won’t leave a trace—will they?” She paused and then had another thought. “But if Victor and Russell come here, won’t they smell human food?”

“Yes,” Eric said, “but that is where Mike and Diane Aldridge will come in. I will glamour them to move in here for a while.”

“But Victor or Russell might hurt them,” Sookie said with fear in her voice.

“They won’t,” Eric assured. “Victor will glamour them. And I can anticipate what he will ask so that they will tell him what we want him to hear. When Cataliades shows Russell the paperwork for this house, he will see that I used the Aldridges to buy it. Plus, I intend to have a little surprise for Victor and Russell when they come. Russell will likely keep surveillance on the Aldridges, but no harm will come to them.”

“You’re sure?”

Eric nodded. “Neither Victor nor Russell would risk killing humans in Texas, especially since the Aldridges will be forthcoming under glamour, but know very little.”

“What about the light-tight technology here—and the alarm?”

He smirked at her. “You are good at seeing many angles, Sookie. You will soon outpace me, I think. Come,” he said, “get dressed. I need your help.” Eric left the room and waited for Sookie.
Within two minutes, she had joined him, wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and sneakers.

“Good—you look non-threatening,” he smiled. “What are our neighbors doing?”

Having already used her telepathy to figure that out as she was dressing, Sookie had an immediate answer. “Mike is reading a book, but he’s dozing. Diane is playing computer solitaire.”

Eric nodded and reached out for Sookie’s hand. Hers was in his immediately. He led her to the back door and into the backyard. “Wow!” she whispered. “A pool,” she added longingly.

He smiled to himself, knowing that their destination two days from then—a ranch house in Fort Stockton—had a pool. He planned for them to stay there for two days, and though Sookie couldn’t swim much—lest she wash away the potion concealing her scent—she could lay out in her beloved sun.

Eric flew them over the fence and to the Aldridge’s front yard, and after assessing the area, he gave her a nod.

She rang the doorbell.

“Mike!” shouted a female’s voice. “Someone’s at the door.”

“Diane doesn’t answer the door at night,” Sookie whispered nervously as she read the woman’s mind.

Eric nodded and stayed in the shadows.

Mike opened the door a little cautiously. “Hi. What can I do for you, Miss?”

As before, Eric zipped in front of Sookie and caught Mike in his glamour. “Hello, Mike, do you remember me?” Eric asked.

“Yes,” Mike answered in a dazed way as if he were looking for a memory. “Hello. Please come in,” he said.

“Thank you,” Eric responded, taking Sookie’s hand and leading her in as well.

Twenty minutes later, the vampire and the telepath exited the home, and the Aldridges were thoroughly glamoured.

The next day, Mike and Diane were going to be moving into the home next door. They would take their personal items, such as family photos. They would also take their clothing and hygiene items—anything that they normally needed. They would bring their office furniture over for the empty bedroom and would also bring anything else they wanted, such as their television and things from their kitchen.

In short, they would behave as if the home next to theirs was their “real” home.

If asked, they would tell their neighbors that their house had structural damage from a pipe bursting and that, until they could arrange for repairs, Jacob Brown—their often-working next-door neighbor—had offered to let them stay in his home for as long as they needed. They would volunteer no other information about their living arrangements to anyone else they knew.

However, if strangers came around asking questions, the Aldridges were to believe and to speak of a very different story. They were to act as if they lived permanently in the home in which they
were staying. They would claim that their “nephew,” Eric, came to stay with them from time to
time and that when he was there during the day, one of them would always stay home from work in
order to make sure that no one came into the house since their nephew slept during the day because
of his job. Beyond giving a physical description, they would not be able to say anything more
about their nephew. But sketchiness was the goal. Eric wanted for there to be holes in the
Aldridges’ story so that the presence of glamour was very clear.

He also wanted Russell and Victor to believe that he operated similarly with the rest of his safe
houses.

Mike and Diane would claim that their “nephew” had visited them several times during the last
month, from September 10th through the 12th, from September 16th through the 18th, and again
from September 20th to the 23rd. They would say that they didn’t know when he’d be back, but
that he’d asked them to buy some more of his “special drink.” And Eric glamoured the couple to do
just that—to buy several six packs of TrueBlood and place them into the small refrigerator kept in
the basement.

Sookie had watched with amazement as Eric had knitted together the story for the Aldridges to tell.
Of course, one feature of that story had been forgetting completely about the girl their “nephew”
had been with. And, as long as strangers weren’t asking them questions, the Aldridges were to go
on with their lives as normal—the only difference being that they would be living next door to their
own home for a year.

It was only after Sookie and Eric were back in the safe house that Sookie asked some questions.
“Why did you tell them to stay here for a year?”

“I want Russell to think that I may come back here. He will likely have this place watched for
many months, and it would be best for the Aldridges if Russell and Victor thought they might still
be of use to me.”

“Oh. What if a year comes and goes and they move home?”

“By then, Russell probably won’t be watching; however, if he is, that would actually be even
better. The Aldridges will not remember their little masquerade after a year, so Russell will know
that their glamour runs quite deep. He will likely continue to keep an eye on the house, but, after a
year, he won’t give the humans another thought.”

“How are you going to make it seem like you’ve been here more often than you have been?”

Eric smiled and then went to the sink. He grabbed the wet washrag from the counter and refreshed
it with warm water before scrubbing his forehead. “I intend to leave evidence,” he smirked.

His next action was to go to the refrigerator. Since they had a case of bloods in reserve, he got the
six pack of TrueBloods that the man across the street had bought earlier and warmed them up one
by one. He drank a large gulp from each before pouring the rest down the sink.

“Given my age, I would generally need to drink only one of these every other night in order to
maintain my strength, but I want for Russell to think that I see this place as safe—and, therefore,
will likely return here,” Eric said as Sookie watched him with curiosity in her eyes as he began to
rinse out the bottles. “Plus, Russell will assume that I occasionally feed on my hosts and heal their
marks when I’m here. As for these,” he said, motioning toward the now-rinsed bottles, “I will
leave them in the garbage can in the garage.”

“That’s why you told the Aldridges not to take out the garbage in there for a week?” Sookie asked.
Eric nodded. “Yes. After the bottles have been in a hot Texas garage for a few days, Victor won’t be able to tell if they have been there for hours or weeks, but he will pick up my scent on each of them.” He smirked. “I have some more clothing in my room downstairs. I keep a little at each of my safe houses. I will wear some of it so that it carries my scent, and then I will leave it behind.”

“But my scent won’t be left behind?” Sookie asked with trepidation.

Eric shook his head. “No. But to make sure, we will leave half an hour before dawn, and once you are out of this neighborhood, I will check for your scent. Remember that the potion accounts for any of the items that belong to you too; thus, as long as you have the potion on, your scent won’t be left behind—nor will it be transferred from your personal items.”

“What about the quilt?” Sookie asked a little sheepishly.

“The potion likely recognized that as yours as soon as you took it from the Slidell house, but that is one of the reasons why I will double check things.”

“Why can I still—uh—smell your scent on the quilt?” Sookie asked with a blush. “And—uh—I can still smell you too when we’re close.”

“The potion doesn’t eliminate our scents fully,” he explained. “It simply eliminates our ability to leave them behind—on anything.”

Sookie nodded in understanding.

“As a safeguard, Octavia will come here before Victor or Russell. I promise you that they will not be told of this place until I am a hundred percent certain that no trace of you has been left behind.”

Sookie nodded again and sighed with relief.

“There are now only five hours before I must wake you for us to leave,” Eric said quietly. “Tomorrow, you can nap after we have reached our destination, and—hopefully—you will be able to get on a more consistent sleep schedule soon. I have to go downstairs so that my scent there is strong.”

Sookie nodded for a third time and went into her room. She used the bathroom and then sunk into the bed, feeling even less sleepy than she was before—but much more tired. She was already looking forward to getting to Fredericksburg early in the day. She had a plan. Once they were safe in the garage, she’d curl up in the backseat and sleep until an hour before dark. Eric would never even have to know that she was that close to him, and she would be able to sleep soundly with him near. Of that, she was certain.

Meanwhile, Eric was glad for another distraction from the mix of feelings coming from Sookie. He went down to the basement and quickly took his dirty clothing from Slidell from his knapsack. Since the spell was no longer in effect on his body, his personal effects would also leave behind his scent. He put that clothing into the hamper and also took off the clothing he had on. He jumped into the shower and cleaned himself before deciding to leave behind a bottle of his shampoo and the bar of soap he’d been using.

Next, Eric checked the dresser. As was the same at all his safe houses, there were a couple of pairs of jeans, a few T-shirts, a pair of lounge pants, a pair of boots, and several pairs of socks in the drawers. There was also some money. He dressed in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and used a pair of the socks. There was an empty knapsack in the closet, and he got it down and packed the other clothing and money inside of it before putting it back into the closet.
He’d glamoured Mike and Diane not to clean or wash anything in the basement for at least a week, which would give Victor plenty of time to find his “nest.” Satisfied with the little imprint he’d left in the room and bathroom, Eric climbed into the bed in order to make sure the sheets carried his scent.

Unfortunately, once he was settled, he was unable to go into downtime because of the tossing and turning from the main floor. It seemed that Sookie still couldn’t rest either, and Eric could easily guess why.

The vampire stared at the ceiling for another twelve minutes before he heard a single muffled sob. He was up and outside of Sookie’s door almost before he could register moving.

“Sookie,” he said softly as he approached the bed.

She turned over and looked up at him. Even in the darkness, he could see that her eyes were red from lack of sleep and unshed tears. He bent down and scooped her into his arms, making sure to take their quilt with them. Her arms went around his neck automatically.

“We will have to go to the basement,” he said. “I cannot leave too much of my scent in the room. It would be natural for me to come into Mike and Diane’s bedroom to feed as they slept, but my scent shouldn’t be too prominent.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing to be sorry about,” he soothed as he walked them down to the basement at human speed. “I should have brought you in here with me earlier. You need your sleep so that you can drive safely.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“The bed is small—I’m afraid. It is what you would term a twin bed.”

“I noticed that before—in the basement of the Slidell house. Do you always have a small bed in your resting places? I’d think—since you are so tall—that you would have something bigger.”

Eric chuckled as he settled them into the bed. So that they could fit comfortably, he lay her on her side and tucked in behind her. Although he didn’t spoon himself fully against her body, he lay his hand on the place where her waist began to curve upward to her hip.

“Is this comfortable for you?” he asked.

She sighed her answer. “Yes.”

“Good,” he answered. In truth, it was the most comfortable that he’d felt that day as well. “To answer your question,” he said, “I do not need a large bed for my resting places. Up until this moment, I have always been in them alone, and—once I am dead for the day—I am quite literally dead, so comfort is not really a factor.”

“But your legs must stick off the bed,” Sookie chuckled lightly before yawning deeply.

“If I am lying stretched out, they do, but like this, they do not. Remember, I grew up during a time when a bed was a pallet of furs and straw. And I have slept in the ground many a day. This is luxury,” he chuckled.

“Oh,” she said as her body relaxed more into the bed. “Will you talk to me until I fall asleep? Like
you used to do?” Her voice already sounded near sleep, and Eric knew that her fatigue was what was causing her to ask what she had. He’d become accustomed to telling her things about his long life as she’d fallen asleep—bedtime stories, as it were.

He hesitated for a moment, knowing that they had both been compelled by the Fae bond to share so much of themselves, but—with her next to him—he decided not to think about that. He’d let the Fae bond “win” this time.

He began speaking softly, “My mother was about six months pregnant when my father took me on a raid with him for the first time. A group of Danes from across the sea attacked a village that we were allied with at the time, so we joined them in seeking revenge. The Danes had also kidnapped the chieftain’s daughter, as well as some other women, but they had not killed most of the men because they’d been on a hunting trip. Anyway—my father, Ulrick, felt it was time for me to take my first journey with the men. I was fifteen winters old at the time and more than ready. I will never forget how my father fretted over leaving Mother while she was so great with child. Of course, no one let on that we knew why he was so upset, but all the men did.”

Eric paused his speaking as he heard Sookie’s light snore. He sighed; she was finally resting and that thought comforted him more than he was ready to acknowledge. Careful not to disturb her, he moved his body so that they were touching more fully. He inhaled deeply and brushed his lips against the back of her neck before finishing his story.
“There are two kinds of light – the glow that illuminates, and the glare that obscures.”—James Thurber

Exactly sixty minutes before sunrise, Eric got out of bed carefully so that he wouldn’t disturb Sookie. Quickly, he gathered the things he wasn’t leaving behind and took them to the car before he put the ice blocks into the cooler.

“Hey,” came Sookie’s sleepy voice from the entryway to the kitchen.

“Hey,” he repeated as he looked at the contents of the refrigerator with some confusion. “I am not sure what you’re going to need for your breakfast.”

“Just coffee and cereal,” she said. “Oh—and milk for both.”

He nodded and began to pack the cooler with the other foodstuffs.

She chuckled as she started her coffee.

“What?” he asked.

“The thought of you packing anything other than blood into a cooler is—well—it’s funny.”

He smiled back, “I cannot say that I have ever packed a cooler with human food.”

She gazed over his shoulder as if examining his work.

“Hmmm,” she sounded.

“You have a critique?” he smirked.

“Yes,” she responded as she grabbed a bowl and poured in some cereal.

“Well?” he asked with a raised brow. “Let’s hear it.”

“It’s just that granola bars and potato chips don’t need to be in the cooler.”

“Does being in there harm them?” he challenged.

“Only if moisture gets inside the packaging,” she answered with a grin. “Things that don’t have to be kept cold—I put in this,” she said holding up a reusable grocery bag.

He winked at her and then gave her a playful look that stopped her heart for a moment.

In a flash, Eric had put all the groceries into their appropriate containers. He grabbed the empty TrueBlood bottles and zipped them to the garage as Sookie squeezed her hands into tight fists and worked to get her heart rate back to normal. She sighed to herself. Eric Northman really was too handsome for his own good.

Eric continued to load the car as she ate her small breakfast and then readied her thermos for the
road. Eric indicated that the trip that day was only four hours, so she would wait to eat her lunch until she had arrived in Fredericksburg.

She looked up as Eric reentered the room. He had a map in his hands as well as a piece of paper with codes written on it. He began to talk her through the map. She would be taking Interstate 10 again, traveling west toward San Antonio, which she would skirt to the north.

She sighed longingly.

“What is it?” he asked curiously.

“It’s just that I’ve always wanted to visit San Antonio—to see the Alamo and the Riverwalk. Maybe next time,” she said with another sigh.

“List them,” Eric returned.

“Huh?”

“The places you want to go—list them. If we live through all of this, we will deserve a,” he paused, “vacation—yes? And beyond that, there will be much time for us to explore the world—together.”

She looked at him a little uncertainly. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, Sookie,” he responded as he reached out to lightly stroke her cheek. “I have seen many places. I would like to see them with you now.”

She smiled and leaned into his touch. “Okay. I’ll start a list.”

He nodded and then dropped his hand in order to show her the rest of the route. She would stay on Interstate 10 until she was near Comfort, Texas, at which point she would turn north onto Highway 87, which would take her into Fredericksburg. The place they would be staying at was an old house, which had been converted into a duplex, but there was a private entrance for Eric’s half of the building, and there was a private garage as well.

Eric pointed out a couple of small towns along the route, which would be good to make stops in, but the actual selection of stops would be left up to Sookie.

“You will do fine,” he said when he felt her nervousness.

She smiled up at him. “Thanks.” She shook her head a little. “I’m still getting used to the fact that you can feel what I feel. What’s it like?”

He pondered for a moment. “I imagine it is similar to your telepathy in a sense. Your feelings filter into my consciousness.”

“And you can tell your own feelings from mine?”

He nodded in affirmation. “You can distinguish your own thoughts from the thoughts of others—yes?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Definitely.”

He smiled. “Well—it is the same with your feelings, except . . . .” He paused.

“Except?”
“When we are feeling something similar, my feelings and yours seem to come together to a certain extent; they overlap and feel stronger. It’s,” he paused, “nice to not feel things alone.”

“Oh,” she said, not knowing what else to say. She did know that she’d be adding that to the list of things she needed to contemplate as she considered the vampire bond. “I’ll be ready to go in a few minutes.”

Eric nodded as Sookie rinsed out her bowl and spoon and put them into the dishwasher. She hated starting a load for only a couple of dishes, but it was probably safer that way. After quickly brushing her teeth and hair, Sookie put on some deodorant and fresh clothing. Like the day before, she went for comfort—opting for jeans and a T-shirt. She didn’t feel cold that morning, so she packed her hoodie, along with her dirty clothing and toiletries, into her suitcase before looking around the room. Eric had glamoured the Aldridges to wash all the used linens and to clean the main floor very thoroughly so that nothing of her would be found—not a single fingerprint nor a loose strand of brown hair—not that brown hair would be suspicious since Diane also had that color.

Eric had told Sookie that vampires generally didn’t count on fingerprints or DNA for tracking purposes since they relied on their senses, but it was better to be safe than sorry. She was just wondering whether she’d left any stray hairs on the bed in the basement when Eric walked into the bedroom. He was carrying the sheets from downstairs.

“I will quickly make up the bed down there with the extra sheets so that my scent is on them,” he said.

He dumped the used sheets onto Sookie’s bed, knowing that the glamoured couple would clean them too—since they were on the main floor of the house.

“Okay, I’ll finish loading the car,” she said.

After going to the bathroom, Sookie took her suitcase and the quilt to the car. Eric had already loaded the cooler and the other food, as well as the rest of their supplies. Her coffee, the map, and the codes she would need for the day were already in the car as well. Next, Sookie walked through the house one more time, making sure that she wasn’t forgetting anything before returning to the kitchen to wait for Eric.

“The potion you put on yesterday should last until you shower in Fredericksburg,” Eric said. “Be sure to refresh it right after you do, however.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Drive to the end of the block and then take a left,” Eric instructed, pointing in the direction he wanted her to go. “Then drive straight for six blocks—to the corner of Victoria and Harbor. I will meet you there ten minutes after I make a few passes of the neighborhood and make sure that your scent cannot be picked up at all in this house. If Octavia’s potion is working correctly, there will be no trace and no trail, but there is no need to take a chance. Plus, Victor will expect for my scent to be present around the area a bit, so I intend to leave it where I can.”

Sookie nodded and got into the car as Eric pushed the button to open the garage door. It was still half an hour until dawn, and the only sign of life on the street was someone delivering newspapers. After using her telepathy, to double check that all was safe, Sookie pulled the car out of the garage and then went in the direction Eric had pointed. She made a left turn at the end of the block and then drove for six others before pulling to the side of the street and turning off the headlights.
She was a little surprised that she didn’t feel the distance from Eric acutely, but—then again—being able to rest next to him had gone a long way to making her feel better—"secure" somehow. She knew that that was because of the Fae bond requiring their closeness, but it was also because of Eric. The vampire seemed more relaxed this morning. She wondered if being close had helped him as much as it had helped her.

She thought so. She hoped so.

She also wondered if “feeding” the bond—as they’d done that night by resting together—would allow them to be more relaxed when they were not in the same room or touching each other. That seemed to be the case, but she wanted to talk with Eric about it—to see what he thought. If that was the case, however, it would certainly go a long way toward convincing her that forming a vampire bond was the way to go.

Ten minutes after she had parked, Eric landed in front of the car. Sookie felt her heart stop for a moment—not out of fear, but because Eric’s beauty in that moment was so striking. To her, he literally glowed, and with his windswept hair, he looked like a Nordic god personified. Eric looked around quickly and then motioned for her to get out of the vehicle.

“Everything okay?” she asked in a whisper, even as she tried to get her emotions in check.

“Yes,” he returned at a low volume. “I’m sure that my own scent is now well-established in the area, and once you had left the house, I couldn’t smell any trace of you.”

“But you can smell me now?” Sookie asked.

Eric nodded. “Yes. The range seems to be about fifteen feet, but Octavia’s potion quite literally works to eliminate all traces of your scent beyond that distance.”

“Good to know,” Sookie breathed out. “So someone would have to be pretty close to pick up our scent when we’re wearing the potion,” she commented.

“Yes, and once we are out of range, there is no way to track us because the scent disappears. It is quite the ingenious potion,” he relayed.

Eric opened the hatchback and then put in the code to open his built-in coffin. He took the potion from his jacket pocket and carefully applied a few drops to his forehead.

After he recapped and then stowed the potion into his duffel bag, he turned to Sookie. “I will see you at nightfall, little one.”

She smiled at the use of the nickname. “Okay, big one.”

“Sookie?” he said with a little uncertainty in his voice.

“Yes?” she responded.

“I want you to know something.”

“Yes?” she repeated.

“I rest better when you are near me too,” he confessed. “I’m glad I do not have to try to sleep without you near me today. And you need never apologize for wanting the same.”

Sookie smiled, knowing that Eric was trying to make her feel better about the fact that she’d been
unable to sleep until she was next to him. She also understood well what that confession was costing him.

“Thank you—for telling me,” she said.

He bent down and kissed the top of her head. “I will have the Bluetooth in. You can speak with me until I fall into my day-death. And I have on the bracelet too,” he said, indicating the device that could inject him with silver if she needed to awaken him in an emergency.

She nodded.

“Be safe, Sookie,” he added with another gentle kiss to her forehead.

Sookie didn’t have a chance to respond before he gracefully put himself into his coffin. She leaned over and looked inside, but could see only the under-soles of his shoes as the panel closed behind him. She chuckled at the sight and then closed the hatchback door before quickly getting into the car. The first thing she did was put on the Bluetooth.

“Okay in there?” she asked as she started the engine.

“Peachy,” he responded. His voice seemed to echo a bit, but she could still distinguish the smile in it.

She navigated onto the street that would take her to Interstate 10. “I suppose there are no claustrophobic vampires—huh?” she asked. “The thought of bein’ in that box makes my skin crawl.”

He chuckled. “No—I suppose not. Or—if they are claustrophobic—they grow out of it quickly.”

“Were you scared of anything like that when you were a human?” she asked.

“You mean phobias?”


“Hmmm,” he contemplated. “I don’t believe so. There were things that I did fear, but the fears were not like phobias.”

“I used to be deathly afraid of snakes,” Sookie admitted.

“Well, poisonous snakes should be avoided,” he said reasonably.

“True,” she responded.

“Why were you frightened of snakes?” he asked.

She sighed. “I used to have the same nightmare over and over that a water moccasin was chasing me. It was based on a memory though.”

“What memory?”

“When I was about four or five years old, Jason and I were playing in the creek near Gran’s house when a moccasin came right up to me; I even saw it hiss like it was going to strike me. They have white mouths—you know?”

“Yes,” Eric commented. “They are commonly referred to as cottonmouths, I believe.”
“Yeah. Gran told me later that she’d never seen one before in the creek on our property, and we never saw one after that either. I just remember thinking the snake was gonna kill me.”

“What happened?” Eric asked.

“The snake—it seemed to just stop, mid-strike. I never knew why at the time, but I can remember Grandpa Earl—uh Fintan—picking me up out of the water right after that.”

“You think he stopped the snake from biting you?”

Sookie sighed. “Yeah. Now that I know he was part fairy, it makes sense. Maybe he hit it with fairy light or something. Grandpa pullin’ me out of the creek is one of the last things I can remember about him. I think he disappeared not long after that.”

“Sookie?” Eric said seriously.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t,” he ordered.

“Don’t what?” she asked somewhat resignedly.

“Don’t do what you are about to do,” he said. “You are looking for ways to blame yourself for your grandfather being taken by the Fae. You are envisioning a scenario where your grandfather was forced to use his magic because of you and that snake. You are thinking that was the reason why Niall’s enemies found him. And you are taking responsibility for his death when it doesn’t belong to you.”

“Doesn’t it?” she asked as she saw the sun’s first rays beginning to penetrate through the darkness in her rearview mirror. She knew that Eric would be falling asleep any minute.

“You cannot know why Fintan was found by the others. And even if the scenario you are now imagining is the truth, it is still not your fault.”

“You’re right,” Sookie said.

“Sookie?”

“Eric?”

“You’re lying to me. You don’t think I’m right.”

“It’s morning,” she said softly. “You should sleep.”

“Not until you understand.”

“Understand what?”

“That you cannot continue to blame yourself for everything negative that happens around you. The deaths of your parents were not your fault. They were killed by enemies of Niall, and it was just luck that you were not with them in that car. Your gran didn’t die because of you either. She was killed by a deranged murderer.”

“Who was looking to kill me,” Sookie said.

“Sookie, do you believe your grandmother would want you to be dead in her place?”
She sniffled. “No.”

“Sookie, I know that you would gladly exchange yourself for any of your family members, but I am glad you are here and are still alive.”

“You are?”

“Yes. And it is time that you honor the people you love by protecting yourself with as much fierceness as you try to protect them. And that is not just about protecting yourself from harm, little one. It is about protecting,” he paused, “the inner part of yourself—your heart.”

“I’ll try,” Sookie said, brushing a tear from her eye. “But you need to go to sleep before I really start cryin’—okay? Crying and driving don’t mix.”

“Okay,” he relented, “but think about what I have said.”

“I will,” she promised as she placed her right hand flat over the passenger’s seat. “Have a good sleep, Eric.”

“I will see you soon, little one,” Eric said before dying for the day.
Chapter 13: Intended, Unintended

A/N: This chapter includes references to the abuse perpetrated against Sookie by Uncle Bartlett. It is not overly graphic; however, be cautioned.

kleenex alert

“Before the throne of the Almighty, man will be judged not by his acts but by his intentions. For God alone reads our hearts.”—Mahatma Gandhi

Last Time: “Sookie, I know that you would gladly exchange yourself for any of your family members, but I am glad you are here and are still alive.”

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“I will see you soon, little one,” Eric said before dying for the day.

Sookie kept her promise to Eric as she thought about the events in her life that had led her to where she was.

“You’re right, Eric,” she sighed, looking at the empty passenger seat.

Her “default” setting was to blame herself. She’d been conditioned to do that—after all. Her mother had blamed her for most—if not all—of the problems in their family.

When her parents had been killed, Sookie had blamed herself. After all, the night they’d died, they’d been trying to get away from her. How could she not blame herself?

When Uncle Bartlett had touched her inappropriately, his very thoughts had blamed her. How could she not blame herself for that too? She was too young—too innocent—to know better.

For as long as she could remember, friends and family members alike had blamed her when she heard their thoughts—as if she could do anything to keep them out. But Sookie still took on the blame, and she had pushed herself to always be better—to better cover up the part of herself that made her “abnormal.”

The number of times she’d failed had eaten at her every single day of her life—until the days she’d spent with Eric in Slidell.
Only there had she felt peace.

Sookie sighed. Yes—when things went wrong, her automatic response was to point a blaming finger inward. A tear fell from her eye. The moment Gran had died, she had blamed herself. And then Jason’s thoughts had screamed out similar blaming.

Truth be told, she’d also been blaming herself for Bill being able to so easily take advantage of her and get his blood into her. If she’d just not been so naïve, then she would have seen through him. If she’d not been so weak and desperate for any kind of affection, she would have “felt” the influence of his blood in her. Maybe—if she would have been smarter and better—Gran would still be alive.

“So much blame,” Sookie said softly.

She couldn’t help but to wonder if she would ever get to the point that she didn’t blame herself for the deaths which had occurred around her—at least a little. She knew that she was not in control of most of the things that had happened, and it was useless to wish that she’d been born without the Fae spark or her telepathy—even though she’d certainly never wanted those things.

But the truth was that those things—the same things that had made her feel so ostracized from everyone else—were also the root of so much harm to the people she’d loved most.

Her mom’s unhappiness and drinking had stemmed from Sookie being “abnormal,” and—yes—maybe her mom should have accepted her child any way she came, but how could Sookie blame her mother for her wish to have a normal daughter.

Apparently, her parents’ deaths had been carried out by fairies that Sookie certainly hadn’t meant to attract. But those murderers were in the human realm for only one thing: to kill her. She felt another tear running down her cheek as she thought about her dad—so kind and always trying to take care of his family the best way he knew how. He was the one who would come into her room at night to try to comfort her when she’d had nightmares. He would check the room for snakes because she was scared. And then he would sit with her for hours so that she could sleep. But his mind had not worried about snakes. His mind had worried about the fact that he felt his beloved wife crumbling because of the daughter he also loved so much. He’d worried more and more that he would have to choose between them. Near the time of her parents’ deaths, Sookie knew from her parents’ minds that her mom had nearly convinced her dad that the best place for her would be an institution where doctors could “help” her. It’s what her mother sincerely thought would be best for Sookie—and for the whole family.

Sookie knew intellectually that none of the strife in her family had been intentionally caused by her. But she was also acutely aware of the fact that unintentional harm could cause just as much damage as intentional harm. For as long as she could remember, she had tried to hide her telepathy so that she wouldn’t cause that harm. But it had still negatively affected every relationship she’d ever had.

Tara had once spent almost a year not talking to her because Sookie had “heard” that Lettie-Mae had beaten her and had told Gran, who—of course—had confronted Lettie-Mae, who—of course—had beaten Tara more. Gran had then called the police in to check on the situation, but they couldn’t prove anything. In fact, not wanting to be sent to an orphanage, Tara had lied to Sheriff Dearborn and had claimed that her bruises had come from a fight she’d been in at school. Sookie and Tara had been nine when that happened. Sookie had been trying to protect her friend, but all her “help” had managed to do was to make Lettie-Mae even more violent. After Tara finally started talking to her again, Sookie pretended not to “hear” the bad things in Tara’s head, though she made sure she invited Tara over a lot. After that, Tara stayed at Gran’s almost more than at her own home, but she’d been as “safe” as Sookie could make her.
Lafayette had spent a long time avoiding Sookie as well. Because of her gift, she was the first person to learn that Lafayette was gay, but he wasn’t ready for others to know yet. He could tell that she had “heard” his secret because he’d been fantasizing—rather explicitly—about Jason, and she’d been unable to hide her surprise. He’d told her to mind her own fucking business and to keep her damned mouth shut! Of course, Sookie had done just that, but Lafayette had looked at her as if she’d betrayed him nonetheless. Sookie had been ten years old at the time. It wasn’t until Lafayette felt comfortable enough coming out and being himself publically that he’d once again welcomed Sookie into his life.

As the miles drifted behind her, Sookie thought of countless examples when her telepathy had been the root of unintentional harm to others.

“So much blame,” she said aloud again.

Judgment and fear—these were the things that Sookie’s telepathy had brought to her from the people she’d most loved. Or—if she was lucky—it was their pity that she would earn because of her curse.

Until Bill. He hadn’t shunned her for her telepathy. He’d come to her with an offer of fake love because of her telepathy. And—just like that—her curse had become a commodity that vampires wanted to use.

“Even you saw me first as an asset,” she whispered, patting the passenger seat.

She sighed as she thought about the men who had shown interest in her romantically. With the tie to Bill gone, she knew that the euphoria she’d often felt with him had been fueled by his blood and his manipulation of her feelings. Had she had any experience with falling in love before Bill came into her life, she might have understood that his love wasn’t real. But she’d been naïve—ignorant.

She blinked away a tear, recognizing once again that she was blaming her own deficiencies for Bill’s duplicity. She shook her head.

She wondered if she could have found happiness if she’d have tried a relationship with Sam. After all, it was harder for her to “hear” him. But even though she’d sensed that Sam had wanted to pursue her, she’d not encouraged him. She hadn’t wanted to ruin the best job she’d ever had by getting involved with her boss. Plus, she did “hear” him, especially when he touched her. Moreover, the harsh truth was that she and Sam could have never worked out because he had hidden himself from her. She’d trusted him with her own secret. He’d known that she felt different because of her “curse”—isolated and alone. Yet he’d never given her an equal amount of trust—or fidelity with another “different” individual.

And Sookie was tired of being left in the dark about everything. Even her family—even her name—was a lie.

She thought again about her “relationship” with Bill. Looking at it with open eyes and her own thoughts, she recognized that they’d had one fight after another during their short relationship. And they had broken up more than once.

Yet she’d continued to be drawn to him like a moth to the flame. While she would question his behavior almost constantly during the day, she would rarely have similar thoughts at night—unless something very disturbing had happened.

After she’d met Malcolm and his crew at Bill’s home, she’d been scared to death of Bill, who had sat in a corner of the room and had watched his vampire “friends” practically molest her. He’d also
almost drunk from their human—and would have if she’d not warned him of the Hep-D. She thought of all the times she’d gone against her own common sense and reason to forgive him and to believe in him. At the time, she’d thought that it was because she loved him—because she “knew” him deep down inside. Now she understood that it was Bill manipulating the blood of a girl so desperate to have someone to love that she couldn’t question why she was falling for him so quickly and so obsessively. She thought about the dreams that she’d had of Bill—both during the daytime and at night. They’d all been disturbing in one way or another, yet she’d never questioned them.

But every single one of them had ratcheted up her fear—even the one she’d had of him before she’d had his blood. In that one, she’d gone down to meet him in her yard. He’d snuck up on her and, then, without a word, he’d started to undress. When she’d remarked that she couldn’t believe that they were about to have sex, he’d lowered his fangs. She would never forget his words, “Who said anything about sex?”

She’d woken up scared of him—scared to death.

Her second dream about Bill had been after she’d had his blood. She’d gone to him—almost begging him to take her virginity. Now, she understood well why fear and lust had been so prevalent in that dream. Hell—she’d even admitted to being scared to death of him. So why had she just “known” that he was the one she should “give herself” to?

She scoffed. His blood.

Another of her blood-influenced dreams had found Bill making her breakfast and then going up in a ball of flame. She’d been so frightened of losing him that she’d been even more pliable to his influence after that.

Fear had been one of the emotions she’d never felt in her dreams of Eric, and—that—more than anything else, told the story of the differences between the vampires.

She placed her hand, once again, onto the passenger seat.

“I wonder what you would say if I told you,” she whispered, as she turned her thoughts to another dream she’d had because of Bill—a dream that she now knew was the first woven dream he’d sent her.

She’d had it on the worst day of her life—the day of Gran’s funeral. She’d just lost the only person who had ever truly accepted her—the only one. Her brother outwardly blamed her for Gran’s death. And her friends were inwardly thinking that she was responsible—at least, partially—too. And—of course—pretty much everyone at Gran’s funeral blamed her as well. She would never forget their thoughts. They all centered on one major idea: If not for the freak, Adele would be alive. And then Uncle Bartlett had arrived—right before Sookie had been called up to speak. All that she’d been able to think about was that the young man pushing his wheelchair seemed very young indeed. And then Jason had told her that he’d invited their uncle. And then she’d heard Uncle Bartlett’s twisted thoughts—for the first time in almost twenty years. He’d been thinking about how it was a shame that little girls had to grow up.

Yes—that was the worst day of her life. And—unbeknownst to her—Bill had already sent her a woven dream, and all that she’d needed to do to activate it was to fall asleep.

The day had driven her to her knees—figuratively and literally. And, after she’d finished off the pecan pie—the last thing her grandmother had made—she’d lain down.
And she’d slept.

Her dream had begun with Uncle Bartlett just staring at her from the chair he used to sit in when he was “visiting,” a chair that was still in the living room—though Sookie never sat in it. Understandably, Sookie had been frightened in her dream. Uncle Bartlett had crooked his finger for her, signaling that he wanted her to come and sit on his lap. Sookie had felt herself shaking her head—even in her sleep—but she’d not been able to wake herself up.

And then Uncle Bartlett had changed and was suddenly Bill. That alteration had disturbed her even more than the pedophile who had been gawking at her, especially since Bill was also sitting in the chair Uncle Bartlett had been in.

Sookie shivered and gripped the steering wheel tighter. Her fears in the dream had been replaced by lust for Bill, and—suddenly—the only thing she’d wanted to do was to give herself to Bill. The juxtaposition of the fear and shame over Bartlett and the lust over Bill had finally shaken Sookie out of her sleep. At the time, she’d thought she was sick for having such a dream—deranged—and her uncle’s voice had rung out at her from her memories.

“You like me touching you. I know you like it,” her uncle would coo as he’d touched her legs and her undeveloped breasts. “You know you like sitting on Uncle Barlett’s lap and playing. You know I only touch you because you want me to.”

When she’d woken up from her dream, the only thing that she could imagine that would take away that voice—as well as her own self-loathing over Gran’s death—was Bill. She’d felt desperate to go to him as soon as the sun set. She’d felt the intense need to give him her body, knowing that he would make her feel better and erase the things that Uncle Bartlett had said—and done—to her. She just knew that Bill would be able to take away the fear of sex that she had always had because of Uncle Bartlett’s thoughts about her—that Bill would make sex “pure” because he loved her.

She had been shaking—from both fear and desire—as she’d found the nightgown that would make her look most like the “pure” bride she felt that she desperately needed to be for Bill. She’d not “thought” about what she was doing as she’d taken the garment from Gran’s dresser. She couldn’t “think” about it. She could only prepare to give herself to Bill.

No—to offer herself.

She’d been so afraid of what would happen if she didn’t.

So desperately afraid.

And, as soon as the sun had set, she had offered herself. She’d run through the graveyard to Bill as if her body and soul were on fire. She’d not even spared a look toward the freshly shoveled dirt on top of Gran’s grave.

Now, Sookie could recognize that her actions that day had been because of a woven dream sent by Bill. As soon as she’d been strong enough to think things through following the severing spell, she’d known that the woven dream that had propelled her down the Interstate from Slidell to Shreveport wasn’t the first she’d experienced. But she hadn’t been able to tell Eric about her first woven dream—not even during their perfect week as they’d shared their histories with each other. Of that night—of the night Bill had taken her virginity—she’d been too ashamed.

Rationally, Sookie recognized that her feelings of shame were probably akin to what a rape victim might feel. After all, through the dream and through his blood, Bill had stripped Sookie of her own free will, even as he’d stripped her of her virginal white nightgown. However, the guilt and the
shame regarding that night still lingered in Sookie.

And then there were the unrelenting questions that she pummeled herself with—over and over again.

Could she have done anything differently? Could have she stopped Bill from manipulating her? Why did she have to be so defective? Why did she have to be the perfect target for Bill?"

Once more, she sighed and placed her hand back onto the passenger seat.

“I know what you would say,” she said with a tiny smile as she thought of Eric’s beautiful face underneath the seat cushion. “You would tell me that none of that was my fault—just as none of my family’s deaths were my fault.” She sighed again. “Maybe you’re right,” she added to the sleeping vampire. “I suppose I’ll have to keep working on really getting myself to believe it though. But because of you,” she paused, “I think that—maybe—I’m on my way.”

She patted the seat. “Thank you, Eric.”

Sookie was silent for a few minutes as she caressed the soft leather of the seat. “I’m scared,” she admitted. “I’m so scared that the Fae bond has taken away my free will again. And—I’m especially scared that it’s taken away yours.” A tear fell from her eye. “I don’t want to unintentionally rape you, Eric,” she whispered. “And—if we made love because of the Fae bond, wouldn’t I be doing just that?”

She shook her head. “I know you wanted to have sex with me before that—to fuck me,” she said, reddening even as she called the physical act of sex by its most common vernacular name. “But if we just,” she paused, “fuck, it would hurt me. And if we made love, how could I be sure that I wasn’t taking that from you—against your will?”

She wiped away a tear and continued. “Oh, Eric—I never want to take anything else from you. If I did that,” she paused, “then I would truly become the monster most people always thought I was.”

She brushed away another tear and took a long ragged breath before straightening her posture and glanced into the rearview mirror.

She laughed ruefully, knowing that—if she were in a movie—this would be the part when she would have an epiphany about her predicament and a moment of self-forgiveness. But neither of those things happened. Another tear fell—this one because of self-pity.

“Get ahold of your, Sookie!” she chastised herself. “You still have two hours left to drive, and—like you told Eric, cryin’ and drivin’ don’t mix.” She took another deep breath and turned on the radio.

She shuffled through the channels for a while before settling on a baseball game. The commentary was just enough to keep her interested and—more importantly—to keep her from sinking back into her thoughts.

She needed a break.

So she took one.

Sookie stopped only once on the drive from Houston to Fredericksburg. She chose another small café, and she bought some black bean chili to go, knowing that she’d be at her destination in an hour.
She didn’t see a camera in the café, but she kept her head down anyway.

The rest of the way to the safe house, she worked on using her telepathy as she drove. She stretched out her gift to the others on the highway, getting short snippets of thoughts from them as if she were scrolling through Jason’s plethora of channels on his satellite television.

And, after getting Eric safely into the garage at Fredericksburg, she stretched out her telepathy even more—pushing herself to go further than she ever had before. There were a lot of people close by since the neighborhood was closely packed with apartments. And there was even a school within her range, and—being a Wednesday around lunchtime, the building was bustling. But she didn’t let this stop her from practicing her skill—despite the headache it generated. She made herself pause at each mind, confirming that no one had any thoughts that indicated that he or she was a danger to the vampire sleeping in the car.

That almost-hour-long task completed, she grabbed the chili she’d bought and took it inside, deciding that she would eat before doing anything else. She hated eating out of Styrofoam containers, so she transferred her meal into a bowl and warmed it in the microwave.

After her meal, she took her suitcase into the only furnished bedroom. She looked around the duplex, wondering where Eric would sleep since none of the few rooms in the house looked light-tight. Maybe they’d be leaving before he needed to sleep again.

After once more testing the immediate area with her telepathy, she unloaded the cooler and brought in the sturdy cloth grocery bag that was serving as a kind of traveling pantry for her. After that, she took a quick shower. Eric had said that she should reapply the potion immediately, so after she dried off, she reapplied it and then put on a comfortable-looking maxi dress that Amelia had gotten for her.

And then she returned to the car. It was too warm to wrap up in the quilt, so she used it as her pillow.

As she closed her eyes, her mind was invaded by more questions about Bill and her own uncertainties about herself. She wished that she could trace all of her self-doubts back to a moment in time that she could somehow move beyond. She’d talked to Eric about her first memory and wondered if that was where all of her pain originated from. And—if it was—how could she ever overcome it? Most of her memories were unpleasant in some way, and almost all of the good ones had occurred as she’d been stifling her telepathy with all of her might. She wondered if there would be anything left of her if she tried to move beyond her pain.

Was that why she couldn’t seem to do it? Was she afraid that she would disappear if all of her pain suddenly went away?

During the previous week, she’d actually had hope that there would be something left—some stronger Sookie that she’d caught glimpses of in the mirror, but had never actually met. Eric had seemed to “love” that Sookie and had encouraged her to seek her out. And the miracle that Sookie had found was that Eric had been “pointing” right at her—the her that was before him.

Not some idealized or “super” version of herself. Just her.

Yes—it had felt like a miracle.

Indeed, Sookie had begun to imagine that she was worthy of being accepted just the way she was—that she didn’t have to pretend or to change in order to be loved. Even Bill—with all his acting and the manipulation of her blood—had always made her feel like she needed to change. He hadn’t
liked her moments of independence. He hadn’t wanted her to question anything about him—or herself.

Eric hadn’t minded Sookie’s independence; if anything, he’d seemed attracted to her for the very things Bill had tried to quell. Of course, now Sookie knew that Eric had been hiding the fact that she was a fairy during their time in Slidell. And he’d contacted Niall because he’d wanted for her to learn how to harness her light power into a weapon that could help him to defeat Russell. Did that mean that Eric didn’t really want her as she was—that he wanted her to change into “Sookie, the vampire slayer?” Or had it just been the Fae bond which had made him seem to like her in the first place?

Questions she had no answers for continued to swirl around her head as she sat up and brushed her fingers through her still-damp hair.

She sighed. She missed Eric’s fingers in her hair.

God—how she missed his gentle touch!

She missed the care he’d always taken in braiding her hair. She missed the way he would talk freely with her as he wound the braid. She missed their baths together—the intimacy that even most lovers never found.

She sighed. She felt drained from her irregular sleep during the past several days and from the weight of her thoughts during her drive, as well as her telepathic exercise. But she was almost afraid to sleep—afraid that if she did, someone might hurt the vampire in her charge.

She did another sweep with her telepathy, being as thorough as she could. And then she kept her shields down—a white noise of thoughts. She let herself get used to that cacophony, and she prayed to God that she would hear any changes in the noise within her mind. And—then—she fell asleep.

[extended dream below]

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Hello,” he said as he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Did Eric send you?” she asked.

“No. Would you like me to go?” he returned.

“No. Would you like me to go?” he returned.

She shook her head.

“Good,” he said, looking around them. “As a vampire, I cannot dream. It is odd to be inside of one of your dreams.”

“Will you remember this when you wake up? I mean—will the real Eric remember?”

The Eric in Sookie’s dream shook his head. “No. I am his blood. You brought me into your dream, and I am here for you—not for him.”

She nodded and sighed.

There was a moment of silence between them.

“Every time you’ve been in one of my dreams—except for the one Bill wove—there’s been a bed,”
she chuckled as she looked at her surroundings and recognized that they were in their bed in Slidell.

He smirked.

She shook her head fondly. “It’s weird though; I’ve never really felt lust in my dreams about you—except maybe the first one—but even that wasn’t the kind of lust I figured Eric would send.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps the Fae bond affected the dreams somehow.”

“Maybe.” Sookie sighed.

Again, there were several moments of silence between them.

“I went to sleep in the car again,” she confessed.

Eric just nodded and drew her into his arms. “It is okay to sleep, Sookie. It is okay to enjoy being with me—and with him. He enjoys it too. Do not begrudge yourself comfort.”

“Are you sure he likes it too?” she asked.

“Yes. I am his blood. I am certain.”

“And everything’s about the blood?”

He didn’t answer her question directly. “He wants to be close to you; I want to be close to you.”

“Because of the Fae bond,” she said resignedly.

“There is more to it. At least, I think there is. Anyway, the Fae bond is a part of us all now.”

“I get the impression that your counterpart wants to learn how to get around the bond so that it doesn’t govern how we are with each other.”

“He doesn’t like feeling out of control.”

Sookie cringed a little. “I sometimes wonder what it would feel like to be in control. I don’t think I’ve ever felt in control—not of my telepathy, not of my life. Not of anything.”

“Maybe he can help you gain what you have been missing. Maybe you can help him reconcile the fact that sometimes the things we cannot control are the best things we ever have.”

“You don’t sound like yourself,” she said.

“I am as much what you need him to be as I am him.”

“So you aren’t real?”

“No. I’m sorry. I’m not. I am just a dream, but I do carry a part of him. Perhaps, it is the part you need and the part he cannot show you.”

“There are things that I haven’t shared with him either,” she admitted. “Things I’m ashamed of.”

She curled into her dream Eric and put her head onto his comfortable shoulder.

She sighed. “But I don’t wanna think about those things right now.”
“Then don’t,” he answered simply. “Rest.”
Friends in Texas

Chapter 14: Friends in Texas

[Two evenings later, Fort Stockton, Texas]

Eric awakened to the familiar scent of Sookie. She was very close, and from her even breathing, he knew that she was asleep in the back seat of the car again—just as he’d found her the night before. She’d seemed self-conscious that he “caught” her sleeping close to him, but he’d made clear to her that it was fine—nothing that required embarrassment or shame on her part. After sundown, he quietly got out of the car and got his duffle bag and his laptop.

He quickly took a shower and applied some of the potion. By the time he was done, Sookie was awake and in the kitchen, preparing herself a meal.

“How was the drive?” he asked.

“Not a lot to see and not a lot of traffic, but it was nice,” she said of their trip from Fredericksburg to Fort Stockton, Texas.”

“Well?” he asked with a smile. “What do you think?”

“I love it!” she said excitedly, gesturing toward the backyard.

Eric had told Sookie that she would get to take the next day off from driving. And he could already tell that she’d gotten some sun.

“Your skin is slightly darker,” he observed. “Did you enjoy the pool?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “I sunbathed for about an hour and waded around in the pool a bit.”

“Was the water warm enough?” the vampire asked. He knew that the nights in the desert could get cool, but—in September—daytime temperatures were hopefully hot enough to keep the temperature of the water warm.

Sookie nodded. “Yes. It was nice. Perfect.”

Eric smiled. “Good. Can you hear the neighbor?”

Sookie chuckled. “Barely.” Unlike the Fredericksburg house, which had been in a very crowded neighborhood, their nearest neighbor in the Fort Stockton home was more than a mile away, and even with the practice she’d done to increase her range, she could barely make him out. “This place is pretty perfect for me—as a ‘resting’ place, I mean.”

Eric nodded. “I’m glad. I’ve always liked this particular home too, though it is the opposite of where I grew up—as far as weather and landscape go.”

Sookie grinned. “I bet. I’d never seen a real desert before today. I can’t believe all the cactuses in your yard!”

“Did you learn anything new today?” Eric asked, gesturing toward the Fae book on the kitchen counter.
She smiled uncertainly and bit her lip. “Yeah. Wanna see?”

He nodded. “Of course. If you want to show,” he added with a smirk.

She smiled a little wider and wiped off her hands. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Then, she extended her hands, palms up, and opened her eyes to stare at them.

Eric watched with awe as small balls of white light pooled in her hands.

“I learned how to call up my light today,” she smiled, even as she brought her palms together. The light seemed to reabsorb into her.

“How do you do it?” he asked.

She blushed a little, but tried to hide it by going back to her cooking. “It’s connected to my emotions, so I have to call on a feeling to get it to work.”

Noticing Sookie’s blush—but choosing to ignore it because she was obviously trying to conceal it —Eric didn’t ask what emotion she used to create the light. Instead, he focused on the success of her practice. “This is good,” he remarked.

She smiled, but then frowned a little. “I think I killed a cactus though—when I shot it.”

He chuckled. “There are plenty to go around. And remember, one of the reasons we are staying here for an extra day is to give you the opportunity to practice a bit before you have your meeting with your fairy cousin.”

She nodded. “I’ll have to show you what I can do later.”

“I look forward to it.” He looked at her seriously. “Do you want to hear this?” he asked holding his phone out for her to see.

Immediately nervous, Sookie turned off the stove burner. “Yeah. But will she be able to hear me—my breathing?”

“I don’t think so. Most vampires could not hear just your breathing over the phone. And even if she did, she would likely think that I was feeding off of a glamoured human.”

“Okay, but let’s go into the living room, and I’ll sit across the room from the phone with this over my mouth,” she added, holding up a hand towel.

Eric smiled and nodded at her caution and then led Sookie to the living room, which was quite large. In fact, the whole ranch style home was big.

“Have you already contacted Mr. Cataliades?” Sookie asked.

“Yes, I texted him after I rose as I waited for the sun to set. Octavia has already been to the Houston home and found no trace of you. Cataliades is going to contact Russell sometime in the early morning hours so that he will not be able to make it to Texas before sunrise. By the time he arrives tomorrow, he and Victor will be in for a bit of a surprise if we have our way.”

Sookie nodded.

“Ready?” Eric asked.

“Yep,” she said, settling into a chair in the corner of the room.
Eric dialed and put the phone on speaker.

“‘Yes?’” a woman with a Latina accent answered.

“Isabel,” Eric said. “Is this a secure line?”

“Of course,” the vampiress responded smoothly. “Well—if it isn’t Eric Northman—wanted fugitive. It is surprising to hear from you.” There was amusement in her voice. “You are in much trouble with the Authority.”

“It was not I who killed the Magister,” Eric said evenly.

“Hmm,” she sounded. “What of Bill Compton’s telepath? I have heard that you killed her as well.”

“Some things cannot be helped,” Eric said, somewhat coldly, giving Sookie a wink as he did so. He was rewarded with an eye roll from her.

“I must say that I was surprised to hear that you killed her, given your fascination with her in Dallas.”

“As I told you then, I had no interest in the late Miss Stackhouse, beyond what she could do to help me find my maker.”

“Then why bother killing her?” the vampiress asked. “It seems so unlike what I know of you—and what Godric told me of you.”

“I had my reasons,” Eric said, “many of which had to do with the help she could have given to my enemies.”

“There is rumor that more vampires than just the Authority are looking for you,” she said.

“Indeed. Russell Edgington is the one who killed the Magister. He wants to kill me too.”

“So the plot thickens,” Isabel commented. “Russell was the one who told the Authority that you murdered the Magister before you threatened Sophie-Anne’s life. According to Edgington, you went into a jealous rage after finding out that he had married Sophie-Anne. He said that the Magister stepped in to protect the queen and suffered for his efforts.”

Eric scoffed. “And the Authority believed that?”

“My source tells me that they had no choice but to believe it. Nan said that she saw video footage which proved it.”

“Interesting,” Eric said. “I was not aware that Nan Flanagan was involved in this situation.”

“You know Nan. Like a cockroach, she will always be where it is most annoying for her to be.”

“And how are you, Isabel?” Eric asked, changing the subject.

“I am adapting to my new role,” she responded quietly. “I miss my sheriff very much, however.”

Eric sighed. “I have heard that you are filling Godric’s place well.”

“I have his role. I will never fill his place.”

“I have a favor to ask,” Eric said after a moment of silence had passed between them.
“What is it?”

“Russell Edgington will soon be coming to Texas to search for me.”

“Are you in Texas?” she asked.

“Not at present,” he lied smoothly, winking at Sookie again. “I was, however, in your fine state just a few days ago.”

“I cannot stand against Russell,” Isabel said warily. “Few could.”

“Nor would I ask you to,” he responded. “I would just like for the Authority to get wind of the same information that will lead Russell Edgington to my residence near Houston so that Russell will have,” he paused, “company. But that information must come from the right source. Tell me—how is Miguel? Have you seen him lately?”

“Sí,” the vampiress responded with a smile in her voice. “Miguelito and I are lovers once more. After Hugo, I felt the need to reconnect with my vampire brother.”

Sookie cringed a bit. She knew that vampires didn’t think the same as humans and that terms like “brother” and “child” weren’t seen as familial in the same way, but she was still getting used to terms like “brother” and “lover” being in the same sentence.

“Do you want me to have him pass along information to the Authority?” Isabel asked.

“Yes. It would be easy for him to do so since he is lieutenant to the sheriff of the Houston area, as well as the area’s investigator,” Eric said. “Plus, he knows me and would recognize my scent.”

“I suppose that your wish would be that the Authority received this information soon?” she asked almost mischievously.

“Russell will likely be in Texas tomorrow evening—along with Victor Madden.”

Isabel scoffed. “Es una pena que nadie ha puesto un trozo de madera en él todavía.” [“It is too bad that no one has put a piece of wood into him yet.”]

Sookie looked at Eric in question.

“Yes,” the Viking said. “It is a great shame that a piece of wood has not found Madden’s heart. I believe Miguel would agree.”

“Sí,” Isabel said. “After what Felipe de Castro and his little bitch boy did to our maker, there is nothing Miguelito and I would not do to take revenge. Unfortunately, we were unable to prove the treason charge before we had to flee Nevada.”

Eric nodded to Sookie, and she breathed a silent sigh of relief. Eric had told her the story of how Isabel’s maker, Federico, had once been the king of Nevada; however, Felipe and Victor had staged a coup almost sixty years before. Isabel and Miguel had sought refuge with the queen of Texas—Queen Dulcina—who had been an ally of Federico’s. Dulcina had also been well-respected by Godric even though she was over thirteen hundred years his junior.

“What do you need?” Isabel asked passionately. “Miguelito and I are at your service, Viking. If it is a chance for revenge against Madden and de Castro that you offer, we offer our lives.”

“I hope it won’t come to that,” Eric said honestly. “However, I will eventually have to face Russell,
and the less I have to worry about the likes of Madden and de Castro, the better. For now, however, I want Russell to think that the vampires of Texas might be helping me, but there can be no direct proof of this. I do not want Dulcina to incur his wrath. I just want the question to be in Russell’s mind.”

“That is why you want the Authority and not the queen’s vampires to interfere with Russell’s search of your Houston residence?”

“Exactly. However, I am certain that Russell will not check in with Dulcina when he passes into Texas.”

Isabel chuckled. “I am certain you are right. And that would be extremely rude of a king not to do.”

“Indeed,” Eric said. “I will text you the address. Oh—and Isabel?”

“Yes?”

“Given the fact that Nan is extremely,” he paused, “annoying, perhaps your queen should consider contacting someone else in the Authority when my scent is discovered in her state.”

“I’m sure she would be amenable to that suggestion,” Isabel returned after a moment.

“Good.”

“I will call Miguelito as soon as I hang up with you. When you need us, you will have friends in Texas.”

“Thank you.”

“Eric . . . ,” Isabel began a little hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“Godric would be disappointed that you killed Sookie Stackhouse. He valued her—despite their short acquaintance.”

“I valued her too. But—as I said—some things cannot be helped,” Eric said before hanging up.

Eric and Sookie looked at each other in silence for a few moments.

“She’ll help?” Sookie asked.

“Without a doubt.”

“I’m glad Godric felt that way about me,” she said with a little smile.

“He was a good judge of character, and he knew me well. He could tell that I valued you too.”

Sookie nodded, understanding well the significance of Eric’s words. He was emphasizing the fact that he had valued her before the blood tie and before the Fae bond—as more than just an asset—or a piece of ass.

“Can I ask you some questions about the vampire bond during dinner?” Sookie asked as she moved to return to the kitchen. Eric had had his dinner with her the previous night as well, and she hoped that the practice would continue.
He nodded. “Of course. Would you like to eat outside on the patio tonight? There are candles that I can light—to keep away the insects.”

“Yes. That’d be nice,” she said a little shyly. “Uh—I’m baking a casserole; it’ll be ready in about an hour,” she informed. “Can you wait to eat till then, or do you want your TrueBlood now?”

“I’ll wait,” he said.

She smiled a little. “The—uh—big bedroom is light-tight, right?” she asked. “I put your things in there, but I wasn’t certain whether you had another resting place in the house.”

“No—the bedroom is the only light-tight space here.”

She’d found out from Eric the previous night that his homes had various types of light-tight spaces. The one in Fredericksburg had had only a simply crawl space accessed by a trap door in the bedroom closet. However, most of the homes had a basement area or a bedroom that was light-tight.

“I moved your things into the master bedroom as well, Sookie,” Eric said seriously. “There is no need for us to pretend that we wish to rest anywhere other than together. It is not just you who cannot sleep when we are not near to each other,” he added.

She blushed a little. “I didn’t want to presume.”

“You can—presume,” he said sincerely.

She smiled and looked down at the floor, a slight blush ghosting her cheeks.

“I will scope out the area,” he said when she didn’t speak for a moment. “Have you made your list?”

Sookie nodded and pulled a list out of her jeans pocket. Their nearest neighbor, Charlie Johnson, was actually the official owner of the house they were in, and he was also the caretaker of the property. In addition, Eric sent him money to help keep up his own property in order to ensure that Charlie wasn’t compelled to move.

“Have you decided?” he asked.

“I think I want to,” she smiled.

Eric had told her that Charlie raised horses and gave lessons, and he’d offered to glamour the man so that he would give Sookie a private lesson the next day.

“I’ve never ridden a horse,” she added.

Eric smiled. “That will change tomorrow,” he said before flying out of the home. His plan was to check the area for any unusual scents and then to drive to Charlie’s and glamour him to take the car and fill it up as well as pick up their supplies. While there, he would also glamour Charlie to accept a first-time student without question the next day. If Sookie enjoyed horseback riding, perhaps they could go riding together the night after that. He’d not ridden a horse for almost a hundred years. In fact, he was half-tempted to teach Sookie himself, but he wanted to give her the chance to figure out for herself whether or not she liked the activity. He didn’t want his emotions—through blood tie or Fae bond—to influence her. So it was best if she tried horseback riding while he was asleep.
He chuckled as he flew past a decimated cactus. “You really did blow it all to hell, didn’t you, min kara!” he said with a chuckle.

As he continued to the old rancher’s home—still chuckling at the sight of the destroyed plant—the vampire didn’t even realize that he’d called Sookie his “beloved.”
Chapter 15: I Trust

“To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.”—George MacDonald

Having completed his glamouring of Charlie, Eric returned to the patio to find the table already set. Sookie was in the en-suite bathroom of their room, and the hearty smell of the food that she was preparing filled the air.

He smiled. He liked the smell.

The vampire busied himself with moving candles around the table. He lit them right after he heard the timer of the oven go off.

Sookie appeared minutes later. She was wearing a yellow sundress; it was the only one she had since sundresses were conspicuous, so she couldn’t really wear them when they were traveling.

“It’s a warm night,” she said as Eric took in her appearance with appreciation.

“You look lovely.”

She smiled, and her face took on a slight shade of pink as she put down her plate and the glass of TrueBlood she was carrying. In their time together, Eric had learned that Sookie preferred to give him his meal in a glass, instead of a bottle. It was a little thing, but the vampire appreciated it nonetheless.

“Thanks,” she said. “This is nice.”

“It is,” he agreed. “You look lovely.”

She smiled, and her face took on a slight shade of pink as she put down her plate and the glass of TrueBlood she was carrying. In their time together, Eric had learned that Sookie preferred to give him his meal in a glass, instead of a bottle. It was a little thing, but the vampire appreciated it nonetheless.

“Thanks,” she said. “This is nice.”

“It is,” he agreed again as he pulled out her seat for her.

She turned a little pinker, and he could tell she was nervous.

“Shall we eat and then speak?” the vampire suggested.

Sookie nodded and immediately looked more relaxed—clearly because the topic she was intending to bring up was a difficult one for her. She dug into her casserole and blew on her bite to make sure the food was cool enough to eat.

“Good?” Eric asked after she’d been eating—and groaning her appreciation—for several minutes.

She nodded. “Yes.”

“So—tell me. Do you like the desert?” he asked, happy to engage her in small talk as they ate their respective meals.

She considered for a moment. “Well, it’s hot,” she giggled. “But yes. I do. It’s so peaceful here. It reminds me of Gran’s house in Bon Temps in a weird way because there aren’t neighbors close.”

“You still think of your house in Bon Temps as your grandmother’s home? Not yours?” Eric asked.

“Yeah,” Sookie answered quickly. “Actually Gran left me the farmhouse, and Jason got my
parents’ old house. But Gran’s house doesn’t feel like it’s mine—not really. At least, not yet. And now there’s so much damage from the Maenad that I wonder how I’ll ever be able to fix it all.”

“One day we will repair it together, Sookie,” Eric said. “If we live,” he added with a boyish grin that broke through all the melancholy in the air—despite the seriousness of his words.

They finished their meal, speaking of the little market where Sookie had stopped that day, before she took in their dirty dishes. She returned with a slice of her pecan pie.

She stared at the slice for a moment and then looked up at Eric. From the seriousness in her eyes, he could tell that she was preparing to tell him something important, so he leaned forward to listen.

“I loved my Gran’s cooking,” Sookie began. “But mostly I loved it because of the way she thought when she was making food.” She smiled and closed her eyes for a moment. “She liked teaching me how to do things, and she liked the fact that it felt ‘normal’ when we cooked together. But she never taught me how to cook her pecan pie.” She shook her head and frowned. “She’d just made one for me the day she died. She’d made another for the Descendants of the Glorious Dead meeting we’d gone to that night, but she knew how much I loved them, so she made an extra.” Her smile came back. “And she was sneaky too—always makin’ them while I was at work so that I didn’t hear exactly how she did it.”

“I would have liked her,” Eric said matter-of-factly.

“She would have been skeptical of you,” Sookie returned with a little chuckle. “You come off as—um—gruff at first. And arrogant. But she would have liked you eventually.”

“Hard won approval?” he asked with a smirk.

“Yes.”

“The best kind, “he said sincerely.

They were silent for a moment as Sookie was obviously gathering her thoughts.

“The day of Gran’s funeral, I sat at the kitchen table and ate all that was left of the pecan pie she’d made, knowing it would be my last taste of her cooking—my last time with her in a way.”

“That must have been difficult for you to do—especially in the room where she’d been murdered.”

“Yes,” Sookie confirmed in a whisper. “But I wanted to be where she was alive for the last time. I needed to be there. I felt less alone in there than I did anywhere else in the house.” She looked from the pie on her plate to Eric. “Did you know that Rene killed my cat too? Not the same day as he killed Gran—but earlier?”

“I didn’t,” Eric said.

“When I cleaned up Gran’s blood, I found a few pieces of cat food under the refrigerator,” she said in a faraway voice. “And I realized that I’d left Tina’s food and water dishes out on the porch. I washed them in the same dishwasher load as I washed the empty pie plate. But then I decided to throw the cat dishes away.”

“Why?” the vampire asked.

“I knew that I would just love another cat if I got one, and I didn’t want to think about losing something else. Or loving anything else.”
Eric nodded. He understood.

“After I threw the dishes away, I went upstairs and lay down. I was so tired.”

He tensed, suddenly aware of where the conversation might be going. “And did you sleep?”

She nodded, a look of dread washing over her face.

“And did you dream?”

She nodded again and then took a deep breath. “Uncle Bartlett was in my dream. Jason never knew what he did to me, so he made sure Uncle Bartlett came to the funeral. Jason always blamed me for the fact that Uncle Bartlett quit coming around. He thought it was because of my curse. I guess it was in a way.” She closed her eyes and trembled as she remembered her fear from the dream.

“When the dream started, my uncle was sitting in the chair he always sat in, and he was looking at me and thinking bad things—just like always. He wanted me to sit on his lap so that he could . . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Sookie,” Eric whispered as he reached out to lightly take her hand.

She took another deep breath. “I felt so afraid in my dream—just as afraid as I’d been of my uncle when I was a little girl. I wanted to run away, but I couldn’t. I wanted to wake up, but I couldn’t.”

“Sookie,” Eric whispered again even as his thumb stroked her palm in a comforting motion.

“In the dream, Uncle Bartlett suddenly became Bill—sitting in that same chair and staring at me in that same way. At first, I was just as afraid of Bill as I’d been of my uncle. But . . . .” She stopped midsentence and let out a little sob.

“You don’t have to go on,” Eric said soothingly. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“I know,” she said, taking another deep breath. “But I need to say what happened—for me. And for us.”

He nodded. “Okay then,” he said, squeezing her hand a little.

She took a deep breath. “In the dream, I went from scared to lustful. When I woke up, I felt dirty—almost as if I’d somehow given into Uncle Bartlett’s advances—as if I was all the things he used to say I was.” She shook her head in disgust. “He used to call me his ‘special girl.’ He used to tell me that he knew I liked it when he touched me. He used to say that if I wasn’t so ‘special,’ he would be able to resist me.” She took another shaky breath.

Eric squeezed her hand again, offering her the only comfort he could.

She went on, “I know now that Bill had woven that dream—that he’d instilled fear and lust into it. And the thing I had always feared the most was my uncle, so he’d appeared in the dream.” Her body trembled in both fear and disgust again—and shame. “When I woke up, my horror at having dreamt of someone I loathed and someone I thought I loved in the same dream disappeared, and all I could think about was giving myself to Bill.” She looked down. “I took a two-hour-long shower as I waited for nightfall and Bill. In my head, I was screaming at myself to get clean. I scrubbed and I scrubbed and I scrubbed. Later, I explained my actions as being from my grief and from seeing my uncle, but now I know it was more. Now I know that Bill’s dream was controlling me. And I did—” she paused, “I did feel out of control.” She wiped away a tear. “After I showered, I dressed in a long white nightgown I found in Gran’s dresser. I think it was from when she got married.” She shook her head. “I wanted to look like a bride that night. All I could think about was
giving myself to Bill. All I could think about was letting him have me so that I wouldn’t have to be afraid anymore. All I could think about was trying not to disappoint him—trying to be worthy of him. All I could think about was that the only way I’d ever feel clean again was if he made love to me.”

“That was your first time?” Eric asked in a quiet voice—though Sookie could tell he was covering up his anger at Bill.

Sookie nodded in confirmation. “Yes. And I thought it was my choice to give my virginity to him, but it wasn’t. I know now that the woven dream drove me to him. Bill was just like Uncle Bartlett. Maybe that’s why I dreamed of them together.” She frowned. “They both preyed upon me right after the people I loved most had died. They both made me think I was not worthy to have anyone else. They both made me feel ashamed and guilty of their actions in order to keep controlling me. But Gran wasn’t there to save me from Bill—like she saved me from my uncle.”

“And you don’t want anything between us to happen because you were forced,” he said perceptively. “Whether that forcing comes from a vampire bond or the Fae bond,” he added.

She nodded. “Yes—and no. Eric—honestly—I’m mainly concerned that I don’t force you.”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “The vampire bond was my suggestion.”

Sookie took a deep breath. “Today when I was driving here and then when I was lying in the sun, I came to truly understand that I wouldn’t have formed a Fae bond with you if I hadn’t already cared about you. From what Niall said, my trust for you had to be real, or the bond would never have formed.” She bit her bottom lip as she contemplated her next words. “Somehow I knew that—of all the people I’d ever known—I could trust you the most. I knew as soon as I saw you in the basement of the Fellowship church that I would be okay. Godric saved me from being raped, but it was you who made me feel like I was safe. And you had made me feel that way before we went to Dallas too.”

“When?”

“When Bill brought me into Fangtasia after I was attacked by the Maenad. I knew that—as soon as you took charge of things—I would be okay. And also when you and Pam came to Merlotte’s to take Bill to the tribunal. You looked back at me when you were walking away that night. It was just a glance, but I thought that there was some kind of promise in it.”

Eric sighed. “I spoke up for Bill that night—with the Magister. I didn’t really want to—and I certainly didn’t have to—but I did. I surprised myself when I did it—and probably surprised Pam even more. But I didn’t want you to be hurt—even then.”

She nodded. “Obviously, part of me trusted you more than I trusted Bill—much more. Otherwise, I would have offered him this Fae bond thing.”

Eric growled involuntarily, an action that made Sookie both smile and lean away from him a little. However, he kept hold of her hand.

“Don’t,” he said, looking down at their entwined fingers. His voice shook with emotion. “Don’t speak of Compton and the Fae bond in the same breath.”

She squeezed his hand back. “Okay. I won’t.”

She waited for a few moments as Eric composed himself before taking a deep breath. “What I needed to make clear is that I chose you, Eric. It may have been an unconscious choice, but it was
still a choice. A part of me—a part that I’m only just beginning to understand—picked you, and that part of me seems to know what it’s doing.” She paused and looked up at him, her eyes rich with emotion. “I just need to know if you picked me too—at least in a way. Do you think that you accepted the Fae bond only because of Godric ordering you off of that roof—because your heart was breaking and you felt vulnerable?” She sniffled. “Because—if that’s the only reason—then I did to you exactly what Bill did to me. I pulled you to me on the worst day of your whole life. I just unintentionally wove a bond instead of intentionally weaving a dream. But the effects are just the same—regardless of motives”

Eric could feel Sookie’s hand shaking—could see her whole body shaking a little—despite the warm air.

“I don’t think it’s the same,” he responded. “Not at all.”

“But I still need to know the answer to my question—for my own peace of mind.”

He closed his eyes. “I’ve told you a little about the night you got attacked by the Maenad, but you need to hear the rest.” He sighed. “That night, it felt like my world was exploding. I’d been ordered to sell V by the queen, and I’d been told that Godric had disappeared. And I couldn’t feel him because he’d shut off his end of our bond years before. And—then—Bill brought you in, and I thought you were going to die.” He shook his head. “It was all so much already! Too much. I had to force myself to stay calm and in control when all I wanted to do was to heal you and kill the one who had harmed you. I called Ludwig in, and I sat exactly fourteen feet away as you went through agony.” He paused. “I didn’t want to be fourteen inches from you—let alone fourteen feet.”

“I didn’t know.”

“How could you have known?” He sighed. “And then Bill gave you his blood. And I wanted to be him.” He chuckled ruefully. “And—trust me—the idea of me wanting to be BillCompton made me cringe, but I would have traded almost anything to be the one healing you.” He paused and opened his eyes. “Fangtasia is light-tight. After Bill went to his rest, I tended to you. You were unconscious, but I cleaned the blood from your back and your face. It calmed me—just to be with you.”

“Calmed you?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yes. I had many burdens that day, yet your presence aided me as I have never been helped by another before. I may not like the fact that the Fae bond has changed me, but it was not the only thing that changed me.” He paused. “So—no—it was not just because of Godric that I accepted the Fae bond, Sookie. I did not knowingly choose the bond, but I did choose you.”

She smiled up at him and squeezed his hand. “Then, I choose the vampire bond, Eric.

He nodded and smiled a little. “Tomorrow night?”

“Why not now?” she asked. “Do you need more time to think?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I want you to have one more day to think about it. Tomorrow, you will learn how to ride a horse, and you can lie in the sun.” He smiled a little. “You are safe here, and you can have,” he paused, “fun. When I rise, we’ll practice your magic and enjoy another meal. We’ll swim in the pool together and then bathe together if you wish—just as we used to. Then—if it is still what you wish—we will exchange blood for a second time.”

She nodded. “That sounds nice.”
“For now, why don’t you eat your dessert and then show me a bit of your magic. There are many more cacti to kill,” he winked.

She chuckled and took a bite of the pecan pie.
Chapter 16: Seguro

Definition: Seguro (Spanish)—safe, secure, certain, sure

Eric woke up the next night just as he’d fallen into his day-rest—with Sookie next to him. However, instead of smelling like the soap she used, she smelt of horses and the sun. And instead of being asleep, she was grinning at him from her side of the bed.

“What has you smiling?” the vampire asked.

“Horses! I love them. Actually—one horse in particular, Seguro.”

“I take it you had fun then?” he asked with a chuckle. Her enthusiasm was contagious.

She nodded vigorously.

“You’re beautiful when you are happy,” Eric said sincerely. Actually, he sighed the words.

She blushed furiously. “I have been happy today! It’s like—by telling you about the other woven dream—I was freed from something. And—uh,” her face fell a bit, “and even if you care about me because of the Fae bond, at least that’s caring. That counts for something—doesn’t it? It is something.”

“Do not forget, little one,” Eric said as he pushed a piece of hair over her ear, “I cared for you before the bond. Yes—the bond has intensified that care in a way that may not have happened as quickly otherwise. I cannot deny that. But I would have been pleased by your happiness—even before. And there is no reason to believe that my affection for you wouldn’t have grown on its own.”

Sookie smiled and leaned in toward Eric until their lips were almost touching. She looked into his eyes, gauging for hesitation or disgust or disappointment or doubt. She saw only curiosity and a kind of steadiness and resolve that only someone who had lived a millennium could have developed.

And there was also a flickering of something else. It wasn’t love—nothing like that, in fact. But Sookie didn’t want to see love. In that moment, she wouldn’t have believed it anyway.

What was there was a strange mixture of “longing” and “withholding.” Sookie understood how finding out about the Fae bond had affected Eric. He’d had to deal with the fact that what he was feeling wasn’t quite real. It was created by the Fae bond—as well as from small kernels of mutual affection. Moreover—Sookie knew that Eric didn’t like to “feel” at all! Thus, the Fae bond had forced emotions onto him in a way that had taken away his control. She couldn’t blame him now for trying to withhold himself to a certain extent and for keeping what was coming from the Fae bond separate from his actual feelings.

But he was also working to forge a path with her in the “new” life they’d been given. They would have to stay together, but Eric was trying to ensure that they wouldn’t lose themselves in the Fae bond. They couldn’t have sexual relationships with others, but Eric wasn’t pressuring her to have sex with him either—even though their having sex seemed like an inevitability to her, especially if
they added a vampire bond.

She also knew that Eric was merely surviving on the TrueBlood he was drinking and that only her blood would satisfy him, but he’d not asked to feed from her. It was true that he’d stopped sharing of himself as he had been doing before they knew about the Fae bond. But he was still sharing in a different way. He was helping her to increase her Fae gifts. He was making her a part of the decisions that would determine the course of their lives. He was telling her about vampire politics and Supernatural politics as a whole. He was—quite literally—making her his partner. He had accepted that their existences were tied to each other’s forever.

He had judged and accepted the benefits of that connection.

He’d accepted her.

Indeed—how could she blame him for withholding a part of himself? Before coming to terms with the Fae bond, she had been holding back as well. But, honestly, she was tired of holding back from Eric—tired of denying what her gut was telling her.

What her instincts had known all along.

That morning and afternoon, as she’d ridden her horse, she couldn’t keep herself from smiling—really smiling.

Until her cheeks had hurt from it.

And it had been Eric who’d arranged for her to have that gift. She hadn’t asked for it. She wouldn’t have even known how to ask! But he’d given it to her nonetheless.

And while she’d ridden, she hadn’t been thinking of Bill or Gran or Russell or Niall. She’d not been thinking about Fae bonds or vampire bonds or blood ties or telepathy. She was thinking of only one thing: the joy of the moment.

Joy!

It was a first for her to feel such a moment without worry.

She was even able to enjoy the thoughts of the one human within her range, for he wasn’t thinking about trying to use her in any way. He wasn’t thinking about how she was a burden or an oddity. To him, she wasn’t crazy or gifted or cursed or nosey. No. Charlie Johnson had just wanted to teach her how to ride a horse, and he wasn’t in a hurry for her to do it either. He was thinking about how everyone went at a different pace when learning to ride, and—since he had no other lessons that day—he was willing to let “the pretty girl with the nice boyfriend” who wanted to buy her a riding lesson take her time.

She’d laughed at Mr. Johnson’s thought about a thousand year old vampire being her boyfriend—let alone his thought about Eric being “nice.” But that had been the full extent of her thinking about Eric too. He’d rested next to her during the night, which had allowed her to sleep and which had—paradoxically—quenched her need to stay next to him. It seemed that the closer she felt to him emotionally, the farther she could be from him physically. So the time they did spend together now seemed like a pleasure rather than a necessity. However, she’d not pondered that fact during her riding lesson either.

She was too busy getting used to the rhythms of the beautiful animal she was working with. She was learning how to guide him to go the way that she wanted, while—at the same time—trusting him to choose the best places to set his own feet in the rough terrain of the desert landscape. She
was learning how to move with him and enjoy the ride as he walked. She was learning to hold tight and let the wind take her breath away when he ran. And she was learning that the roughest ride came in the moments between walking and running—between control and pure freedom—when the horse was at a trot. The first moment she felt herself bounce along with his canter, she’d thought she was going to spring right off of his back, but she didn’t. Instead, her body soon got used to the feeling, and she realized that she was not going to fall!

She’d just thought she was for a little while.

Her time on the horse had zoomed by. When she got off of the animal for the last time that afternoon, she’d taken a while to scratch his head just as Mr. Johnson had told her the horse enjoyed being scratched. The horse, named Seguro because of his sure-footedness during his first steps as a colt, seemed to look right into Sookie. And the telepath realized why she had always loved animals so much and why she missed Tina so much. It was because they seemed to be saying so much with their eyes, yet there was no way for her to know their thoughts.

Seguro’s eyes seemed so full of the confidence he was named for. And they were also content. He was more than happy to have helped her learn to ride that day, and Sookie sensed that he enjoyed his life, despite the bridle and reigns that could have limited him.

Once she’d gotten back to the house, she’d put her hair up into a bun and bathed—but had been careful not to remove the potion before it had run its course. And then she’d lain down next to Eric.

Through the hours of the late afternoon, she’d let herself really think about him—about everything she knew about the Viking vampire. Eric’s vampirism could have tethered him, as Bill’s had. But Eric had accepted the bridle of his new life without allowing it to take away who he was—or his freedom. And she could see him figuring out how to do the same thing with the Fae bond too.

Yes. The Fae bond might control their path in a way, but they could still determine their own steps as they moved along that path. And—if there was one thing that Sookie had grasped from what Niall had said—it was that the Fae bond would try to put them on the path that would most likely keep them safely together—and “safe” didn’t sound bad at all!

Neither did together.

She’d also come to another realization as she’d lain staring at Eric. He was willing to evolve and change with the times—always with the purpose of becoming stronger. Even before the Fae bond, he’d seen her as a way to increase his strength because he’d seen value in her. He’d shown her respect because of that value. He’d negotiated with her instead of trying to control or manipulate her. He’d wanted her to evolve and increase her own power because it would help him AND help her. And she realized that in his mind, those two things—the benefits to both himself and her—had always been one and the same. Indeed, that had been true from the first night she’d met him.

She’d alerted him to the undercover cop, and with no hesitation, he’d believed her. He could have grabbed Pam and left Bill and her to their own devices. But he’d led them out of the club through a secure entrance. She’d made her gift known to him, and—in exchange—he’d made sure she got out without problems. There had always been something of a give and take between them—an inherent instinct that what was good for one of them was good for both.

The look in his eyes that night right before he’d zoomed away was almost exactly what it was now: curiosity, resolve, longing, and withholding. She knew that he needed to protect himself, but she also understood—finally—that he wanted to protect her just as much.
Being on Seguro that day had taught Sookie that she could be strong even if she was frightened. It had taught her that she could stay steady even when it seemed like she would fall. It had taught her that even if she was bridled, she could run. It had taught her that even if she had no idea who “Sookie Stackhouse” really was, it didn’t mean that she couldn’t figure that out. And the possibilities now seemed much bigger than before! The thought of living more than one lifespan would have frightened her before, but now it seemed exciting. She’d have time to figure herself out and evolve with the world around her—just like Eric had and continued to do. Meanwhile, she had a partner willing to help keep her safe.

All of these thoughts zipped through Sookie’s mind quickly, even as she was only a breath away from Eric.

“Seguro,” she whispered as she leaned in the rest of the way and settled her lips over his.

At first, their lips just touched one another.

They’d not kissed since they’d found out about the Fae bond, so both felt the need to pause as they were. When they’d kissed before, they had each been spurred on by the feelings from the Fae bond—the “love” it had made between them. That love was still there, but neither of them could yet accept it as entirely real. So they needed to ground themselves in what they knew to be true.

The vampire let himself enjoy the tactile sensations of the kiss: the softness of Sookie’s lips, the sweetness of her mint-flavored breath, the sharp inhalation that signaled her enjoyment.

The telepath let herself savor the fact that for the first time in her life, she was kissing someone whom she could not “hear,” but someone whom she already knew the thoughts of regarding her.

Both seemed ready to deepen the kiss at the same time as Sookie’s arms came around Eric’s shoulders, and his hands pulled her a little closer. Their mouths opened as their tongues joined their lips in exploration, but the kiss was careful—careful in the best sense. After all, they both needed to be full of care for themselves and for each other.

The passion built between them, but there was no frenzy. Eventually, their clothing was pushed from their bodies, but there was no ripping—no impatience. His hands and then mouth explored further and further down her body, but he kept his attentions upon both the giving and the receiving of pleasure.

And when her legs wrapped around his body so that she could encourage him to enter her, there was no begging. He was not taking her—or claiming her. He was not making her his. And she was not making him hers. After all, how could they deny the fact that they already belonged to one another because of the bond.

This—their first time to be joined—was not about ownership.

It was about trust and a deeper connection than the sexual act itself.

As they moved together and established a steady rhythm, both of them moaned in pleasure, but they were not lost in ecstasy. Their eyes would meet and pause on each other at times, even as they both learned how to bring the other more pleasure. At other times, their eyes would be closed as they focused on holding on to the pleasure for themselves.

Eric kept his mind on the physical sensations he was feeling. Sookie fit his body as perfectly as he’d suspected she would, having held her many times before. Her body welcomed him. Her sheath was tight, but supple and wet as she stretched around him. He went slower at first so that her
body could become accustomed to him, for he’d seen what Bill Compton was packing once when the idiot vampire was fucking a donor in Sophie-Anne’s sunroom—even as she’d been conducting a meeting with her sheriffs! Thus, Eric knew that Sookie had not had anyone close to his size. But that didn’t stop her from moving with him, as he moved into her. His body and her body were true complements, and—in a thousand years—Eric had not come across a woman so suited for him in a physical sense.

The vampire could feel the Fae bond exploding with what could only be called bliss as their bodies moved together, but he didn’t allow himself to dwell on that feeling. For this first joining, he needed to concentrate on only the thoughts in his mind and the feelings of his body.

Meanwhile, Sookie felt the overwhelming pleasure caused by Eric’s years of experience building within her, and she knew that her orgasm was fast-approaching. She too concentrated on the physical sensations of their joining. She was amazed by the feeling of it—the equilibrium of their movements. Bill was one to take control during sex, but Sookie didn’t feel “controlled” by Eric—which was ironic, given the fact that he was literally on top of her. If anything, she felt “warm”—another irony, given the refreshing coolness of Eric’s flesh.

Her first time with Bill had been in the so-called “missionary position” as well. But the feeling of the two experiences couldn’t have been more different. Eric was so much deeper inside of her, yet he was not so heavy on her body. He was so much taller—bigger—but she didn’t feel smothered. Eric’s gracefulness seemed to allow him to touch and kiss anywhere he wished on her face and shoulders, along her collar bones, and on her breasts—even as he maintained his steady rhythm. Bill’s movements had been much less smooth. Also, Eric’s thrusts were more powerful than Bill’s, but, somehow, they were also less aggressive.

Yes. The experiences were night and day, and for that first time in her life, Sookie felt cherished and complete—not because Eric was cherishing her and completing her, though he was doing just that. No—she felt complete in and of herself—even though she wondered whom she might become in the future. And she felt that she could finally cherish herself—to accept the things that had always made her different.

To embrace those things.

Eric was looking into Sookie’s eyes as her orgasm swept through her. He’d found that most women looked lost in that moment of ecstasy—lost in their pleasure. On the contrary, Sookie looked found. And she looked free—free to feel the way her body was being sated. Free to enjoy that feeling.

As her inner muscles caressed his shaft, Eric grunted out his own release. He memorized the moment: her eyes, free and satisfied; her face, relaxed and ethereal; her hair, a chocolate tangle; her legs, wrapped to hold him inside of her; her fingers, pushing into his shoulders; her neck, exposed and ready.

But his fangs didn’t come down, and he didn’t bite. Her posture gave him permission. Their act gave him need. And he wanted to taste her.

But he didn’t want to unsettle the perfect moment by taking something when she was not taking as well. He realized then that the Fae bond had managed to creep into their lovemaking—after all. But he found that he couldn’t resent it. It seemed intent upon keeping the balance between them. He realized something else too; he didn’t need for the woman underneath him to yield to him, as much as he needed to know her trust. He didn’t need to proclaim that she belonged to him—not when every part of her had been given to him freely.

By choice.
Oh—his vampire nature wanted to proclaim that she belonged to him—to mark her body with his fangs. He wanted to go find Compton and rub his fucking nose in the fact that Sookie Stackhouse was his. His instinct was to kill Sophie-Anne and Sam Merlotte and Alcide Herveaux and Russell and anyone else that would dare to even look at his woman with the intent to take her from him. But as she relaxed her legs so that he could withdraw from her body, he realized that he didn’t need to do any of those things.

There was no reason to taunt Bill—because Sookie had never and would never truly belong to him.

Merlotte and Herveaux were also no longer threats for her affection. They were simply two-natured men, whom Sookie had made her friends. Whether they wanted more from her or not simply didn’t matter, for Sookie and he were now one. No—they were not threats; they were potential allies to his bonded fairy.

He would, however, kill anyone—be it vampire king or fairy warrior—who truly did threaten Sookie. However, that was not because she belonged to him or because he wanted her greedily for himself. Well—he did want her greedily. But that was not the main thing.

She was his because she’d selected him—unwittingly or not. And he would protect what they were to each other because it had beauty and uniqueness—even if it still unnerved the hell out of him.

Even if it was difficult to negotiate.

Even if it was impossible to control.

However—despite these things—in that moment, Eric did something he’d yet to truly do. He consciously chose Sookie as well—with every rational thought in his thousand-year-old mind.

He chose her because he wanted her. He chose her because of all the people he’d met in a thousand years—all the humans, vampires, Weres, shifters, demons, fairies, and witches—she was the one who was best-suited for him.

He rolled onto his side, and she turned to look at him as well. They stayed like that for a while—just silent and quiet—and he felt her contentment through their started bond. He wished she could feel his too, so he spoke of it.

“I feel happy,” he said as he settled his hand onto the curve of her hip.

She smiled. “Me too. But I bet you can feel that.”

He nodded.

“I’ve never had an orgasm like that,” she said, even as she flushed pink.

“Bill never?” Eric asked with surprise and judgment in his tone.

She became even redder. “Oh—no. Um—I did have orgasms during sex with him, but he always bit me right before I had them.” She laughed nervously. “I was a little worried that I couldn’t have an orgasm without—uh—getting bitten.” She looked down a little. “I’ve heard from some women’s heads that they need pain to—uh—get pleasure. You remember Dawn?”

He nodded.

Her blush darkened and she spoke quickly. “It’s not like anything’s wrong with that. I mean—I’m not one to judge people for their quirks and preferences. But I just wondered if I could—uh—you
know. Without—uh—being bitten. And then I felt you having an orgasm without biting me first. That’s never happened to me before either. Bill always bit before he . . .” She stopped midsentence and smiled through her blush. “It kind of makes me feel good to know that my body is enough to make you—um—happy enough to—uh—have an orgasm too. I know you probably wanted to take my blood, but I appreciate that you didn’t this time. I mean—you could have, but you chose not to. Octavia said that’s a sign of a vampire caring, and I appreciate that.” She shook her head. “I’m rambling. Sorry.”

“You are nervous?” he asked as he assessed her emotions from the tie.

She nodded.

“Why?”

She kept smiling, though she became impossibly redder. “Most girls are nervous after their first time with a new guy. I’ve heard it from many a head. They’re worried about whether the guy was satisfied and whether he was going to call or just disappear. I guess it’s nice to be nervous—to feel normal like that.

He smiled softly. “I was satisfied—very. And if you were away from me, I would call. Once with you would not be enough.”

She giggled and then turned serious. “Um—do you wanna do the blood exchange now?”

“Later,” he smiled as he pushed her hair behind her ears affectionately before leaning in to kiss her gently. “You should eat first, and we need to check in with Cataliades. ‘I’d also like to have that swim with you and take our bath—this time in the buff,” he said waggling his eyebrows.”

She grinned and leaned in for a kiss of her own. “Promise me something?”

“If I can,” he said.

“Let’s not let Russell find out about this place—if we don’t have to.”

“This place will be just ours,” he promised. “Our home in Slidell too.”

She smiled. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”


“What?”

“Can you—uh—pay Mr. Johnson a little more? He was thinking he might have to sell some of his horses ’cause his arthritis is getting worse. He just needs a little more so he can hire this nice young man in town to move to his ranch and work full time. It wouldn’t have to be much more.”

“Of course, lover,” Eric said without thinking.

“I have a little in savings, and you could apply the money I earned in Dallas to helping him out.”

Eric’s face clouded a bit.

“I know it’s not much,” Sookie said quickly, “and I’m not criticizing you for not paying me for Dallas sooner. I know you had a lot on your plate.”
“No, Sookie. It is not that,” Eric corrected. “Now that we are together, you can ask for whatever you wish. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again—you will not exhaust my money. But—as for the Dallas money—I did pay you; I messengered the check to Compton four days before you came to Fangtasia to report that he was missing.”

Realization came to Sookie’s face. “Bill?”

“You claimed to be his. It was protocol to send the payment that way, and I didn’t want to make waves with Compton because he knew of the queen forcing me to sell V. Otherwise, I would have sent it directly to you just to fuck with him.”

Sookie sighed. “Well—then I guess I’ll have to wait to pay you back until I can learn how to use my fairy light better, kick Bill’s ass, and get my money back.”

In the next moment, Eric was on his back, and he had drawn Sookie up to straddle him.

“Oh!” she gasped in surprise at their sudden change of position.

“Mmmm,” he half-purred and half-growled. “When you talk about kicking asses, you make me want to be the first being that you tame, Sookie.”

She bit her lip a little as she felt his erection standing tall and thick against her bottom. Immediately, her own sex started readying itself for him again.

“You like a girl who takes charge, Northman?” she teased, shifting her bottom a bit so that she could make more contact with his straining member.

“I like you,” he answered with a twinge of desperation in his voice. “I want you.”

Seeing the intensity in his eyes, she couldn’t help but to oblige him, and even though she’d not often been the one in charge during sex, she lifted her body up and took him into herself, slowly lowering until he was fully sheathed.

“You feel incredible,” he almost whimpered.

“You too,” she groaned as she started to move. She set a faster pace than before. This time, they were both more anxious to reach completion. And no thoughts entered either of their minds about bonds or ties or blood.

All Eric could think about was Sookie’s beauty as she rode him. She was unfathomable: innocent and wild, shy and wanton. She was as magnificent as any fairy or Valkyrie, but she was just a human too—a young human woman who was still learning how to seek her own pleasure.

When he could tell that her exertions were tiring her, he placed his large hands on her hips and helped her move, even as he thrust upwards in various directions, finding the spot he was “looking” for after only a few moments.

“Oh God!” she yelled out. “What’s that?” she asked with a pant as she bucked against him, trying to get him to hit that spot again.

“That is the part of you that no one but me will ever touch,” he growled, letting his vampire nature stake its claim at last, as he curved his body and thrust upwards again.

She yelled out in ecstasy and shook above him before coming undone. He watched her orgasm begin, and thrust into it, even as he brought his thumb to stroke her clit.
“Eric!” she yelled more than once as he kept up the stimulation of her body until she felt as if her orgasm was going to cause her body to explode.

Watching her writhing and shaking above him led to Eric’s own orgasm. She collapsed onto his chest, breathing heavily and still shivering. He didn’t feel much more in control as he let himself get lost in the pleasure of the moment. He wrapped her into his arms.

“God,” she giggled after her breathing evened out a little. “You’re much more fun to ride than a horse!”
Eric watched Sookie scoop out a portion of her leftover casserole. She was standing only across the room, yet it still seemed too far.

She’d slipped on the long dress she’d worn a few days before. He’d had a difficult time controlling himself that day—given the way the dress had hugged her body, concealing so much of it, yet hinting at so much more.

Now that she had given her body to him, he could enjoy doing everything he’d imagined before—touching her over her dress, nipping at the exposed flesh of her collarbone and shoulders, and slowly teasing the fabric far enough up her legs to let him taste paradise. She turned around and caught him licking his lips at the thought.

“Hungry?” she asked innocently.

“Very,” he returned suggestively, even as he looked up and down her body.

Immediately all the parts of her body he could see flushed red. He grinned boyishly. “You still blush, lover? After all we have done to each other, I find that odd.” He walked toward her slowly. “Odd and alluring.”

“Eric,” she breathed out as he began to trail kisses down her neck. His hands settled over the fabric on her hips before trailing upward and then palming her breasts. She was not wearing a bra under the dress this time, so he was able to easily pluck and tease her nipples into hard buds.

Just as he was getting ready to drop to his knees to see if the dress had enough fabric for him to fit under, the microwave dinged and alerted them that Sookie’s dinner was warmed.

He looked at her face and saw indecision there as she glanced toward the machine that held her food. Her stomach growled.

He chuckled. “You should eat, lover.”

She bit her lip and nodded. “How about you? I mean—do you want a blood?”

“Yes. Thank you,” he answered with a little kiss to her forehead as he went to the refrigerator. He was tempted to say no to the vile liquid since he had the promise of Sookie’s blood later, but he didn’t want to be tempted to take too much, and he knew that she liked it when they dined together. He could feel her contentment when they did and recognized it was because she missed eating meals with her grandmother. He had learned that Sookie longed for moments of closeness with those she valued, and sharing a meal was a simple thing.

And he could stomach a TrueBlood for that.

He took her meal out of the microwave and replaced it with his blood as she fixed herself a glass of iced tea and lemon.

“Fairies are supposedly harmed by these,” Sookie mused as she squeezed the wedge of citrus to
flavor her drink.

“Lemons?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she returned. “The book Niall gave me warns about them harming the Fae. Iron does too; it’s like silver for a vampire. I’m sort of surprised that Niall gave me a book that contained a listing of fairies’ weaknesses, especially since he had to have known I would tell you about them.”

“He is not willing to protect you from his enemies now that you are with me.” The vampire sighed. “It is good that he is at least willing to arm us with this knowledge.”

Sookie shrugged. “I wanna think it’s because he cares about me. Maybe a little?”

“Sookie, if he didn’t, he would have let you die in Faerie instead of bringing you back. To him, your living with me—your being bonded to me—is a worse fate for you than dying.”

Sookie scoffed. “I don’t know if it was him that decided to bring me back. I heard a woman yelling at him that I’d die if he didn’t. Otherwise, who knows what he’d have done?”

The microwave’s dinging once more interrupted them, but this time, both of them were glad for the distraction.

Eric relaxed his hands, which had balled up into fists at Sookie’s words. He’d not known that Niall had almost allowed Sookie to die—that he’d been responsible for her having to endure more pain than was necessary. If he’d been unimpressed by the fairy before, he was doubly so now.

Neither Sookie nor Eric said anything as they carried their meals to the patio. The night was warm and still.

“Did you practice today?” Eric asked as they sat down.

“Yeah—a little,” she smiled. “It’s getting easier to call up my light. See?” She immediately produced a ball of light in her palm. “And I was able to produce three bursts in a row before my power sort of petered out.” She sighed, “According to the book, fairies are supposed to be able to produce the bursts without limitation unless they are injured. Maybe it’s because I’m part human that I can’t?” she half-asked and half-mused.

Eric nodded. “That is a reasonable hypothesis. Perhaps your fairy cousin can supply an answer.”

The two avoided talking about fairies for the rest of the meal. Instead, Eric asked Sookie to tell him more about her experience learning to ride a horse. Then, he told her about his own admiration for the majestic animals and promised that they would return to Fort Stockton when they could in order to go riding together. It was a pleasant conversation, and it was—for lack of a better word—”normal.”

Part of Eric wanted to resist what he was feeling for the woman he was bonded to by Fae magic—the woman he intended to bond with in the vampire way too. He knew that much of what he was feeling was not from him; in fact, he could distinguish what he now knew was the Fae bond thurmming even then.

But he also knew that he had to adapt to the changes that had come—accept them. He was still determined not to let the Fae bond control him, but he knew that he needed to come to terms with the new wrinkles in his existence. Otherwise, he wouldn’t survive.

After dinner, Sookie quickly took care of her few dishes and her human needs as Eric went to the
living room to check his email. He found only one: a message from Mr. Cataliades. The demon explained that he would be busy for most of the evening, but would call when he could.

“How is the diagram coming?” Sookie asked as she came into the living room. Eric patted the seat next to him on the couch.

“See for yourself,” Eric said, opening the file he’d been working on to show her.

“Wow!” she exclaimed as she looked at his work. “This looks more like a blueprint of Russell’s mansion rather than a diagram to me!”

“It’s the same program that architects use,” Eric reported with a little smirk. “And here,” he said, pointing to the screen, “are the outbuildings you told me about.”

Sookie nodded. “Do you think we’ll attack him at his mansion?”

Eric sighed. “I don’t think so, but if we can get a spy in there, all this will become useful. If we can determine the level of security he has in his main residence, then we will better understand him as a whole.”

Knowing that Eric was frustrated because he’d not yet come up with a specific plan to eliminate Russell, Sookie nodded again and squeezed his shoulder. “You’ll find a way,” she said sincerely. “And now you get to have this to add to your assets!” she added as she allowed her hands to light up.

He turned his body toward her, his eyes focusing on hers with an intensity that took her breath away. “Touch me,” he whispered passionately.

She looked at her hands with a little concern and then reached out to touch his chest. Her light absorbed into him.

He sighed in pleasure and closed his eyes.

“What did it feel like?” she asked tentatively.

His eyes opened, and she was enraptured by the placid blue pools she saw.

“I feel calm and centered—focused. I feel—good.”

She bit her lip. “I’m surprised you—uh—wanted me to do that. I know you don’t like the thought that the bond can affect us.”

He sighed. “I behaved badly right after I learned of it. Octavia was right when she told me that I should accept what is good about the Fae bond. I thought I’d lost something, and I was reacting to the fact that I thought that I . . . .” He stopped midsentence.

“Loved me?” she asked carefully.

“Yes,” he admitted.

“But you don’t?”

“No, do you love me?” he asked in return.

“I don’t know.” She whispered as she closed her eyes. “But I feel love for you. I feel a lot of it—the kind I have for friends and the kind I always imagined I’d have for the man I thought I’d. . . .”
She stopped for a moment. “But I think some of it’s the fairy bond. Maybe?” She opened her eyes. “I just don’t know how much of it is.”

He nodded. “I feel love for you too, but—even as I do—I am not certain of it.”

He reached out and put his hand on her cheek. “But I do,” he paused, “care for you a great deal. And—that—I know is from me. I hope that you will trust in that.”

She sighed and leaned into his touch. “I do. I care for you too, Eric.”

“Maybe not love—but something close,” he whispered.

“Yes—close.”

He smiled. “Our destinies will always be entwined, Sookie Stackhouse.”

She sighed. “Not Stackhouse. Not anymore.”

His smile dropped. “Surnames—family names—were not used in my time as they are used today. I was identified as Eiríkr Ulfrikson in villages beyond my own. I chose Northman almost four hundred years ago because I wanted to keep hold of my human heritage—even if it was only in symbolic form.”

“I don’t know who I am,” she said, wiping a sudden tear from her eye.

“Then take the time to choose,” he said. “You have made ‘Stackhouse’ your own, however. You have made it a name that I will always associate with beauty and strength and bravery. That was you, Sookie. Just you. For you are the only Stackhouse I have ever really known.”

She smiled. “Sometimes, I’m pretty sure that I would have fallen in love with you without any bonds or any ties, Eric Northman.”

He returned her smile. “Sometimes, I imagine what it would have been like taking you to my human father and mother and presenting you as my bride-to-be. I believe I would have done that—if you had been a girl in my village.”

She gasped a little—both at his words and at the sincerity behind them, and for a moment—just a moment—she imagined that they were a simple human couple, going to meet with Eric’s parents. She imagined how nervous she would have felt—and how happy.

“Wait!” she exclaimed. “They would have disapproved of me—wouldn’t have they?”

“Of a serving wench?” he asked waggling his eyebrows.

“Oh God!” she cried. “They would have disapproved!” She looked horrified.

“No,” he said sincerely as he placed his palm against her cheek. “They would have seen your worth—my mother especially. You have a strength in you—beyond your telepathy and beyond your Fae power. It is the strength of goodness, and my mother would have admired that.” He chuckled. “And my father would have listened to her.”

Sookie’s lips twitched into a smile even as she fought to keep her tears at bay. “Thanks,” she said quietly as she leaned into his shoulder a little. “Not many people have said nice things about me like that.”

He leaned in and kissed her temple. There wasn’t anything he could say to make up for the fact
that Sookie hadn’t been appreciated throughout her life. Frankly, he didn’t quite understand it. He wondered what his own people would have made of someone with Sookie’s gifts. The humans of his time were closer to the Supernatural than the humans now. The gods and goddesses were ever-present in their lives. Thus, a girl like Sookie would have been either killed out of fear or revered as a gift from the gods. He sighed. Humans had not evolved much after all. They still went to extremes with things they didn’t understand. And the girl next to him wanted only to be “normal”—to fit somewhere and to be appreciated for herself. Eric wasn’t sure he was the best individual to provide Sookie with what she needed, but he knew that he would try—wanted to try.

His thoughts were interrupted by his phone ringing. Sookie sat up nervously.

“It’s just Cataliades,” Eric said as he looked at the incoming number.

She relaxed as Eric answered and put the call on speaker.

“Good evening,” the vampire said.

“And to you,” the demon returned.

Their pleasantries over, Eric got down to business. “What can you tell me?” he asked.

“Yesterday, I contacted Russell with the information about the house in Houston about a half an hour before dawn, as I said I would.”

“And?”

“And he did just as we thought he would. He made immediate arrangements that placed him in Houston at sunset. Victor went as well.”

“What of Compton and the witch?” Eric asked.

“They are still in New Orleans. Apparently, my goddaughter set up a bit of a magical wild goose chase. Compton has ordered Rasul to secure a guide and a hovercraft for later tonight. I believe that Compton is escorting the witch into the bayou,” the lawyer chuckled. “They are going to look for the source of the magic on the pouch left behind by Pamela.”

“Perhaps, they’ll run into some gators,” Sookie mumbled.

Eric and Sookie smiled at each other. “Be sure to compliment your goddaughter for us. So—what of Russell and Victor?”

The demon lawyer let out a half-chuckle, half-snort. “They were not pleased by what they found at your Houston home—I’m afraid.”

“They didn’t hurt the Aldridges—did they?” Sookie asked with concern. “The human family there?”

“No,” Mr. Cataliades quickly assured.

“What happened?” Eric asked.

“Apparently, one of Queen Dulcina’s people, Miguel Abarca, stumbled upon a scent that he knew.”

“And whose scent would that be?” Eric asked with a wink at Sookie.
“Yours!” the demon returned with false surprise in his tone.

“Oh my!” Eric said with false concern, eliciting a giggle from Sookie.

“Of course, the first thing Miguel did was to contact his queen, who in turn contacted the Authority. The queen’s people and the Authority representatives showed up only minutes after Victor had begun questioning the humans.”

“Well—I’m certain that Russell would have informed Queen Dulcina about his presence in her queendom,” Eric commented, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Against my advice, he did not,” the demon reported, a smile in his voice. “I have been scrambling to smooth things over, but the presence of the Authority agents has complicated things—as you might imagine.”

“Indeed,” Eric chuckled.

“However, Dulcina has graciously agreed to overlook the matter of Russell’s break of protocol. However, the Authority was much less understanding until . . . ,” Cataliades paused dramatically.

“Until Nan became involved,” Eric finished.

“Yes,” the demon confirmed. “I believe you are right about there being some kind of connection between Nan and Russell. But how did you know?”

“Godric,” Eric said quietly. “Russell knew more about the situation with Godric than he should have, and Nan is—despite her other flaws—not a gossip. She would have told only someone close to her.”

As soon as Eric spoke Godric’s name, Sookie took his hand in hers, hoping the gesture would somehow comfort the vampire.

“Well,” Mr. Cataliades remarked with a sigh, “it was not obvious that she was helping him, but since I was looking for it, I noticed.”

“What did she do?”

“From what I could pick up on, Queen Dulcina didn’t contact Nan directly. I suppose that was your doing?”

“Yes,” Eric answered. “I was hoping that she would get in touch with Jacob.”

The Viking looked at Sookie, who was looking at him in question.

Eric clarified. “Jacob is another of the AVL’s spokespeople; both he and Nan work for the Authority as well. Nan is based in the East and Jacob is in the West. Since Texas is in the middle of the United States, Dulcina can get away with going through Jacob, though Nan is usually the one that handles business for both the AVL and the Authority in Texas. Nan hates Jacob because he’s Roman’s child. She thinks that he got his position through nepotism.”

Sookie nodded. Eric had told her already that the AVL was simply the public face of the Authority. And he’d also told her about its leader, Roman.

Cataliades chuckled. “No—Nan hates Jacob because almost everyone prefers him over her.”

“That too,” Eric intoned.
“Dulcina contacted only Jacob,” Cataliades confirmed, “but—somehow—Nan found out and showed up on site about an hour after everyone else did. Once there, she claimed that Russell had informed her that he suspected Eric might be in the Houston area and had asked for Authority permission to begin a search.”

“And Nan claimed that she’d granted him that permission?” Eric asked.

“Yes,” the demon responded. “She further claimed that she and Russell were going to contact Queen Dulcina as soon as the veracity of the information was confirmed.”

“I imagine Nan was happy to see Jacob,” Eric said sarcastically.

“Yes—they do get along so well together,” the demon said in the same tone.

“So—where are we?” Eric asked.

“Russell is fuming,” the demon reported. “He suspects that Dulcina might be harboring you, but can prove nothing.”

“Good,” Eric said with a smile. “This is exactly what I wanted.”

Mr. Cataliades chuckled. “With Nan’s sudden appearance and Dulcina’s seeming forbearance, Russell isn’t being fined—at least not too heavily. And I was able to negotiate Russell and Victor staying throughout the questioning.” He chuckled. “Can you imagine Jacob and Nan working together to question those poor people?”

Eric snickered and mouthed the word, “later,” to Sookie.

Mr. Cataliades continued. “You glamoured the humans there well. They were able to say only that their nephew Eric was away because of his work, but that he’d been around more recently and planned to return in a week. Jacob glamoured them to call him if you returned, but—otherwise—the humans will not remember their encounter with the vampires. Nan and Jacob are each leaving several vampires and Weres to keep watch over the house,” the lawyer added.

“And you are sure that they found no trace of Sookie?”

“None. Octavia’s potion worked just as she said it would. Russell has asked me to use my contacts to keep tabs on the Texas vampires. You have introduced a few more variables for Russell and Victor to deal with. Well done.”

Eric looked pleased for a moment, but then his face fell a little. “I am still no closer to knowing how to defeat Russell.”

“But you have bought yourself more time and some breathing room. And you know how Queen Dulcina holds a grudge.”

“Yes,” Eric said evenly. “Is there anything else we should know tonight?”

“Not tonight,” the demon said. “Hunter’s teacher will be checking in with him tomorrow. I will have an update from her in the next few days.”

Sookie smiled. “Thanks, Mr. Cataliades.”

“It is nothing, dear.” Sookie heard the phone click. As expected, the demon hung up without saying goodbye.
Sookie giggled.

“What is it, lover?” Eric asked.

“Supes and phone manners,” she said.

“Ah. I can see how we would seem,” he paused, “abrupt to you.”

“That’s one way to put it,” she smirked.

Eric closed down his computer. “Shall we have our swim?”

“Are you sure we should? I mean—the spell that covers our scents will be lost.”

Eric smiled. “I will do a large sweep to make sure we are truly alone. Then we will swim and bathe. After that, we will reapply the potion and our scents will be covered once more. A couple of hours will not make a difference—not out here. No one knows about this residence other than the two of us.”

“I don’t want to take any chances,” Sookie said cautiously.

“We won’t be. I promise you, Sookie,” he said sincerely. “We know exactly where our enemies are tonight. And—as I said—I will double check the security of this area before we go for our swim.”

“Okay,” Sookie smiled. “I’ll go put on my swim suit.”

Eric smirked. “I’d really prefer it if you didn’t, lover.”

She blushed.

Eric chuckled and got up. “I will meet you in the pool.”

Sookie rushed into their bedroom and pulled out the only swimsuit Amelia had bought for her, a white bathing suit looking like it might have once belonged to Esther Williams—at least a modern one—since it was two pieces and had only strings holding it on her. Since the desert air was getting cooler, she put on a robe over it and then padded outside. The sight that met her was one that she would not soon forget.

Bathed in the glow of the almost full moon, Eric looked like a god or an angel. His back was toward her and he was nude, his body looking ethereal as the light seemed to both absorb into and reflect from him.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, but his look didn’t hold the lust she’d expected. It was the picture of relaxation. He gave her a smile and then turned and dove into the pool. As if pulled by a string, Sookie walked over to the pool and watched him gliding under the water for a moment. His body was moving at human speed, though his strokes were inhuman in their perfection. He was the definition of masculine beauty in that moment—agile and graceful, strong and confident.

Sookie let the robe fall from her shoulders. She had dipped her feet into the water the night before, so she knew it was relatively warm even though the sun was no longer out. She continued to watch the vampire until he emerged. He gave her a welcoming smile. She was not one to dive, but she held her nose and jumping in.

When she broke the surface of the water, Eric was exactly where she figured he’d be: nowhere in sight. So she wasn’t surprised when he grabbed her in his embrace from behind, nor was she
surprised when she was being dunked by a playful vampire. What did surprise her was the kiss they shared under the water before he brought them to the surface again.

They were both smiling when he did. She put her arms around his neck and drifted through the water with him as he lightly swished his feet. To Sookie, swimming with Eric almost felt like flying, except without the fear of heights. It was exhilarating and freeing—and fun.

“I love the water,” the Viking said as Sookie floated in his arms. “The sea where I am from was cold most of the year, but I still loved it. And there were hot springs near our village where we would bathe throughout the year.”

Sookie smiled, happy that Eric was sharing something of his human past so freely. “There’s a small lake near Jason’s house. My dad taught me to swim in that lake when I was little, and Jason lets me go there any time I want since the public pool in Bon Temps was always too hard for me to go to.”

“Mmmm,” Eric purred, pulling her body into his own. She shivered, but not because it was cold. “I can only imagine the lustful thoughts you would hear from men and women alike if you went to a public place in this outfit. I know that mine are very lustful, my lover.”

Before Sookie could blush, Eric’s lips were on hers, and she forgot to be embarrassed. In the next moment, she was no longer floating in the water; she was floating in the air.

“Eric?” she asked.

“Bath,” he answered simply as he flew them into the house. Her legs were wrapped around his waist tightly, and she was happy to continue their kiss. She smiled into his lips, deciding that she liked his plans very much. What wasn’t to like? Warmer water—check. Closer quarters with Eric—check. A seat next to the gracious plenty that was currently rubbing against her bikini bottoms—check, check! And yum, yum!

Somehow Eric managed to turn the water on for the tub without breaking their kiss, a fact which Sookie was more than happy about. He sat her down on the counter as the tub filled. It was then that he broke their kiss and looked at her mischievously. For her part, she used the time to catch her breath.

“Hmm,” he pondered playfully. “I wonder how many orgasms I can give you before the tub fills up.”

Sookie didn’t have time to react before he pulled the strings of her bikini, and she was bare before him. She glanced over his shoulder at the tub.

“It’s a big tub,” she said throatily. “It’ll take a while to fill. So I’m guessing two.”

“You underestimate me,” he growled as he took one of her nipples into his mouth and began to tease her clit with his fingers. He’d already discovered some of the things that set her off, and soon he was working her nerve center with his thumb while pushing two long fingers into her body. A single curve of his talented digits later, and she was shaking with orgasm one. He didn’t give her a chance to recover before he was down on his knees in front of her, tasting her release and bringing her toward a second orgasm with his rapidly-moving tongue.

“Eric,” she moaned as he plunged his tongue inside of her again and again before bringing it to her clit and sucking. His fingers found their way back inside of her, and soon she was writhing with orgasm number two.
“The tub’s only half full, lover,” he said as he looked up at her, licking his lips.
Exchange

Chapter 18: Exchange

“The price of anything is the amount of life you exchange for it.”—Henry David Thoreau

Half an hour later, they were lounging in the tub, Sookie still recovering from Eric’s mission to transform her body into a continuous orgasm machine and the vampire looking extremely pleased with himself even though the large erection currently resting against Sookie’s back had yet to be taken care of.

But he could be patient as she caught her breath from his “work.”

Her fingers were drawing circles around his knees, which were sticking out of the water. In turn, his fingers were playing with the tops of hers hands.

“I can’t believe that in all the times we took baths together after the severing spell that I never felt that thing,” Sookie giggled, wiggling a bit against his cock.

“That thing?” he chuckled. “It has been called many things, but never that.”

“Mmmm, it’s a nice thing,” she said with another giggle.

“Just nice?”

“Naughty?” she teased.

He nipped her neck with his blunt teeth. “Always—when it’s around you.”

“Are you sad?” she asked a few minutes later, as she turned her hands over to embrace his. Their fingers entwined together perfectly.

“Sad about what?” he asked.

“Well—because of the Fae bond, it’ll be difficult for you to have sex with anyone else.”

“Impossible,” he corrected. “And you should be the sad one.”

“Why?” she asked.

He sighed. “Do you want me to be blunt?”

“Yeah,” she responded, suddenly more than a little nervous.

“Then turn around so that I can look at you while we talk.”

Sookie scooted away from him a little before turning around. The tub was so full that she had to be careful so that water didn’t slosh out.

He retook her hands when she was facing him. “You will not like what I’m about to say, Sookie. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

She nodded.
“I am a thousand years old—a little more than that actually. That is more than 365,000 nights.”

Sookie bit her lip, beginning to understand where he was going with this topic.

“I have fed many of those nights, Sookie, and you know that vampires tend to associate food and sex. I’m sure that you can also guess that I have not been one for,” he paused, “monogamy.”

Sookie frowned. “Eric, how can I ever be enough for you?” she asked nervously. “You’ve been with so many!”

“No, Sookie.” He looked a little nervous and raked one of his hands through his damp hair, even as he squeezed her hand with his other. “I’m not explaining this right.” He inhaled deeply, letting the unneeded air fill his lungs before pushing it out in a rush. “I have been with many, but never with one, Sookie. There was never one that I wanted to be with more than a few times. Even Pam and I lost interest in each other soon after I made her, and most of the times we were together involved others anyway. I was with Godric many times over the years, but we were never anything approaching monogamous.”

Sookie reddened again. “Did you—uh—like being with a man? I mean—uh—it’s a little weird thinking of you doing that—not that there’s anything wrong with it, but I just don’t have much experience. And the only gay person I know—well, at least the only one that admits it out loud—is Lafayette. And he likes only guys.”

Eric shrugged. “I have tried about every kind of sex and sexual partner you can imagine, though I have never taken someone who was unwilling. I’ve not had many male partners, for they were generally less satisfying to me. Godric, of course, was the exception because there was love between us. I have not had a male lover in some time. But this is not what I wanted to talk about either.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I—uh—didn’t mean to get you off your train of thought.”

He chuckled. “It’s fine. It’s just that I have tried everything: males and females and some that were quite literally both; people of all sizes and ages; people of all ethnicities and races I have come across; Weres and shifters and demons.” He once again dragged his hand through his hair. “I am happy—anxious even—to have one. One person whose body I will come to know as my own. With you—it has already been better than with the others, not only because I care for you, but because you care for me. But I am only your second—if I am not mistaken. And one day, especially if you become vampire, you may long for others. But the Fae bond will not allow you any more than it will allow me. So I fear that you will be the disappointed one.”

Sookie’s jaw dropped. “You—uh—think I’ll get bored with you?”

He shrugged again. “I have many experiences to contrast with the sex we have had, and those other encounters don’t even compare. Maybe it’s the bond or your blood or your light or just the fact that you are you. I don’t know, and I don’t fucking care anymore. What I do know is that I have wanted you since I met you, and having you has only made that ‘want’ increase.”

She shook her head, still feeling shock. “So I’m nervous because I think I won’t be enough for you because you’ve had a lot of experience. And you’re nervous because you think you won’t be enough for me because I’ve had too little experience?”

He nodded. “Yeah. That about sums it up.”

She shook her head. “We’re quite the pair—you and I.”
He chuckled. “Yeah. That about sums it up,” he repeated.

She smiled. “Usually, I’d let all my insecurities rip me up inside, but I don’t wanna do that anymore, Eric. I wanna be happy with this—with us. Yeah, we were forced into it, but we can’t change that now, and this,” she used her freehand to gesture between them, “makes me happy. And trust me when I say that I don’t think I’ll be getting bored with you any time soon—unless I stop liking orgasms.” Immediately, she flushed at her own words.

He chuckled and then leered at her as he pulled her closer. “Do you want another one?”

“Only if you get one too this time,” she returned shyly.

“I was planning on it,” he said as he slipped his freehand into the water to test her readiness. “You are wet for me, lover,” he purred.

“I’m in the water,” she teased. “Of course, I’m wet.”

He slipped two fingers into her, and she moaned in pleasure. “I do not think this is water, little one.”

He lifted her body and slowly replaced his fingers with something much larger. He eased into her, giving her body time to stretch around him.

“Oh God, Eric! You feel so good!”

“Look at me!” he demanded as her eyes closed and her head lulled backwards. “You feel good too, Sookie,” he said when he captured her eyes. “You feel best. You feel right.”

She leaned forward and kissed him hard, rewarding him for words that made her heart soar.

“I want to exchange while we are like this,” she panted as she broke their kiss.

Eric stopped their movements for a moment. “Are you certain?” he asked. “Blood and sex need never mix with us, Sookie.”

“I want them to, Eric,” she said sincerely, taking his face in both of her hands. “You once told me that everything to a vampire is about blood. And I want you to have everything.”

His lips crashed into hers this time. The water level in the tub was forgotten as Sookie and Eric moved together, neither one of them caring at all that the floor was becoming drenched. Eventually Sookie had to break the kiss in order to breathe. But Eric had no such need, so he kept kissing her cheek and then her neck. She felt her orgasm approaching like a tidal wave and held onto Eric’s shoulders as he increased his upward thrusts so that she wouldn’t be swept away by it.

“Sookie,” Eric groaned, his eyes feral and his fangs fully down for the first time that they’d had sex.

“Yes,” Sookie moaned, using that single word to say so many things. Yes—she commanded, wanting him to keep going so that she’d be struck down by the wave pounding into her. Yes—she celebrated, ecstatic because of the feeling he was stimulating in her. Yes—she answered, confirming her desire to bond with him. Yes—she demanded, ready to take his blood and to feed him her own.

“Yes,” she said again.
Eric growled wildly, but Sookie was not frightened of him. She knew that he wouldn’t hurt her.

And then something clicked inside of her. “He won’t hurt you; he won’t ever hurt you,” a voice inside of her said. It was a strong voice. It was a sure voice. It was her own voice. And it sounded beautiful.

Eric felt Sookie’s joy coming through their tie and celebrated in it. He saw the certainty in her eyes and reveled in it.

She was so fucking beautiful that he wanted to proclaim her as his to the world. However, he had always been more about action than words. He could feel Sookie’s walls beginning to constrict around his cock and knew that her orgasm would not be held off for much longer—despite the fact that he’d been deliberately avoiding the spot inside of her that would have sent her over the edge immediately. He’d wanted to prolong this joining, but he would not be able to hold in his own release once her inner walls were caressing him.

He brought his wrist to his mouth and bit savagely, creating a large wound. Sookie grabbed his hand and immediately put it to her mouth, biting a bit more as she did.

“Yes!” he roared in pleasure as her action stimulated both of their orgasms. He fell forward at the power of his ecstasy and then increased it by biting into her neck.

Eric’s next conscious thought was several minutes later. Given the power of his reaction, he was grateful that his instincts had kicked in at some point. His nose was still against her shoulder, but he’d obviously licked her wound closed and was glad to see that he’d not created larger punctures, given his zeal to have her blood. Already, her wounds were fading because of his own blood, rolling around in her system. No—his blood seemed to be playing in her bloodstream.

Sookie was lying against his chest, her legs still wrapped around him. His cock was still inside of her. He’d never felt more sated after sex. And he’d never felt another’s emotions as he was now feeling Sookie’s. She was happy and tired.

As content as he was.

Eric was thankful that there would be only a three hour and thirty minute drive for her the next day. Thinking of the fact that that drive would make it impossible for him to wake up in her arms the next night, he decided to change their plans a bit.

“Lover,” he said into her hair.

“Mmmm,” she returned sleepily—dreamily.

“It is five hours until dawn.”

“Mmmm,” she said again, this time with a little purr in her voice. “Just give me fifteen minutes, and I’ll be ready again.”

He chuckled. “It is not that, little one. Though I am already anxious to have you again, I think we should gather our belongings and leave as soon as possible. I can drive us to our next destination.”

“You wanna leave here sooner than planned?” she asked a little sadly.

“Only so that I can go to my day-rest with you next to me. I don’t want to awaken without you, and I don’t want to think of you having to sleep in the backseat of the car.”
She was more awake now. “But isn’t it more dangerous for us to travel at night?”

Eric nodded. “Usually, I would agree with you. But we are in one of the more sparsely populated regions of the country, both in terms of humans and supernatural beings.

She sat up a little and groaned with disappointment as he pulled himself from her body. “How far are we from where we’re goin’?”

“We are just going to Roswell. I could have us there in around three hours.”

Sookie smiled a little. “Roswell as in aliens?”

“Yes,” he chuckled.

“Okay,” she said. “But I need to shower really fast.”

“Good idea, lover,” he purred into her ear. The next thing she knew, they were both in the shower, and he was holding her against the tiles as he took her quickly, this time hitting her spot with every stroke. He once more proved he could make her cum in record time before he tenderly set her onto the shower bench and washed her hair and body. Then he bathed himself at vampire speed before drying them both off and applying Octavia’s scent concealment potion to their foreheads.

Sookie felt like she’d been in an “Eric whirlwind” as he gathered their belongings and loaded the car. All that she’d managed to do was get herself dressed and dry the bathroom floor before putting all the towels that they’d used into the washing machine. Eric assured her that he’d already glamoured Mr. Johnson to send the maid he’d hired the next day, so Sookie set the washing machine so that the towels would soak in bleach throughout the rest of the night.

Given that they’d been in the house for fewer than two days, there wasn’t much mess. And with Eric going at vampire speed, the place soon looked like no one had been staying there, except for the fact that the bed was a mess. Sookie gathered the sheets and took them to the laundry room just so that she could feel better about the fact that she was leaving “sex sheets” behind.

A little more than four hours before dawn, Sookie was waiting about two miles away from Eric’s property while he did a last-minute perimeter check as had become his habit when they left a safe house. Sookie also knew that he was searching for any trace of her scent. If his scent was picked up, it would be regrettable, but if hers were found, she knew it would be a disaster for them.

She also had her telepathy stretched out as far as possible. She could sense Mr. Johnson in her range, but he was asleep, and she’d never picked up the thoughts from people’s dreams—thankfully. She was mostly keeping her mind on the void that she knew was Eric. As he got closer, she smiled. After the second exchange, she’d started picking up little things from him—not his feelings exactly, but little flashes of energy that she knew were emanating from him. It was almost like small streaks of light or electricity that she could see in her head and feel in her body.

She smiled as he landed in front of the car. She couldn’t help but to notice the fact that he looked extremely pleased with himself.

“What?” she asked as he got into the driver’s seat and began driving.

“It’s just that I will always remember that house as the one where we had sex for the first time.” He smirked. “And the second time. And the third time. And. . . .”

Before he could continue, Sookie stopped him with a zap of light to the arm.
“Hey!” he grinned. “I’m trying to drive, and that tickled.”

She giggled. “Well—unless you want the business end of my light the next time, you’ll be good.”

“Was I not good, lover?” he purred.

She shook her head, knowing that she’d never “win” a conversation about sex with a thousand-year-old vampire, who seemed to have the sense of humor of a teenaged boy at times. She wondered if any man ever grew out of that and was immediately glad Eric hadn’t.

She yawned.

“You should sleep, little one,” Eric said, his voice softening.

“Don’t you want company?” she asked.

“I have company,” he smiled.

She returned the smile and then pulled their quilt from the backseat of the car, wrapping it around her body. She reclined the seat a bit, and within moments, she was asleep.

The next thing she knew, she was being picked up from the car and carried inside their next “home.” She nestled against Eric’s chest and spoke sleepily.

“We have neighbors this time, but they’re all asleep, except for one that way,” she gestured with her head. Her eyes were still closed. “He just got home from his shift at the Air Force base, but he’s not thinking of aliens,” she giggled a little, “or anything other than taking a shower.”

Eric chuckled and kissed her forehead. “Do you need the bathroom before I settle you into bed, little one?”

She nodded, and he carried her to the en-suite bathroom attached to the master bedroom. “I will be right back,” he said as he unwrapped her from the quilt and left the room. When she was done taking care of her human needs, she left the bathroom and crawled into the bed.

Eric joined her a moment before she fell back to sleep, snuggling up behind her.

“I have placed the perishable foodstuffs into the refrigerator and brought in our bags. There is a note on the nightstand with the codes to this home. I shall see you tonight, lover.”

“Okay,” she mumbled as she nestled into his chest.

Sookie felt half-awake and half-asleep as Eric fell into his day-sleep. The little flickers of electricity she’d been feeling from Eric suddenly went away, and she realized just how much she’d loved them—how much she loved him.

“I love you, Eric,” she mumbled sleepily. She smiled into his chest as she recognized what she’d said. The words sounded good and right. She did love him—despite the fact that the Fae bond had helped to create that emotion. She knew that she should have probably taken more time—after the Bill situation—before she let herself fall in love again, but she couldn’t help herself when she thought about all Eric had done for her and all the talks they’d had. After they’d found out about the Fae bond, she’d been worried that he wouldn’t forgive her, but he hadn’t blamed her. And he seemed to be accepting the Fae bond now.

Sookie felt hopeful that the vampire bond would help Eric to feel better about what they had. She
knew that it would make him feel more “equal” in a way. She cuddled closer to him, already missing the little wisps that would become his feelings when they finished the vampire bond.

“I love you,” she repeated a little louder and a little more awake now. She couldn’t help but to wonder what she would feel from Eric—what she would feel him feeling for her. She didn’t think it would be love; after all, he had told her that he was going to try to focus on his own feelings and not those being made by the Fae bond. But she would surely feel his affection for her and—just maybe—something close to love.

Sookie was just about to fall into her sleep next to the man she now knew she loved when a sudden fear struck her. She sat straight up in the bed.

What if she felt something else entirely from Eric? He was—after all—”deep,” just as she’d said in her first dream about him. She knew that he felt care for her; he’d told her that, and she trusted that he’d been telling her the truth. But what if other feelings were dominant? What if his lust for her was his major feeling? She wasn’t naïve; she knew that he lusted for her, and she lusted for him too. But the lust was secondary to Sookie—a bonus. What if it was the other way around for Eric?

“You can live with that,” she said to herself in the dark.

However, an even more devastating thought occurred to Sookie even before she’d finished her sentence. What if she felt resentment from Eric—resentment that he was stuck with the Fae bond and with her. She remembered how he had looked so betrayed and angry after finding out about the bond. What if she felt those things from him? What if she felt his regret and bitterness? What if she felt hatred competing with the care he had for her? After all, he’d told her many times that he didn’t like having feelings. He’d told her that he’d thought about killing her to avoid developing deeper feelings for her. And now that he couldn’t kill her because of the Fae bond, would part of him despise her?

“You can live with it,” she said again into the dark. After all, isn’t that what she already did with the thoughts of the people she cared about? They didn’t always think good things about her; in fact, recently, they’d thought more bad than good—a lot more bad than good. For every protective thought Jason had about her, there had been another one that resented the fact that she’d brought so much trouble to Bon Temps lately. Tara and Lafayette had similar thoughts. And even though she’d never heard Sam as clearly, she’d heard enough to know that he was still upset that she’d picked Bill over him, and the word “fangbanger” had slipped into his thoughts more than once where she was concerned. But she’d learned to take the bad with the good of people’s thoughts over the years. She’d learned to ignore the fact that the people she loved didn’t always have nice things to “think” about her.

At least, she’d tried to ignore it. She shivered and pulled the quilt around her body a little more.

Yes. She’d learned to stoically live with being bombarded by thoughts that used to make her cry into her pillow every night. And she’d learned to build up her shields as much as she could to hide from those thoughts.

But she knew she wouldn’t be able to hide from Eric’s emotions. She shivered again, knowing that he could already feel her emotions for him.

“He must feel that I love him,” she said to herself, the anxiety filling her. She shook her head. He didn’t seem to be mad or upset about her feelings for him, so that was something good. Maybe her love for him felt like simple affection, or maybe he thought that her feelings were all from the Fae bond.
“No,” she breathed in relief, “he won’t be mad at me for loving him.”

However, she knew that he would be angry at himself if he loved her. And with a vampire bond, she’d feel it all. She breathed in and out deeply.

She thought about reconsidering the vampire bond, but looking down at the man she loved, she knew that she wouldn’t do that. It was something that he needed. She thought about the fact that she was meeting with Claudine in a couple of days and wondered if the fairy could help her to develop special shields, like she’d done with her telepathy. If so, there might be a way for her to protect herself from feeling Eric’s emotions.

“Either way, you’ll learn to live with it,” she told herself again, this time with more resolution in her tone.
Chapter 19: Tactics and Ploys

HOUSTON: TWO HOURS EARLIER

Jacob looked around the opulent hotel room that Russell would be staying in for the day. The queen had been most gracious in giving her fellow monarch accommodations, though Jacob knew that she didn’t like Russell. Dulcina had offered Jacob a room too, but even with allies, he never slept in a place that was known to others if he could help it. His maker had taught him that.

“So—you will inform me of any progress?” Russell demanded more than asked, breaking Jacob from his thoughts.

“Of course,” Nan said quickly.

Jacob barely contained his eye roll at Nan’s pandering. “Given your obvious interest in this situation—as well as your sincere desire to help,” Jacob said evenly, hiding his sarcasm with practiced ease, “I will inform you personally should the Viking be found.”

Russell nodded. “I desire only to help the Authority in this matter. The Magister was an old friend.”

“Of course,’ Jacob said with a nod. To anyone watching the exchange, the Authority vampire seemed neutral as he spoke to the oldest vampire king on the New World—and the Old World for that matter.

Jacob, like his maker, knew how to appear as was needed in any given situation. That was one of the reasons he was very good at his job as a “front-man” for the AVL. Nan had been chosen as his counterpart in the East because she was an encyclopedia when it came to matters of law—not just in the United States, but worldwide. By contrast, Jacob was incredibly adept at putting others at ease with his natural charm and ability to “read” people. That skill had been one he’d been adept at during his human life too; as one-quarter fairy, he’d been an empath. As a vampire, his gift had diminished only slightly—though no one but his maker and his maker’s maker knew of the skill.

On the surface, the Authority had chosen the two perfect spokespeople to run the public arm of the Authority—the AVL. While Nan was knowledgeable and had the perfect instincts for politics, Jacob was unassuming—seemingly unthreatening. The Authority had been wise in choosing two such contrasting individuals.

Of course, it didn’t hurt that Jacob was the child of Roman Zimojic, head of the Authority. However, it was not his maker’s favoritism that had earned him his position as spokesman—though his maker’s teachings had certainly been instrumental in preparing him for the job. For as long as Jacob had been vampire, his maker had been teaching him how to balance diplomacy with sheer violence in order to accomplish lofty goals.

Public diplomacy. Private violence.

Roman had been a visionary—always desiring to make sure that vampires changed with the times. And when he’d established the Authority, Roman had put his ideals into practice—for the profit of any vampire who fell in line. As for the ones who didn’t—his maker always tried diplomacy first. And he’d been willing to compromise too—within reason.
However, Roman was not averse to getting his sword wet with blood when the situation called for it. Neither was Jacob.

Roman had chosen to turn Jacob almost four hundred years before. Jacob had been leading an insurrection against a tyrannical English lord in Wales. Roman had been attracted to Jacob’s charisma—and his audacity. And, of course, his scent. So when the lord had mortally wounded Jacob, Roman had turned him.

“Why don’t you just head back to California so that you can reassume your position up the king’s and queen’s asses?” Nan intoned. “I’m certain they’re already missing your ‘particular’ skill-set. And I am more than capable of taking care of this mess with Northman. After all, the Magister was killed in Louisiana, which is my territory.”

Jacob held in his sigh and squelched another eye-roll. Though Nan was portraying confidence and annoyance, he felt a little fear from her. She was nervous, and a nervous Nan was someone he wanted to keep an eye on.

Jacob pretended to consider Nan’s words. “Given the Authority’s desire to settle the matter of the Magister’s murder as soon as possible, I’m sure that they will be glad to know that we are working together to apprehend Northman.”

Nan sneered. “You couldn’t apprehend your own balls.”

Jacob smirked. “Indeed. Given the fact that my cock is so large, they are sometimes difficult to see.” He winked at her. “Perhaps, you could help me find them.”

Nan scoffed, “When hell freezes over.”

“Well—since I am now assured that the Northman matter is in the capable hands of the Authority,” Russell said, with a twinge of sarcasm in his tone, “I’ll take my leave from Texas tomorrow at first dark. As you can imagine, now that my dear Sophie-Anne and I are wed, there is much to do as we consolidate our kingdoms.”

Jacob nodded. “Yes. I’d imagine. I must say that it is extremely fortunate that the Magister managed to perform your marriage ceremony with Queen Sophie-Anne before he met his demise.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Russell said, his face the picture of sincerity, though Jacob felt anything but sincerity from the ancient king. “My little cactus blossom and I wouldn’t have wanted to wait another moment. Imagine our horror when Northman burst onto the scene only moments after our marriage was official—only to kill our dear friend!”

Jacob held in his smirk; the Magister had no friends. That was what had made him effective.

“I’m sure it was quite taxing for you,” Jacob said, his own voice seeming sincere as well.

“Oh, it was,” Russell responded, “especially for my bride. She has such a delicate disposition.”

Jacob nodded. “Well—I too must be off. It nears dawn, and I must write my report for the Authority—unless you’d care to write our reports jointly,” he added, giving Nan a little leer. He enjoyed “flirting” with the vampiress. It never failed to rattle her, which never failed to amuse him.

Nan sneered at him. “Write your own goddamned report and stay out of my fucking way!”

Jacob ignored her biting remark, and turned to Russell. “Your majesty, my Weres will be in place by dawn, and my team will inform me if Northman returns within the week—as the humans have
claimed he will.”

“Yes,” Nan said sarcastically, “and my team will be there to make sure yours doesn’t fuck things up.”

Jacob smirked at her. “Always a pleasure, Nan.”

“I wish I could say the same,” she intoned.

“Your majesty,” Jacob said with a little bow before zooming away at vampire speed.

As soon as he could tell that he and his child were alone, Russell turned to Nan.

“You should not allow him to bait you, child.”

Nan shrugged. “Jacob is an insufferable ass.”

Russell seemed to consider something for a moment. “You are right, but we still have appearances to keep up. And you should not underestimate Jacob.”

“I don’t,” Nan sighed as she put herself into her maker’s arms. “I have missed you, my father.”

“And I you, daughter. But do not fret. If all goes well, your time of separation from me will be ending soon. What new can you tell me of the Authority?”

Nan sighed. “Roman is extremely adept at hiding the identities of the other members, but I have another name for you: Kibwe Akinjide.”

Russell patted her cheek affectionately. “Ah—Kibwe—the king of Illinois. You are doing well, my dear. Once I have the names of all the members, our allies will take them out all at once.”

“There is a rumor, father—that all of the members of the Authority council will be at the summit in Rhodes; they plan to meet in secret.”

“This is good news,” Russell mused with a smile tugging his lips upward. “Once we know the list of those in attendance, we can use the process of elimination to discern the other members of the council, and—for any we are unsure about—we can eliminate them as a precaution. Have you confirmed the number of members on the council?”


“And with Kibwe, we now know the identities of two of those eight,” Russell smiled, thinking of Rosalyn Harris, a wealthy, powerful vampiress in Georgia. Nan had pegged her as another of the members of the Authority months before.

“What of Roman’s henchman?” Russell asked after a moment.

“Duncan has been recently seen in Europe. Rumor has it that he is visiting an old lover there and will likely be out of the country for quite a while.”

“One less potential enemy to worry about,” Russell mused. Though Nan had learned that Duncan was not officially on the council because his maker was still alive somewhere, the somewhat mysterious vampire had stood by Roman since before the Authority was formed. And, inarguably, Duncan was an effective assassin. It was good that he was out of the country—and out of the way.

“Keep vigilant, my daughter.”
“I will,” Nan said as she stepped away from her maker.

“If Northman is found by Jacob’s people, you must use all of your influence to make sure he does not stay in their custody. They won’t believe him if he tells them what really happened to the Magister, but I want him for myself,” Russell snarled. “He and I have unfinished business.”

Having reestablished her cold demeanor, Nan nodded in understanding.

“I am instructing Victor to stay behind and exhaust any leads. He believes that Northman may be moving south toward Mexico,” Russell said.

“I have already submitted the paperwork that will make Victor my official consultant in the search for Northman,” Nan informed. “None of Jacob’s people will be able to impede him, and he will be able to travel anywhere he wishes—without having to check in with the locals.”

“Good,” Russell said with a smile. “This is very good.”

Nan smiled at her maker, happy to please him. “It is only an hour before sundown. And I have arranged for you to have a lovely meal before you go to your rest, Father.”

Russell lifted his eyebrow in question as Nan walked to the door of her adjoining suite and let in two men.

“I could not ask for a better child,” Russell told his progeny as he crooked his fingers for the beautiful, glamoured young men to approach him.

Jacob pulled his phone out of his pocket and looked around. Using his heightened senses, he determined that he was, indeed, in a secure location. He dialed the number he knew by heart.

“Yes?” the answering voice said.

“Father,” Jacob responded with respect, “as you told me he would be, Russell was on site when I arrived at the Houston home. Northman’s scent was fresh—not more than three days old.”

“Did you pick up any other scents?” Roman asked.

“My lord?” Jacob asked, confused by the slightly worried tone of his maker’s voice.

“Did you pick up any other scents?” Roman repeated. “Or any signs of magic.”

“I scented the humans who live in the house—of course,” Jacob responded. “But no signs of magic and no other vampire scents.”

“Any other supernatural scents?” Roman asked.

“No, Father.”

“Good,” Roman said, sounding relieved. “And Victor?”

“As you suggested, I allowed him to ‘overhear’ my theory that Northman has traveled south.”

Roman chuckled. “Victor is a good tracker, my son, but even he knows that your skills are unparalleled in this arena.”

Jacob smiled at his maker’s compliment. “I inherited my gift to track from my sire.”
“Yes. And I inherited it from mine,” Roman commented.

“Is my grandmother well?” Jacob asked.

“Yes. She sends her tidings and will see you in Rhodes.”

Jacob smiled a little wider. He genuinely loved the vampires in his bloodline. They inspired loyalty and awe from him. Not all were so lucky.

“Is there anything else you wish of me here?” Jacob asked.

“A After Russell leaves tomorrow night, meet with Queen Dulcina. There is something I would have her do before the summit. Call me at this number when you have a private audience with her.”

“Understood.”

“I will talk to you tomorrow, my child,” Roman said before hanging up.

Jacob put his phone in his pocket and moved toward the place he’d secured for his daytime resting place.

Bill sighed deeply. Vampires’ bodies did not get weary—unless, of course, they were undergoing torture or starvation—but he felt weary of mind.

“What is your problem?” Hallow asked.

Bill pressed his fingertips against his temples. In truth, the witch was a big part of his problem right then. She’d turned out to be beautiful—unnervingly so—but he was tired of babysitting her as they traipsed around the bayou, looking for the origin of the magic Pam had left behind.

“You indicated earlier that we would discover the source of the magic that Eric’s bitch of a progeny left behind before the end of the night,” Bill said with frustration. “Yet we have discovered only swamps and alligators.”

Hallow glared at Bill. “My spell was correct. The witch that produced the magical trace in that pouch performed her spell here.”

“This is little more than a shack,” Bill said, looking around the dilapidated dwelling with derision.

“Yes,” Hallow agreed, “and no magic has been done here for almost a century.”

“How can that be?” Bill asked angrily.

Hallow sighed. “It would seem the potion the Norseman’s child used was made long ago. Its originator is likely dead by now—if the witch was a human.”

“How could Northman have gotten the potion then?” Bill asked sneering at Hallow.

“He is a vampire,” Hallow sighed. “For all we know—the witch handed it to him a hundred years ago, and he’s been saving it for a rainy day.”

Bill sneered. “Northman is too short-sighted for such a thing. He considers only immediate gain. Are you sure there is not something wrong with the spell you performed to find this place?”

The witch snarled. “You should remember to show me respect, Mr. Compton. Russell has put you at my disposal—not the other way around.”
Bill sighed. “Fine—perhaps you are right that Northman has had the potion for years.” He tried another tack. “By being here, can you discern the potion’s purpose?” he asked in a more conciliatory tone.

“That’s better,” Hallow smirked. “To answer your question—yes. The potion that Northman’s child retrieved from this pouch,” she said, holding up the item, “was some kind of concealment spell. The fact that no further trail could be discerned from Pam confirms this.”

Bill held in his derision for the creature in front of him. “I thought a witch’s magic died with her,” he said.

“A common misconception among the young and the uninformed,” Hallow said with a patronizing lilt. “Curses die with a witch when he or she dies,” Hallow informed. “But potions and charms keep their efficacy.” The witch smiled. “And that means Northman might have gotten the potion from another witch who passed it on to him.”

“Who?”

“Octavia Fant.”

“Who’s that?” Bill asked.

“That is the name of a witch in New Orleans who has a shop that might deal in such wares as old potions. I believe that a visit to her may be called for.”

“We are to return to Mississippi tomorrow night,” Bill said gruffly.

Hallow sighed. “I do not need you to escort me to Octavia’s shop. She lacks true power and is well past her prime,” she added haughtily. “I will visit her tomorrow before you rise.”

Bill shook his head. “No. I will go with you at first dark in case she needs to be glamoured to cooperate. Moreover, Russell has ordered that we do not separate.”

“Fine—have it your way,” the witch said with a shrug.

Bill led Hallow back toward the boat Rasul had hired for them. Though a hovercraft designed to negotiate the swamplands, the vessel was quite comfortable. Bill smiled as he thought about the respect the new Sheriff of Area 1 had given him. Indeed, Rasul had seemed to intuit Bill’s importance in Russell’s monarchy and had acted accordingly.

“What has you so pleased?” Hallow asked as she settled next to the vampire as the glamoured human piloting the craft started its engine.

“Nothing that need concern you,” Bill responded with a huff.

“Come now,” Hallow purred. “Our voyage out of the swamp will take at least half an hour. Why don’t we put the time to good use by getting to know each other better?” she asked as she brought her hand over his crotch.

Bill pulled away a little. “I no longer indulge in carnal relations with women,” he insisted.

“That is not what your dick is telling me,” Hallow observed as she continued to stroke him.

“My beloved is gone,” Bill gasped, even as his lower body continued to respond to her hand.

“Poor baby,” Hallow whispered, “let me make you feel better.”
“I won’t betray Sookie’s memory by bedding another woman,” Bill hissed, though he didn’t stop Hallow when she unzipped his jeans and pulled loose his pulsing dick.

“Who said anything about a bed?” Hallow purred as she bent down to take him into her mouth.
Chapter 20: de Sangre Caliente

Two nights later, 4:00 a.m.

Sookie woke up a bit disoriented. It was dark outside, and she felt like she’d been sleeping for a full day. She also felt something else, something she’d grown very familiar with during the last few days: Eric’s tongue. To say that he knew what to do with that particular part of his body was an understatement. Eric was a master with his tongue, a virtuoso.

And, at this point, she’d be any instrument he wanted her to be.

“Eric,” she moaned out as he languorously licked and kissed and sucked her folds.

“You are beautiful here,” he growled, the vibration causing Sookie’s hips to rise. His hand gently pushed them back to the bed, holding her in place. “This is my fifth favorite part of you.”

“Only fifth?” she squeaked as he continued his ministrations and applied a bit more pressure to her opening with his tongue.

“Maybe sixth,” he said as he blew on her engorged clit and then took it into his mouth and nipped it lightly. “No—definitely fifth,” he growled, his voice causing glorious vibrations to travel through her body.

“God, you’re good at this,” she moaned.

Eric was in no hurry to bring her to release, and Sookie had quickly learned that he was familiar with many, many techniques when it came to cunnilingus, as he called it. Some of them had her barreling into an orgasm within moments. Others seemed to take glorious hours. She’d also learned with Eric that there were many kinds of orgasms in the world. There was the kind that hit her like a ton of bricks and knocked her practically unconscious. There was the kind that swept her up into its embrace like a barely-rolling wave in a gentle, warm sea. There was the kind that seemed to feed her energy and had her climbing back onto him so that she could seek another. And then there was the kind that went on seemingly for hours—as if it were thousands of small orgasms stitched together in a beautiful pattern like the blocks of the quilt that had been wrapping them up since their time in Slidell.

Her back arched, creating more contact between her center and his tongue, which was still making the most of its time with her clit. Much to Eric’s amusement, she had proclaimed his tongue to be her “love button’s BFF.” But in her defense, she’d been in the middle of one the longest orgasms of her life at the time when she’d made that proclamation—because of something Eric called tantric sex. She’d said a lot of things that had made her blush later when he had reminded her of each and every one of them. She’d called him a “Viking sex god”—in addition to just calling him God many times, a fact which would have had Gran chasing after her with a rolling pin. She’d also slipped and called Eric’s penis, “the gracious plenty,” a label that had been whirling around in her head since the first time she’d seen it, but was mortified to actually say out loud. Yes—she’d learned two important things about tantric sex that night. First, it completely eliminated the filter between her head and her mouth. Second, it was fan-freaking-tastic!

Eric’s fingers became accomplices to his tongue as they slowly entered her, scissoring their way inside.
“Mmmnngh.”

“What was that, lover?” Eric asked with a chuckle.

“Ummghh,” she said just as unintelligently.

“Oh,” he chuckled again. “I thought that was what you said.” As he dove back in to concentrate once more on her nerve bundle, she made other unintelligible sounds, speaking in a new language that Eric’s attentions were provoking her to create more and more each night. When he tried to tease her about it, she liked to remind him of the litany of curse words in various languages that he used when he lost control.

He knew a lot of languages. And a lot of curse words.

As soon as Eric’s fingers curled into the spot that only he had ever found, the dam that had been holding back her orgasm shattered into a million pieces. She felt her walls squeezing his fingers, trying to force them to stay inside. Too soon, however, he removed them, but before she could complain, something larger replaced them as he thrust into her with one swift movement.

“Unghfah,” she yelled out as their hips pushed together. To say that he filled her completely was not an understatement—or an overstatement. It was a fact.

And it was a snug fit—though a perfect one.

Sookie had always been appalled when guys had made comparisons between her and other girls in their heads—especially when those comparisons were made during an act that was supposed to be intimate. Her first kiss with a guy was spent with her having to hear him compare her lack of skill with the others he’d kissed. The first time a guy had felt her boob, she’d sworn he was weighing and testing it like a scientist as he thought about the other breasts he’d touched. Those were just some of the reasons why being with human boys had been impossible for her. However, she had come to realize that comparisons—or in this case, contrasts—were natural to make during sex. Oh—her mind didn’t wander because she wasn’t “into” the act with Eric.

She was most definitely into it!

No. On the contrary, sex with Eric seemed to make her “hyperaware” of everything somehow. It woke up every single cell within her body, and each one wanted in on the action.

The only other person she’d been with was Bill, and she wasn’t going to lie and claim that she’d not enjoyed sex with him. She also wasn’t going to lie and say that she’d never been frightened during their sex. Bill had a strange kind of intensity about him—the kind that spoke of something darker lurking just under the surface—something she’d been “told” to ignore by his blood. Their time in the graveyard had left her bruised and sore—and not in a necessarily good way. Then, in Alcide’s van, she’d seen the monster Bill was capable of being firsthand, and she had no doubt that he would have fucked and drained her if Tara and Alcide hadn’t intervened.

However, sex with Bill had been good in many ways too. She’d had her first orgasms with another person with him. Now that she’d been with Eric, however, she could look back and see that there were things that the Viking did to her that Bill never did—never could. The way Eric filled her was among the best of those things. Eric was bigger—quite a bit bigger—than Bill in the “equipment” department. Oh—Bill knew how to make up for that to a certain extent, and Sookie wondered if she would have been as excited about Eric’s size if he’d have been her first.

“Uungh,” she groaned as Eric increased his pace. Yes. He filled her. It was like there was no
millimeter of her core that he didn’t strike as he moved in and out of her. She’d heard from a lot of women’s minds that they didn’t really get much—in terms of orgasm-inducing pleasure—out of simply vaginal intercourse. And Sookie had been inclined to agree with them. It was pleasant enough with Bill, and he certainly seemed to enjoy being inside of her, but her orgasms came only when he bit her and/or stimulated her clit. But her opinion had changed since she’d been with Eric. His girth allowed him to touch all of her, and his length brushed against her cervix in the subtlest and most delicious way when he buried himself deeply into her as he was doing now. Those two factors alone had brought her several orgasms, but when he moved his hips and then thrust upward, that was when she saw literal stars. Nope—the G-spot was definitely not a myth just because most men couldn’t be bothered to find it in their partners.

Sookie had not been merely a passive recipient of Eric’s ministrations either. She’d been learning him as he’d been learning her. And that was something she’d never done with Bill. In truth, she’d not felt confident enough in herself to do much more than follow Bill’s lead when it came to sex. And he’d seemed to prefer it that way.

However, Eric was different. He seemed to savor every little move she made to try to increase his pleasure, and he displayed his enjoyment to her like an open book. She was learning the sounds he made or curse words he used when she did various things. But she had come to learn that his eyes would tell her anything she really needed to know about the pleasure he was receiving.

Yes—his amazing blue orbs literally screamed out a “how-to” guide when it came to making their master happy.

Sookie twisted her hips to the side a bit and squeezed her internal muscles around him.

“Fjandinn! Helvíti! Skít!” he yelled in quick succession. Sookie was pretty sure that she didn’t want the exact translation of what he’d said, nor did she need it. What she was sure of was that she could make him come undone, which was always quite an accomplishment, given his control.

“Yes—his amazing blue orbs literally screamed out a “how-to” guide when it came to making their master happy.

Sookie twisted her hips to the side a bit and squeezed her internal muscles around him.

“How long till sunrise?” she asked.

“Still almost forty minutes,” he said. “I am sorry I woke you, but you moved in your sleep.”
“Moved?” she asked with a kiss to his chest. “Moved how?”

“Moved against me,” he answered simply.

“Hmmm,” she giggled. “So, because I moved, you had to wake me up with oral sex?”

“Mmmm,” he responded affirmatively. “That region was the guilty part of your body. It was the part that moved; that and your delectable ass were accomplices in my seduction. And I was powerless.”

By this time, she was propped up a bit on his chest so that she could look at his face in the dim light of the room. She felt the wisps of Eric’s feelings fluttering through her as if they were laughing. Since they had not yet completed the bond, she still didn’t feel his specific emotions yet—but she could feel that they were there.

“Poor, powerless baby,” she said with a teasing pout.

“Indeed,” he agreed with mock seriousness as he moved his hand down and began caressing her bottom.

“I suppose that’s your way of keeping half of the dastardly duo in check?” she asked with an arched brow.

“Someone must,” he said with mock resignation and a little squeeze to her bottom.

“You’re weird,” she said as she burrowed into him.

“Am not,” he pouted, sounding much younger than his thousand years—about 997 years younger.

“Shhh,” she ordered. “I wanna cuddle till I have to get up and meet Claudine, and you have to go to sleep.”

“Mmmm. That sounds wonderful, lover,” he purred as he brought his hands to rest on her back.

She smiled into his chest. She’d been surprised—pleasantly surprised—when she’d learned that Eric was a cuddler—and an amazing one at that.

Sookie sighed happily into her lover’s embrace. She’d been looking forward to Claudine’s visit and had spent much time studying the Fae book—when she hadn’t been enjoying her Viking lover, that is. She thought back to the previous two days and nights as she continued to enjoy being close to Eric.

[extended flashback]

After she’d had her mini-breakdown about completing the vampire bond in the early-morning hours after they’d arrived in Roswell two days before, she’d given up sleep and then read the rest of the Fae book. She’d also begun a list of questions she wanted to ask her fairy cousin.

That night—after a mind-bending (and back-bending) lovemaking session with Eric, she’d shown him her list and then had asked him to speed-read the book as well, but he couldn’t. Obviously, Fae magic prevented anyone other than a fairy—or maybe just herself—from reading the book. So she began to read it out loud to him as he massaged her feet and legs. They’d taken a bit of a “break” when he’d begun to massage other things.

An hour or so later, after they’d checked in with Mr. Cataliades, Sookie had continued to read the
book out loud, and Eric soon theorized that it was a book that seemed made just for her—as if it focused mostly on the gifts she had and what she could do with them. She’d looked at him in confusion since the book covered four Fae gifts: telepathy; the light power, which Sookie had learned was caused when her Fae magic reacted with ambient electromagnetism to create a spark; teleportation, which was the “popping” that Niall had done; and scent-manipulation, which Niall had done as well, both to conceal his scent from Eric and then to amplify it. Sookie had assumed that these four were the only Fae gifts until Eric posited that they might be the only ones that she had and, therefore, the only ones that Niall was willing to tell her about.

That thought had elicited a slew of new questions for her list, with Eric suggesting many of them. Sookie had been a little relieved when he suggested waiting to complete the vampire bond until she could ask Claudine if she thought that the Fae bond would resist it in any way. Of course, Sookie had her own reason for wanting to hold off on completing the vampire bond, but she’d not yet been brave enough to share it with Eric. How could she tell him that she feared completing the bond because she didn’t want to have to feel it if part of him hated or resented her?

When every part of her now loved him.

She just hoped that Claudine would tell her that there was a way for her to block out Eric’s feelings if she needed to. She figured that Eric would be happy, too, if she could do that. The only reticence he’d indicated about completing the vampire bond had related to the fact that she would be able to feel his emotions. Of course, he’d expressed that hesitation before they’d started their physical relationship, but she figured that he would still welcome it if she could block his feelings.

After she and Eric had finished the Fae book and the list, Eric had shown her what sex with a vampire could really be like when he’d held her against a wall and fucked her at vamp speed until she’d literally lost consciousness for a moment. She’d expected to be sore afterwards, but she’d not been. She’d been shaky as aftershocks of her orgasm seemed to find her and cause her to shiver for hours after they’d had sex. But she’d not been sore at all, a fact that she’d marveled at the next day when she’d woken up and contemplated the dead-for-the-day Viking in her bed. Eric had never caused her to be sore—at least not where she expected to be. She had found muscles she’d never known she had as they’d had sex, and those muscles were definitely saying “how-de-do.” But he’d never had to heal her “lady bits” with his blood when he’d gotten too “vigorous.” Bill had needed to do that several times. Sookie wondered if it was because Eric’s blood was already inside of her, but—then again—Bill’s had been too.

Of course, Eric hadn’t been apologetic about causing her to black out; in fact, he’d looked pleased with himself—very pleased. However, she hadn’t minded much, especially as he’d bathed her tenderly, washing her hair and telling her about his human village and the foods he most wished that he could try, which included Swiss milk chocolate, which he insisted smelled better than any other food; kimchi, a spicy Korean food, which he claimed made his nose hairs twinge in excitement; and Granny Smith apples, which he enjoyed the sound of when people ate them.

They’d laughed about his fascination with the smells that emanated from fast food restaurants—especially since none of them smelled like actual food to him.

After Sookie had assured him that she was too wired for sleep, they’d packed up and started the four and a half hour trip from Roswell to a town north of Taos, New Mexico, which was where Eric intended for them to stay for three days. His house there was secluded, even more so than the Fort Stockton home since it was high up in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. He explained that she and Claudine could practice all they wanted there, safely secluded because of the thick cottonwood and spruce forest his house was situated in.
Eric had driven for the first ninety minutes of their trip while Sookie had taken a nap. After a long kiss—during which the high-handed vampire deliberately sliced his tongue so that she’d get a quick boost from his blood—he’d gotten into his coffin before she could zap him with her light. However, she had to admit that his blood did work to keep her awake during the rest of the early morning drive.

He was better than Red Bull.

She’d fallen more and more in love with the landscape as she’d driven higher and higher into the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. She thought it was ironic that the mountain range, which was one of the most southern parts of the Rocky Mountains, had the Spanish word for “blood” in its name. According to Eric, the Sangre de Cristos ran from Colorado into New Mexico and had been named “the blood of Christ” because of something called an alpenglow, which made some parts of the mountains look reddish at sunrise or sunset.

She hadn’t seen a reddish glow by the time she got to the mountains, but she had been awed nonetheless. Not having travelled much, Sookie was amazed by the change in landscape she’d experienced over the last few days. The stark beauty of the desert had calmed her, while the high elevations of the mountains took her breath away. There was not yet snow on the mountains, a fact that disappointed Sookie since she’d never been in “real” snow before. She’d experienced nothing but stray flurries in Louisiana, and they’d always melted when they hit the ground. Eric had promised that their destination in California would have snow—at least if they were there long enough.

However, when Sookie had gotten out of the car when she arrived at the cabin, she’d been greeted by much cooler air than she’d expected. The cabin didn’t really have a garage for her to park inside. There was just a space to park the car under the main part of the cabin. She’d, of course, cast her telepathy around and had loved the fact that there was no one in her range there. However, she was expecting someone, a woman who took care of the cabin. Eric had called her the day before and had arranged for her to bring Sookie some groceries and incidentals. Sookie was glad that her vampire had thought to include a warmer coat on the list of things to bring. Sookie began to unload the car, deciding to take in all their belongings since there was not an enclosed garage. She had just taken Eric’s reserve of TrueBlood inside when she “heard” a fuzzy brain approaching.

Needless to say, Sookie had been initially freaked out by the fact that someone of the two-natured variety was close enough for her telepathy to pick up, but soon, she’d been reassured by the thoughts of the Werebear who was driving up the little road that meandered to the house. She was also shocked that she could hear the Werebear’s thoughts so clearly and wondered if that was a byproduct of Eric’s blood or the Fae bond.

Of course, it could have been the fact that she’d been practicing with her telepathy too.

“Yaa’ ta’ sai,” the woman had greeted with a smile.

“Um,” Sookie had stammered, not knowing what the striking woman in front of her had said.

“You are welcome here,” the woman had translated. “I am Elina. The Viking said you would be lovely.”

“Hello,” Sookie had returned, unable to help her smile as she listened in on the striking woman’s thoughts. Luckily, those thoughts were mostly in English. She was thinking that the vampire was lucky to have found a woman with such a striking “spirit.” She was also wondering about Sookie, and the telepath could tell that the woman in front of her was much more than she seemed as well. “Eric didn’t tell me that you knew him. Uh—most people that care for his homes are glamoured.
“He thought you might enjoy someone to speak with for a while,” Elina had smiled as she took two bags from her car. Sookie had grabbed the other two.

As it had turned out, Sookie had enjoyed Elina’s company—very much. She’d learned that Elina belonged to a small group of Werebears and had known Eric for much of her life. Sookie had tried not to be jealous when she heard from the woman’s head that Eric had once had a dalliance with Elina’s daughter, Onawa, who—at least in the thoughts of her mother—was one of the most gorgeous women Sookie had ever seen. The telepath had been happier when she discovered that Onawa was now happily married and was a new grandmother, though she still looked gorgeous to Sookie.

In addition to being a Werebear, Elina was also a medicine woman. Sookie had been more than a little captivated to hear that Elina was an Apache and that her Were family had long been known and accepted by the rest of the small community they belonged to. She’d asked Elina to stay for lunch, and the two women had enjoyed their food on the porch, where Sookie had wanted to sit—despite the cool temperature—so that she could keep an eye on the car. Elina had given Sookie a knowing smile more than once as the telepath’s eyes had drifted to the vehicle where Eric was resting.

“He will not be waking for many hours,” Elina had said.

Sookie had shrugged and then blushed when Elina correctly guessed why Sookie was so anxious for the vampire to rise.

The elder Apache woman had seemingly looked right into Sookie. “You and he have made good medicine together?”

Sookie had sputtered out her coffee at that remark, an act which had caused Elina to laugh merrily. “From what my daughter once told me, I am sure you have made good medicine with your bodies, but I was speaking of your spirits. I can see something amazing inside of you—something magic. I cannot tell what it is—some kind of bond, perhaps?” Elina closed her eyes. “But it is not a vampire bond; I have felt those before, and what you have is a little different.” She opened her eyes and smiled benevolently at Sookie, “I know that you cannot be fully human—since I feel that you were the one who shaped what is there.”

Sookie’s blush had melted away immediately. “I didn’t mean to,” she said quickly—apologetically—somehow knowing that the woman in front of her would keep any secrets she spoke. Suddenly she knew that Eric had sent Elina for a reason. “Gran,” she’d whispered. Eric had wanted to give her a sounding board—someone who would remind her of Gran, while at the same time being able to understand something of the Supernatural. It had been a high-handed move on his part, but she couldn’t exactly be mad at him—not when he’d given her exactly what she’d needed.

Taking advantage of Eric’s gift, Sookie had told Elina about the Fae bond and Bill and Russell and Sophie-Anne. And Elina had listened patiently before giving Sookie a piece of advice: to look at the moment on the Dallas roof as being the best moment in her life—not one of the worst—for that moment had clearly put her on the pathway to herself. To what she could be—but had been stopped from being by her kin.

After those words, Elina had left Sookie to her thoughts.

Sookie had then curled up with the Fae book in the car, trying to glean any additional information from it. Eventually, she’d dozed off and had awoken after dark.
Eric had been sitting on the porch, looking into the star-filled sky when she had gotten out of the car. “You believe me high-handed,” he had said as she approached him, wrapped up tightly in their quilt. She’d appreciated that he’d made that statement matter-of-factly. Of course, however, there was no contriteness in his tone.

“Yes,” she’d answered. “But maybe I don’t mind your being high-handed so much—sometimes.”

He’d turned to look at her and his eyes had shone with sincerity. “I should have told you what I intended, but I wanted you to be able to choose whether to speak with Elina or to send her away. I asked her to follow your lead.”

“She was nice,” Sookie had said, sitting onto Eric’s lap. “And you were right. It might have seemed forced if you would have told me about her. By the time I figured it out, I already knew that she wasn’t talking to me out of obligation or anything.”

“Good,” Eric had observed before taking her inside and making love to her. After that, they’d had a meal and a bath before Eric had insisted that she ought to go to bed early so that she’d be well-rested for Claudine’s visit. Of course, that had been before he’d woken her up with his talented tongue.

[end, extended flashback]

“Are you nervous?” Eric asked into the dark, breaking Sookie from her thoughts of the past days.

“Yes. But excited too,” she smiled.

“I have done something,” he admitted.

“What? Asked Elina to patrol the perimeter of your property while Claudine is here today?” Sookie chuckled. “She told me earlier—asked if it was okay with me.”

“And?” Eric asked, showing a few nerves of his own.

“I know you don’t trust the fairies.” She sighed. “And they’ve never done much for me either. After meeting Niall, I think I have to agree that I don’t much trust them to be my family, but I also have a strong feeling that Claudine won’t hurt me.” She paused. “Still, I think it would be best if someone was here to make sure you’re protected during your day-rest.”

“And to make sure you are protected too,” Eric added.

Sookie nodded. “Elina’s going to bring her oldest grandson, Kuruk, with her. She said that he needs experience in organizing and conducting patrols. And I figured an extra set of hands—err paws—would be good.”

“Thank you, lover. I will worry less,” Eric said as he gently caressed her back.

“You’ll be dead for the day,” she commented. “You won’t have to worry at all.”

“That’s why I worry. I am not able to be with you during the day. I am not able to help to protect you. Even if you activate the bracelet to wake me, you will be outside, so my help to you would be limited.” He sighed. “It makes me feel powerless.”

Sookie could say nothing. She couldn’t imagine how vulnerable a vampire would feel during the day. Someone like Eric was so strong, yet in his rest, he could literally be killed by a toothpick to the heart. She hated that thought and kissed his chest, even as her alarm clock went off, signaling
the time when she had planned to rise for her one-day session with Claudine.

She got up, kissed Eric, and quickly took a shower before applying some of Octavia’s potion. She’d had a bath the evening before with Eric, but she’d not washed her face because she wanted the potion to be fresh for the day. She got dressed quickly and was grateful to see that Eric had made her coffee. Elina had brought some homemade breads and sweet rolls, which Eric had put onto a plate. He watched her intently as she carried the modest breakfast outside, just as the gray fingers of dawn crept onto the horizon.

She “heard” a fairy mind approaching and yelled out into the near-dawn. “I’ll be back in five minutes! Uh—help yourself,” she gestured toward the food, even though she’d not yet seen her guest.

Sookie went back inside the house and took Eric’s hand, leading him into the bedroom. They both lay down.

“Var försiktig, vacker en.” [“Be careful, beautiful one.”]

“What do I want to know what that means?” she asked with a little smile on her face.

“I am asking you to be careful,” he responded. “I need you to be careful.” He touched her chest right over her heart, and she understood all the ways he was intending his words.

She leaned in and kissed him softly on the lips. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Yes,” he said right before he fell into his day-death.

She sighed as she looked at his beautiful face, caught up in his concern for her in the moment of his death.

“I love you, Eric Northman,” she said as she kissed him again before getting up.

He, of course, didn’t hear her.

Nor had he heard her the morning before.

Nor the morning before that.
Cousin

Chapter 21: Cousin

Sookie grabbed the fleece pullover that Elina had brought for her to wear. Thinking about the Werebear, she cast out her telepathy and found the now familiar signature at the edge of her range. Another similar brain pattern was near Elina; Sookie figured that was her grandson.

Sookie also sensed that the Fae brain had moved to the porch. She grabbed a small whistle that Elina had given her the day before and put it on like a necklace. The Werebear had said that Sookie need only blow that whistle if she needed help.

She took a deep breath and walked onto the porch, where a beautiful brunette was smiling at her. The sweet rolls were both missing from the plate.

“Sorry—but you did say to help myself,” Claudine said with a bright smile as she stood up.

Sookie recognized the woman’s face and voice immediately even though she had seen her only briefly in the fairy realm.

“Claudine?” Sookie asked.

“Yes,” the fairy said, as she approached Sookie and gave her a warm hug. “It is so nice to meet you—finally. I asked Grandfather many times to let me get to know you, but he did not want our world to affect yours. However, I always wished that we could have been friends, dear cousin.”

The sincerity in Claudine’s voice immediately put Sookie at ease and also brought a tear to her eye.

“Me too,” Sookie answered. She sniffled. “I’m sorry that I can’t invite you inside. But I can bring you a blanket if you’re cold.”

Claudine waved her off. “Do not worry, little cousin. I do not feel the cold as you do, and I understand why your vampire placed the conditions he did upon his and Niall’s arrangement.”

“Do you like coffee?” Sookie offered. “There’s also tea or water.”

“Coffee with sugar would be lovely!” Claudine answered with glee.

Sookie nodded and quickly went inside. She grabbed two cups of coffee and the fairy book, which was currently sporting her long list of questions as a bookmark.

She rejoined Claudine on the porch and was grateful that the fairy seemed to be content to sip her drink for a few quiet moments. Sookie felt like she needed time to gather her thoughts.

“Do you really love the vampire?” Claudine asked, breaking the silence. Sookie looked up at her in surprise.

“Did you hear me say that?”

Claudine smiled and pushed her long hair behind her ears. They were pointed at the top. “These are good for more than just looks,” the fairy laughed a little. “Do not worry. I will not tell Niall about what we say to one another. I doubt he will ask anyway,” she said with disapproval in her voice.
“He is of an older time—a harsher time. He cares for you—just as he cares for my siblings and me—but he does not always know how to show that care.”

“You ain’t kidding,” Sookie sighed ruefully, taking a sip of her coffee.

“I am glad that today can be about you and me!” Claudine said brightly. “And I hope it will be about the friendship I always wished we could have. We may have only until sunset, but that is longer than I thought we would ever get!” She smiled widely. “Many times, I thought of breaking Niall’s orders, but I knew he would just order me home if I did so. Now, I feel that we have some freedom.”

Sookie smiled at the fairy’s fervor as well as the genuine affection in her voice. “I’d like to get to know you too,” Sookie said, trying to muster up the same amount of happiness. “But I’m sad we won’t have more time.”

Claudine winked. “I have learned one thing from being from a realm where the speed of time in relation to other realms is variable. And that is to never say ‘never.’”

Sookie’s smile reached her eyes this time, and she cut herself a piece of bread, especially since Claudine was eyeing it as if she wanted to devour it. Apparently, statuesque six feet tall fairies didn’t have to watch their weight.

“So,” Claudine asked again, “do you really love him?”

“Yes,” Sookie answered truthfully, seeing no reason to hide her feelings from Claudine, even though she couldn’t yet express them to Eric.

Claudine’s reaction—for lack of a better phrase—shocked the hell out of Sookie. The fairy leaned forward in her chair and clapped her hands together gleefully. “I was pulling for that one! Of course, I had to watch from afar since vampires will eat me—if they pick up my scent, that is. But I never cared for the dark one. The Viking, however, is quite handsome. And rumor has it that he is excellent in bed!”

Immediately Sookie blushed deeply and was thankful when Claudine kept speaking enthusiastically.

“Not that I could ever experience sex with a vampire,” she pouted, “though I hear they have great vigor, and the Viking looks—well,” she sighed, “he looks scrumptious! And especially vigorous! But since you can mask your scent, he is not a great danger to you!”

Sookie’s embarrassment went away immediately as she took in Claudine’s words. “Wait!” Sookie said. “Mask my scent? I can really do that?”

Claudine smacked her head with her hand. “Of course, that is something that we needed to talk about. Niall wanted for me to make sure that you learned how to manipulate your scent—in addition to just concealing it.”

“But I don’t conceal my scent,” Sookie said with confusion as she sat forward in her chair and put her now empty coffee cup down on the patio table.

“But you are concealing your scent even now—to a certain extent at least. Of course, I can teach you how to do it fully,” Claudine said with a wave of her hand. “That’s an easy one to master—when you have the gift.”

Sookie shook her head. “No—I have on a potion that a witch gave Eric. That’s what’s covering my
Claudine looked a little confused now. “Yes. I figured that you and the vampire must be using a potion of some kind, for I did not pick up on your scent until I was quite near to this place. But I can pick it up now. I have a very good sense of smell, Sookie. Most Fae do.”

“So—you see—I’m not the one masking my scent,” Sookie said, still confused.

“Sure you are; you have been for a while now!”


“By instinct,” Claudine said as if the answer were obvious. “As soon as your spark was activated by the Viking’s blood, your Fae scent would have grown stronger, but you protected yourself instinctively since you were near vampires.”

“You mean I . . . ,” Sookie began.

“You have been concealing your stronger scent since you went to Dallas,” Claudine said contemplatively. “I am sorry, but I figured you knew, but—then again—how would you?” she asked herself. The fairy sighed and looked at Sookie apologetically. “Well, I’m here to make sure you do know what you need to—from now on. Today, you may ask me anything you wish, and if I don’t know the answer or have been forbidden to tell you something by Niall,” she added with a wink, “I will ask someone who might be able to help.”

Sookie was just about to ask who that someone was when Claudine continued speaking, “I can help you understand how to fully conceal or enhance your scent. You may even be able to alter your scent so that you smell like another.” She smiled. “I have only a limited ability to dampen my scent, though I cannot conceal it altogether. My brother and sister inherited the ability to manipulate their scents like Niall can. However, I am a very strong warrior—while neither of them is that good at fighting. That is why I was chosen by Niall to watch over you. I suppose there is give and take to all gifts,” she said good-naturedly.

“Wow!” Sookie exclaimed dumbfounded. “I can’t believe I’ve been using a power and didn’t even know it.”

Claudine smiled. “We will work on it today, dear cousin. I may not have the same skill as you, but all Fae traits are powered in more-less the same way."

“Eric thought that the book Niall gave me was geared toward me,” Sookie commented, mentally checking off a few questions—which Claudine had already covered—from her list. “If that’s true, do I have the ability to teleport too?”

Claudine seemed to be studying Sookie. “Everyone in our family does, and Niall believes you were trying to teleport back to the human realm after he transported you to Faerie. However, you were very weak and could not do it yourself. I can give you the basics of how to do it today, but usually our gifts kick in by instinct, so if you have the ability to teleport, chances are, you will do it when you are in great danger.”

Sookie sighed. “Then I don’t think I can do it. Bill almost killed me—he was gonna rape me and drain me—but I didn’t teleport away from him.”

Claudine looked troubled. “Since your body was in great distress, you might not have had the power to do it.”
“But I’ve been in danger lots of times since Dallas, and I’ve never teleported.”

“Do you know of the concept of fight versus flight, cousin?” the fairy asked contemplatively.

“Yes.”

“You seem to be a fighter, Sookie. You have used your light to try to fight your enemies—correct?”

“Yes.”

“So your first instinct is to fight; thus, your light manifested before your ability to teleport. And that fighting inclination makes you a good match for your Viking.”

Sookie blushed a little.

Claudine continued. “It is my instinct to fight too, so I did not learn how to teleport until I was well into my seventies.”

“Seventies! How old are you?” Sookie asked. The fairy in front of her looked to be about twenty-five in human years.

“Time is different between your realm and mine,” Claudine commented. “But I am around 700 of your years.”

“Wow!”

“It is not so old in relative terms. We Fae live long lives.” She paused. “So I will try to help you teleport today, but it is possible that you won’t be able to—either because that gift is not strong enough in you or because you don’t see yourself under enough of a threat to do it.” She seemed to be in deep thought for a moment. “The first time I did it, it was because Fintan had been seriously injured. I found him and teleported with him back to my grandparents’ palace so that my grandmother could tend to him.”

“You found him?” Sookie asked, curious about the fairy’s choice of words.

“Yes,” Claudine said. “That is my strongest Fae gift: the ability to find those in distress and go to them. I can do it with anyone I am related to by blood. That is another reason why I was chosen by Niall to be your protector here.” She shook her head. “I’m so sorry that I did not come to you after Bill Compton attacked you. I felt your distress, and I also felt that you were near death, but I knew that I didn’t have strong enough magic to heal you, so I popped to my grandmother to ask for her help. She is the strongest healer among us—you see. By the time she got to the hospital you were in, she sensed a vampire was already there with you. When she realized it was the Viking and that he’d given you his blood to start your healing, she left.”

“Oh. Well, thanks for trying to help,” Sookie said.

Claudine smiled. “You’re welcome. It was for the best that the Viking helped you though. The Fae bond would have made it impossible for you to come to Faerie, which is where my grandmother would have had to take you in order to fully heal you.”

The two were quiet for a moment as Sookie contemplated the fact that her fairy cousin and her step-fairy-great-grandmother had planned to come to her rescue after Bill almost drained her in Alcide’s van. That fact actually made her feel better—more loved even.
“So this book was made just for me,” Sookie commented, as she touched the Fae book.

“Of course,” Claudine said with her tinkling voice.

“Because Niall didn’t want to give me any other secrets about the Fae?” Sookie asked in a challenging voice.

Claudine’s countenance changed immediately. “Yes, I am afraid I have been forbidden to tell you some things about fairies, lest the Viking learn of them. Fairies have some weaknesses that Niall does not want others to know about.”

“Yet the book told me about lemons and iron,” Sookie commented. “He had to have known that I would tell Eric.”

Claudine smiled. “See! I told you Niall was not all bad.”

Sookie shook her head, having a hard time following Claudine’s train of thought.

The fairy shook her head, having a hard time following Claudine’s train of thought. “Niall is more worried about your being protected than he is about the vampire knowing how to harm us. He trusted you and Eric not to use this knowledge to harm us. He trusted you and Eric not to use this knowledge to harm our kind—but to keep yourselves safe with it. But—like I said—he has forbidden me to speak of other weaknesses that fairies have. As a hybrid, the lemon and iron likely won’t harm you, or—if it does—you won’t have a severe reaction. Thus, those were the logical things to tell you about.”

Sookie nodded. She wasn’t quite ready to become a member of Niall’s fan club, but she was thankful that he’d given her the book and that he’d allowed Eric and her to have some knowledge about how to protect themselves if Breandan did come after her.

“Can other people read the book at all?” Sookie asked.

Claudine shook her head. “No—just you and the one who prepared it for you—so that is you and my grandmother. Her name is Leonie—by the way. Niall contacted her while you were unconscious—since she was in this realm too at the time. She made it for you.”

“Not that I’m not grateful to your grandmother, but why would she help me? Didn’t Niall cheat on her with a human woman?”

Claudine laughed. “My grandmother and grandfather have not shared a bed since it was discovered that Leonie could no longer have children.”

Sookie’s face screwed up in anger. “So he just discarded her?”

“No!” Claudine said insistently. “Do not think so badly of Niall, dear cousin. His marriage to Leonie was arranged, and they have been excellent partners over the years, ruling over Faerie with fairness and tolerance. But there was not romantic love between them. They had a daughter, Magallen, but the birth was difficult, and our healers soon realized that Leonie would not be able to have additional children. After that, Niall and Leonie decided—mutually—to seek other bedfellows. They have both been quite active in that department—especially Grandmother,” Claudine said with a wink.

Sookie blushed and took a deep breath. She’d heard of “open marriages,” but had never known anyone who had one—by choice, that is. Gran, however, had always taught her to be accepting of others and their ways.
“Well,” Sookie said with resolution, “as long as they’re okay with it.”

“More than okay!” Claudine assured. “You would like Grandmother Leonie. She has wanted to meet you for a long time, though she has deferred to Niall. She was especially fond of Fintan; in fact, she was like a mother to Uncle Fintan and Uncle Dermot. Niall had to bring them to Faerie when they were small children, and he was heartbroken at having to leave his beloved behind. Leonie accepted the children and raised them with as much love as she had given to my own mother.” Claudine smiled sadly. “I think those boys taught her how to live again since my mother died young—while she was having my siblings and me. Leonie mourned more than any other when Fintan died. She took care of him after he was returned to us by Breandan, but even her healing couldn’t help him.”

Sookie sniffled a little as a tear rose in her eye for her grandfather.

Claudine looked out into the woods and continued speaking softly. “Fintan was much injured, and her magic could only stave off his death for a little while, not prevent it. And—at that time—we thought that your father, your mother, your brother, and you had all been killed by Neave and Lochlan. Fintan’s heart broke because he had not been able to keep you all safe.”

Sookie asked a question that had been preying upon her mind. “How did Breandan find my grandfather in this realm?”

Claudine looked back at Sookie and closed her eyes. Sookie felt the fairy reading her thoughts.

“Stop!” Sookie said, throwing up a shield around her mind.

“Oh!” Claudine said with a little surprise. “Sorry.”

“I don’t like people in my head,” Sookie said.

“I am sorry then,” Claudine said contritely. “It is just that I felt your distress, and it is my instinct to try to help. And to do that, I was trying to find the thought that caused your pain.”

“It’s okay. But—can you just try not to go in there again?”

Claudine nodded, but gave Sookie a curious look.

“So did you find the thought?” Sookie asked.

“Yes,” Claudine said. “I saw the memory that had stirred your guilt and sorrow. I could see Fintan saving you from a snake with his magic.”

“Do you think Breandan found Fintan because he used his magic to save me?” Sookie asked, sharing her fear aloud.

Claudine shrugged. “I do not know how Fintan was found, but if such a little bit of magic alerted Breandan to where Fintan was, then he was already close and would have found him anyway. Do not blame yourself for his capture, cousin. I know that Fintan did not blame you. He spoke of his human family with great love. He wanted to go back to his Adele—to rest in her arms one last time—but there was not enough magic left in him to teleport home to her, and he would not have survived the trip if another had tried to take him.”

Sookie wiped away a few hot tears that streaked down her cheeks.

She stood up abruptly. “I—uh—need to go inside for a minute. To go to the bathroom and get more
“I’ll just be a minute,” Sookie assured as she rushed inside. She put the coffee cups on the kitchen counter and then ran into the bedroom where Eric lay dead to the world. Knowing that his presence would offer her the comfort she sought, she lay down next to him and rested her head on his alabaster chest. Once with her bonded, she allowed her tears to fall freely. Hearing about how her Grandpa Earl—Fintan—had wanted to return to Gran had made her heart break for both of her grandparents.

Sookie had been very young, but she still remembered how Gran’s face had changed after Grandpa Earl had disappeared. Gran had gone from having a never-ending smile in her eyes to having a look of intense longing. That look had eventually faded a bit—maybe when Niall altered her memories—but it had never gone away completely.

Growing up, Sookie “heard” the gossip from the heads of Gran’s “friends.” Maxine Fortenberry was the worst. She thought that Earl Stackhouse had left Adele for another woman and even spread the rumor that Earl had been seen with a woman and two kids in New Orleans a few years after he left Bon Temps. Others hypothesized that Earl Stackhouse had been the victim of a crime. Some thought that he had been killed by an alligator or that he’d drowned. Apparently, he’d been going fishing the morning he’d disappeared. According to Gran, his truck had been found near Lake Bistineau, where he liked to fish for bass. All of his fishing gear was still inside of the vehicle. No trace of him had ever been found.

At the time, Sookie hadn’t really understood much about what was going on because the thoughts of the people around her were also very confused and sad. And then—shortly after her grandfather had disappeared—her parents died. Sookie’s memories of those years during her childhood all swirled around thoughts of loss—both hers and other people’s. She especially remembered Gran’s sadness at losing her husband, her son, and her daughter-in-law in such a short time.

Now that Sookie knew what had really happened to Grandpa Earl, she felt the tragedy of the situation even more acutely. Her grandfather had wanted to return home—to the woman he loved so much that he’d left Faerie and lived as a human. He had made the choice to live with Gran in the human realm—to raise a family with her—even though he would not age with her.

Sookie had heard Gran thinking about her husband a lot over the years. Gran had never even looked at another man after Grandpa Earl disappeared. She had always held out hope that he would return to her. Sometimes, she even hoped that Maxine’s rumors were true because that would mean that Earl was alive and happy somewhere. But mostly, she imagined that he had fallen into the water, bumped his head, and gotten amnesia. Occasionally, she would indulge in the fantasy that he would remember who he was—who she was—and return home to her. And that dream had stayed with her until her own death.

Sookie thought of her Gran and Fintan—forever separated in two different realms. And she cried for them, even as the Fae bond—still active and alive, despite Eric being dead for the day— comforted her as if Eric himself were hugging her as tightly as she was holding him.
Chapter 22: Remembrance

After about ten minutes, Sookie had cried herself out, and she forced herself to leave Eric’s side after giving him a short kiss, lingering at his lips just long enough to breathe out, “Thank you, Eric. I love you.”

She went to the bathroom and wet a rag, carefully washing her face, except for the spot that held Octavia’s potion. She took care of her human needs as well and then returned to the kitchen to refill her and Claudine’s coffee cups. When she went back outside, Claudine was sitting where she’d left her. However, there was now a box sitting on the table in front of her.

Claudine smiled kindly at Sookie. “I am glad that you have someone to seek comfort from when you are troubled, dear cousin—someone who will love you as you deserve.”

Sookie smiled sadly and took a sip of her coffee. “Eric cares for me. I know that, and I know that’s real, but any love he has for me will always be something he resists.”

“Because he is a vampire?” Claudine asked with interest, even as she sat forward in her chair a little. “Can they not love? That is what Grandfather claims. But Grandmother says that his opinions on that matter are hooey.”

Sookie chuckled a little at Claudine’s word choice. “They sure try not to love. It makes them vulnerable. But I know that Eric loved his maker very much.”

Claudine contemplated for a moment. “For the Fae, the ones we care for the most are often the ones our enemies try to use against us. And if we love in this realm, then we are vulnerable to the inevitable heartache that will come from watching the human die while we live on.” She continued meditatively. “Vampires have to deal with both of these factors here: the cruelty of time and vindictiveness of enemies.”

Sookie tilted her head. “I hadn’t thought of it that way,” she considered, suddenly better understanding Eric’s—or any vampire’s—reticence regarding love. She sighed. “But those aren’t the only reasons why Eric will resist any love he feels for me. And it’s not the reason he will doubt me if I tell him I love him—while he’s awake, that is,” she added sadly.

Claudine looked at her in question.

“Eric will always think that the Fae bond is the reason why we feel love for one another,” Sookie said in a quiet voice. “I’ve decided to try to accept what I am feeling—no matter where it is coming from. After all, there are worse reasons to fall in love than the kind of trust it took for us to form the Fae bond in the first place. And it’s too difficult for me to resist the feelings I have for him, especially now that we’re—uh—getting to know each other more.” She blushed as Claudine smiled at her knowingly.

Sookie shook her head to clear it of her thoughts of just how irresistible Eric was.

“Anyway,” she sighed, “I’d thought that I’d found that sweeping kind of romantic love with Bill, but it turned out it was all a lie.” She laughed mirthlessly. “I guess it’s ironic that Eric will never let himself love me because what we have is a kind of lie too, but at least it’s a lie we both know about
and a lie that we’re gonna try to make the best of.”

Claudine sighed. “I cannot be sorry that you bonded with the Viking because I am not sure if you would be alive otherwise. With the other vampire—Compton—you were moving down a path that I was certain would lead to your death or captivity. And you were blind to his manipulation.” She shook her head. “So many times, I wanted to go to you, but I couldn’t take you to Faerie after you’d had vampire blood, and Compton could have tracked you to anywhere I tried to hide you in this realm. Once the Viking relit the spark in you, I had hope, and—with Leonie’s help—I was able to get Niall’s permission to aid you, but things progressed too quickly for me to enact my plan.”

“What were you gonna do?” Sookie asked curiously.

“Almost the same thing the Viking did, actually. The witch, Octavia, had already been contacted about performing a severing spell so that Compton’s blood could be removed from your body.”

“How do you know Octavia?”

“I don’t, but my grandmother, Leonie, does,” Claudine said. “She talked to Octavia for me, and I got Niall to agree to allow me to befriend you after Compton had been taken by his maker. However, I didn’t have time to approach you before you left Bon Temps to go to Russell Edgington’s domain. In addition, it would have likely been several weeks or months before the spell could have been done—even if my plan had gone as I’d hoped.”

Sookie sat quietly for a moment, taking in what Claudine had told her. “Why so long?”

“You would have needed to trust me, Sookie—without the kind of hesitation that I feel from you even now,” Claudine said with a twinkle in her eyes. “As you know, the severing spell required that you have a helper. I could have been that only if I had your trust first.”

Sookie nodded in understanding and gave Claudine a little smile. “Thanks again for trying to help. It would have been a good plan if I’d not gone runnin’ after Bill or if Russell hadn’t found out all about me from that file Bill made about me.”

Claudine smiled almost sadly. “Of course, I’d also intended to hide you away in Faerie for a while after the severing spell was done. Obviously, that would not have worked.”

“Because of the Fae bond,” Sookie said.

Claudine nodded. “I wish we had known that it was possible for you to form such a bond,” the fairy sighed. “I can see that the way it was made has hurt you deeply and caused you and your vampire to be uncertain about your feelings.”

“Can you tell me more about them—about Fae bonds?”

“Well,” Claudine began, “while fairies gain their spark at birth, they lack the ability to form bonds until they reach adulthood, which—for us—is at about a hundred years old. For humans, physical maturity comes much earlier. For instance, you reached the physical age of being able to form a bond at nineteen, but since your spark had been effectively stifled, it was thought by Niall that you would never form one. Plus, no one of less than half-blood has ever successfully formed a bond before. And no fairy has ever formed a bond with a non-Fae. It was thought impossible.”

“Niall told us all that,” Sookie said quietly. “He said that was why he missed the fact that I had a bond.”

Claudine nodded. “He probably did not say it, but he was sorry about that. I have seen him since
then, and he expressed,” she paused, “regret.”

Sookie smiled a little. “Can you tell him that it’s okay—that I’m okay? Uh—but only if he asks about me?”

“Of course.”

“What about bonds between two fairies? What are they like?”

“Well,” Claudine said, sitting forward in her chair like she was gossiping with an old friend, “I know a lot about them actually. I was very curious about bond-making when I was growing up. In the Fae culture, bonds are rare, and bonded pairs are sort of looked down upon by some people, even though most fairies secretly envy them.” She frowned a little. “Bonded pairs are known to be formidable, though their lives become linked in a way that most fairies fear. They literally cannot survive without each other. And most of us never feel a strong enough connection with another to risk our lives being tied to someone else like that.” She sighed—almost with longing. “I have always thought that bonding was a beautiful notion, though my brother always made fun of me for thinking that.”

Sookie smiled. “Brothers can be like that.”

Claudine nodded. “I have always liked the idea of a bond tying two people in love so closely together. I suppose I like the romance of it.”

Sookie’s smile faded.

Claudine looked at her with compassion in her eyes. Sookie was grateful it wasn’t pity.

“Your bond with your vampire did not form as bonds are usually made—I’m afraid. In Faerie, two Fae will take a long time deciding whether or not to bond. And great love is always at the heart of a bond. The bond amplifies the feelings. The skeptics among the Fae think of a bond as a kind of parasite, doing all that it can to make itself stronger. But I don’t believe that, for the Fae that have one are made stronger too.”

“How are they made stronger?” Sookie asked, even as she tried not to cringe at the fact that Eric would likely agree that the bond was a “parasite.”

“A bond is quite magical, and the Fae abilities of the bonded pair invariably strengthen after it is formed. The bond pushes the fairies to become stronger in a sense—to protect each other and the bond itself. There is a shared purpose and a joy in sharing it.” Claudine shook her head. “Some ambitious fairies have tried to form bonds to gain more power, but those always fail to be made. A bond can only be made by those with pure hearts in the forming of them. That is why Niall was so surprised that you were able to form one with the vampire. I’m sure you have figured out by now that he does not have a high opinion of vampires.”

Sookie nodded. “Yeah. That’s pretty obvious.”

Claudine smiled somewhat wistfully. “You and your vampire are an anomaly—lightning in a bottle. That is why I believe your vampire will come to accept the fact that his love for you is no less real because it was formed through the bond.”

“I hope so,” Sookie said quietly. She stared into the woods for a moment and was comforted to “hear” Elina’s mind. She couldn’t hear her specific thoughts—probably because she was in her bear form—but Sookie was glad for her presence nonetheless. The elder Werebear did remind her of Gran, and it was a comfort to have her nearby.
Claudine followed Sookie’s gaze and smiled softly at her. “Your vampire already does things to show his care for you, dear cousin. They are things that wouldn’t occur to my own husband to do, but—then again—we are not a love match.” The fairy grinned. “The Werebear I met on my way here told me that she was here to guard us at Eric’s behest. And I can feel that you are comforted by her presence. Plus,” she paused, “Eric arranged for this.” She pushed the little box Sookie had noticed closer to her. “Or—at least—he arranged for part of it, and his idea led to my own addition,” she added with barely-contained excitement.

Sookie opened the box and saw two items that immediately brought tears to her eyes. She pulled out a picture of Gran, Jason, and herself, which had been taken in the spring—right when the azaleas were in bloom. Hoyt had come over to Gran’s with Jason for lunch the day the picture had been taken, and he’d had a new digital camera that he was snapping pictures with. Sookie had asked him to print one out, and she’d framed it and given it to Gran for Mother’s Day.

The other item was a pocket watch that Sookie recognized immediately even though she’d not seen it for almost two decades. It was her granddad Earl’s pocket watch. Fintan’s watch. Sookie put down the picture and touched the watch lovingly, tracing her fingers over the leaves and filigree in the design.

“Niall told me and Leonie that you were unconscious when he and Eric made their deal for me to come here.”

“I was,” Sookie whispered. “I had fainted. I kind of lost it when I found out that I’d basically trapped Eric into the Fae bond. You see, we made it at probably the worst moment of his life, and I’ll always wonder if he accepted it just because he was so vulnerable then.” Sookie shook her head as a tear fell from her eye. “Eric looked so betrayed in the moment Niall told us about the Fae bond. And I saw his eyes when he realized that what he was feeling for me had been made by the bond.”

“That must have hurt you very much,” Claudine said as she brushed away a tear of her own.

“Yeah,” Sookie admitted. “And then I just got so mad at myself for doing that to him—for doing the same kind of thing that Bill had done to me. For forcing Eric to love me.”

“Surely you cannot blame yourself,” Claudine said. “You did not know about the bond.”

“It didn’t matter. All I could feel was anger at myself for needing a connection so badly that I’d forged one with someone who was in the midst of sorrow when it was made. And then, all I could feel was pain because I realized that almost everything that had happened between Eric and me up until then had been influenced by the Fae bond. I had trapped him into a future that he would never have agreed to if he’d been given a choice.”

“But that was not your fault,” Claudine reiterated forcefully.

“I know that—now. At least, I know it here,” Sookie said as she pointed to her head. “And that has made things better for me. Eric and I have both had time to process things now, and—as I said—I couldn’t stop myself from still loving him.”

Claudine sighed. “It seems that he cannot help himself either. The watch is proof of that.”

Sookie looked at her in question.

“Eric asked that Niall give you something to remind you of your grandfather—a keepsake. A remembrance. According to Niall, the vampire was concerned that you had been made to leave
everything behind at your own home. He felt that you would be more content if you had a remembrance of your family, and he said you retained only nice memories of Fintan.”

Sookie sniffed. “He didn’t tell me about that.”

“Niall didn’t guarantee that he’d get the keepsake. He said only that he would consider it. It was Leonie who convinced Niall to give you the watch. She also helped me to get the picture.”

“How?” Sookie asked.

Claudine smiled. “Leonie was with me when Niall came to tell me of the deal he’d made with your vampire—about the arrangement for me to visit you. Grandmother was helping me to get my affairs in order so that I could return to Faerie.”

“Wait,” Sookie said with confusion. “I saw you in Faerie when Niall tried to take me there.”

Claudine shook her head. “You must have seen my sister Claudette. We look exactly alike, and she is already in Faerie. After hearing about what had happened with you and Eric, Leonie popped to Faerie in order to get you the watch.”

“But the time difference between us and Faerie?” Sookie observed in a questioning tone. “How could she get this so quickly?”

Claudine smiled. “She knew where she was going—of course. And she lingered in Faerie for only a minute—two human days.”

Sookie nodded in understanding and looked back at the pocket watch.

“Did you know that it was given to Fintan by Adele?” Claudine asked.

“It was?” Sookie asked, looking at the object in her hand even more closely.

“Open it,” Claudine instructed.

Sookie opened the lid and read the inscription. “Always remember—if I could love you for all time, I would. Yours, Adele.”

Sookie sniffed again, trying to hold back her tears. “And the picture?” she asked, looking once more toward the framed photograph on the table.

“Well—as I said—Leonie is able to conceal her scent, so when I had the idea to bring you something from your home in Bon Temps as well, she chose this. She also visited your brother and checked on your friends. One of Leonie’s Fae gifts is similar to the glamouring that a vampire can do, so Jason was more than happy to speak with her.”

“Really? How are they?” Sookie asked, thirsty for information about the people she loved.

“Your brother, Sam Merlotte, and Lafayette Reynolds are being watched by Russell Edgington, but they are all fine. Jason has been glamoured by Bill Compton more than once.”

Sookie gasped with concern.

“Do not worry. He has not been harmed by it. And from what Leonie could discern, Jason did not tell Compton anything of importance—because the vampire, thankfully, failed to ask the right questions. Your brother was asked if he knew where you were, and he did not. He was asked if he knew where Tara Thornton was, and he did not. Jason is to call Bill if he learns where either of you
is. Leonie later found out that Lafayette and the shifter had been glamoured in a similar way."

“...I didn’t know that shifters could be glamoured,” Sookie said with surprise.

“It is more difficult, but Mr. Compton seems quite skilled in his glamour—at least in the ability to accomplish it.”

Sookie’s brow furrowed as she thought about her inability to resist Bill’s woven dream.

Claudine continued her report. “Your house also has a constant guard. Leonie went during the daytime, and she discerned several Weres outside your home. She also smelled the scents of several vampires. Do not fear, however; the Weres didn’t detect her. She asked me to let you know that one of the Weres, in particular, has an extreme, sociopathic hatred for you. She picked up the name Debbie Pelt from her head.”

Sookie nodded and sighed. She wasn’t surprised. “What about Tara?”

“Jason told Leonie that Tara is with a Werewolf named Alcide Herveaux.” She lowered her voice. “After you disappeared from the hospital, Jason and your friends figured that Eric would either drain you or take you to Russell. Alcide and Tara decided their best bet was to run, but Alcide was purposely vague about their destination. Lafayette and Jason decided to return to Bon Temps. Sookie, I am sorry to be the one to tell you this, but your brother and your friends believe that you are dead by Eric’s hand. They also told this supposition to Bill while they were under the influence of his glamour.”

Sookie shook her head sadly. She’d hated having to leave everyone without a word, but she knew that they would be in greater danger if she tried to contact them. “It’s probably better for them that way,” Sookie said sadly. “At least they’ll stay safe.”

“Yes,” Claudine agreed with sorrow in her own tone.

“Does Bill know where Tara and Alcide went?” Sookie asked, suddenly very concerned.

“No,” Claudine assured. “From what Leonie gathered, Bill never found out that Jason and Lafayette had been at the hospital, so he has never asked them questions about Alcide, which might have brought out information he could have used.”

“But surely Bill would have smelled that Jason and the others were there—at the hospital—right?”

Claudine shook her head. “Not necessarily. He would have asked Jason about it if he had. Between the disinfectant smells in the hospital and the smell of the Werewolf—not to mention you and Eric—Bill probably missed the fact that Jason and Lafayette had been there. Lafayette has a similar scent to Tara since they are related, and Jason’s scent is similar to yours, though not as strong. Just in case, however, Leonie wiped Jason’s memory of your time in the hospital. She did the same to Lafayette too.”

Sookie sighed.

“Do not worry,” Claudine assured, picking up Sookie’s apprehension. “Leonie just took the memories of that night from their minds to protect them—and your friends Tara and Alcide. And then she took away the memory of her visit. But that is all. What she did wouldn’t have harmed them.”

“I know it was for the best,” Sookie relented. “I just don’t like the idea of people being glamoured and their memories taken away. Eric does it too—to keep us safe—and it’s usually not that big of a
deal, but I’ve been around people who have been glamoured too much,” she shivered, thinking of Ginger, “and I’m afraid for the people I love.”

Claudine nodded in understanding.

“Will you thank your grandmother for me?” Sookie asked as she touched the picture. “Will you thank her for all her help? And for taking care of Jason and Lafayette too?”

“Of course,” Claudine smiled. “Now—shall we practice your skills?”

Sookie nodded in affirmation and then followed Claudine off the porch.
“Good job!” Claudine praised, seeing the light forming above her cousin’s palm.

“Thanks,” Sookie smiled.

“Now—make it bigger and more powerful,” the fairy instructed.

“How?”

“Just use your mind to make it grow.”

“Use the force, Luke,” Sookie muttered with frustration, even as she tried to concentrate on her light.

Claudine’s tinkling laughter seemed to fill the forest. “You know—Claude is a big Star Wars fan—at least he was until the newer movies came out.” She shrugged. “I watched Episodes IV and V, though they were the first two to come out I think,” she shrugged again, “not that that made much sense. Anyway, Claude told me that, when George Lucas was a young boy, he witnessed two fairies fighting. Of course, no one believed George.” She rolled her eyes. “I think the whole story was made up, but Claude is convinced that the ‘force’ is based on Fae magic.”

Sookie chuckled.

“But our magic is not really like the ‘force,’” Claudine said thoughtfully. “Fairies should not ‘let go of their feelings’ when they use their magic—as Luke must in the films. In fact, as I said before, our magic is often first exposed when we feel something very strongly—whether that be fear or anger or desire.”

“That’s what happened to me,” Sookie relayed, “when the Maenad had taken over my house—and then hurt Bill. I was so mad and so scared when I saw that Bill had been poisoned by Maryann’s blood.”

“So you used your light to protect yourself and the one you thought you loved,” Claudine said knowingly. “That is how our powers often manifest themselves—unless we have been taught, as I am teaching you now. But the instinctive way of learning is always best.” The lovely fairy paused for a moment and seemed to be studying Sookie. “You know—the fact that you did not teleport away when you were confronted with the Maenad says two very important things about you.”

“What’s that?”

“That you are a fighter,” as I said before. “And that you would not leave behind someone you cared about.”

Knowing Claudine was right, Sookie nodded. “If I can learn to teleport, will I be able to take others with me—like Niall did when he took me to the fairy realm?”

Claudine’s brows furrowed. “Not unless they, too, have a fairy spark. I could not even have teleported with you before your spark relit.”

“Okay,” Sookie said with a little disappointment. She wondered if she could ever use the gift of
teleportation if she had to leave someone behind—leave Eric behind. She doubted it.

“Now, let’s get back to work on your light,” Claudine said, refocusing them both.

Sookie nodded and looked down at her palm, amazed that she’d been able to keep her light going without even thinking about it.

Claudine smiled proudly at her. “Now—make it bigger, stronger,” she commanded again.

Sookie tried to think about times when she’d been angry or afraid, but nothing happened to the light to increase its size.

“What are you thinking about?” Claudine asked.

“I’m trying to remember what it felt like when I first used my light. I’m trying to remember shooting the Maenad.”

“Oh—sorry,” Claudine apologized, “I should have made my instructions clearer. It is only your current emotions that will work to increase your light’s power.”

“But I’m not really afraid right now—or angry,” Sookie said with confusion.

Claudine shook her head. “Don’t use those emotions. They are fleeting at best. You should use emotions that are much longer-lasting than those which cause a spike in adrenaline.” The fairy smiled beautifully. “You, my dear cousin, should use your love for your vampire to empower you. That is how the magic of fairies who bond becomes more potent. It is their love that fuels their light.”

Sookie nodded and looked down at her palm. It didn’t take her any effort at all to focus her thoughts onto Eric, and she gasped as her light doubled in size and took on a bluish tint.

“Marvelous!” Claudine cried out gleefully. “Blue is the strongest kind of light a fairy can produce. I can only achieve something close to purple—but it’s actually more red, to be honest.”

“Really?” Sookie asked. “But then how am I doing it? I’m mostly human.”

“There is no ‘mostly’ when it comes to a spark. It is there or not there. It is strong or not strong. Yours is there and strong. Your human DNA has nothing to do with your spark—though it does alter the taste of your blood. Thankfully.”

Sookie snorted. “Yes. Very thankfully. I don’t want vampires to suddenly get even more rabid around me.”

Claudine’s laughter once again filled the woods.

Sookie gave her a wry smile. “So it’s blue because I love Eric?”

The fairy seemed to shake her head and nod at the same time. “It is blue because you love him with all your heart and soul.”

The sun was about three hours from the horizon when Sookie and Claudine finally finished their practice. During the day, they’d stopped only a couple of times to eat and for Sookie to rest and go to the bathroom. While Claudine still looked perfect—without even a single hair out of place—Sookie looked like she’d been dragged through the forest.

A couple of times.
Claudine smiled at Sookie. “You are a very quick study, Cousin!” she said excitedly.

“I don’t feel like it,” Sookie lamented, flexing her sore muscles. Shooting her light again and again had drained her strength, and there was an almost backfire effect when she fired her stronger blue light orbs, like a “kick” when one fired a shotgun, and—after a few of those—her muscles had begun to strain.

After they’d practiced with Sookie’s light orbs, they’d turned their focus to her scent. Sookie had been able to completely cover her scent and manipulate it in various ways, including smelling only like a human or amping up her Fae scent. Sookie had also been able to mimic Claudine’s scent after a little practice. But that ability was quite draining on her.

“Your vampire can make you well with a little of his blood,” Claudine said knowingly. “Have you bonded with him yet—in his way, that is?”

Sookie bit her lip and her anxiety immediately ratcheted up. “We’ve started a vampire bond. Actually, that’s one of the things I wanted to ask you about. How do you think the Fae bond will—uh—react if Eric and I complete the vampire bond? Uh—we wanted to wait to finish it until I could ask you. And—there’s something else. Is there a way for fairies to block a bond?”

Claudine looked a bit confused. “Block it? But why?”

“Uh—I want to be able to prevent myself from feeling what Eric’s feeling,” she paused, “if I need to.”

“But why?” the fairy asked again, still obviously confused.

Sookie shook her head a little. “It’s just that I think it would be helpful—uh—not to have to feel everything he feels.”

“Oh!” Claudine cried out with understanding. “Like if he gets hurt.”

Sookie didn’t say anything. She felt a little bad, letting Claudine believe something that wasn’t exactly true, but it seemed easier to do just that for the moment.

Claudine seemed to be thinking deeply for a moment. “Do you mind if I ask someone to join us for a little while? It’s not part of the agreement between Niall and Eric, but I cannot answer your questions about a vampire bond. And, in truth, I feel a bit out of my depth since your case is one of a kind. But I know a person who could help us.”

Sookie tensed. “Who?”

“Grandmother. Uh—Leonie.”

Sookie looked at Claudine curiously. “Why do you sometimes call her Leonie and sometimes Grandmother?”

Claudine chuckled. “I do the same thing with Niall and my brother and sister. It’s just that one moment I’ll think of a person by his or her relationship with me, and the next, I think of him or her by name. Plus,” she grinned, “Grandmother does not like being called ‘grandmother’ out loud, so I only do that when she’s not around.”

Sookie chuckled and shook her head at her cousin. She’d learned a lot about Claudine that day. Mostly, she’d figured out that the fairy was someone who tried to enjoy life to its fullest, and she was amused by almost everything.
“Where is Leonie now?” Sookie asked.

“She is still at my home in this realm. I am to return to her after I leave here, and then we will say goodbye for the time being since I am going back to Faerie, while she is staying to visit friends here.”

Sookie bit her lip. “I don’t know. It took a lot for Eric to trust just one fairy being here.”

“My grandmother would not harm your vampire, Sookie. And, as I said earlier, she has longed to meet you for a while. However, Niall did not want that, and she acquiesced to his wishes.”

“Why would she come now then? Won’t Niall be mad?”

Claudine smiled. “My grandmother does as she wishes for the most part, but reluctantly agreed to listen to Niall regarding you because she is not your blood kin; however, she told me to call her today if I thought you needed her knowledge or help with anything. Now that Niall has basically disowned you, she no longer feels the need to listen to him on the matter,” the fairy said, her eyes twinkling.

Sookie glanced toward the house.

“You have my word that she will not go into the house,” Claudine smiled.

Sookie took a deep breath. “It’s not that I don’t want to trust you. I’m trying.”

“But you hardly know me,” Claudine smiled with understanding.

Sookie nodded. “Do you think she would mind if I brought Elina and her grandson closer? I—uh—don’t want to offend you or her, but I’d feel better if they were inside protecting Eric if another fairy was here.”

Claudine shook her head and giggled. “Of course she wouldn’t mind that! You get them while I go get Leonie.”

Sookie watched in awe as Claudine “popped” away. Teleporting had been one thing she’d not been able to channel her energy to do, and the ability amazed her. Sookie shrugged, pulled out her whistle, and blew it. Less than twenty seconds later, two black bears approached the porch.

Sookie’s heart beat rapidly as she looked at the beautiful and dangerous creatures.

“Uh,” Sookie started, “my fairy cousin is bringing someone else up here. It’s okay—I think—but would y’all mind stayin’ in the house with Eric until they leave?”

The smaller, but seemingly more powerful bear looked to the other one and gave something that resembled a nod. The two disappeared into the woods for about a minute before returning in their human forms. Sookie was grateful to see that they were both fully clothed.

Elina smiled as she gave Sookie a hug.

“Sookie, this is my eldest grandson, Kuruk,” she said as she introduced the young man next to her. Sookie held out her hand to Kuruk. “Nice to meet you.”

He shook her hand for about a second too long as his eyes smoldered into hers.

Elina said something rapidly in a language Sookie didn’t understand, and Kuruk immediately
lowered his hand and his eyes in deference.

“Yes, Gammy,” he pouted as he shuffled inside the house.

Elina smiled. “He has been mesmerized by your practice in the woods today and has developed something of a crush on you and the other fairy. Of course, he has a new crush every other day.”

“Oh,” Sookie laughed a little. “Well, he’s cute. I bet the girls line right up for him.”

Elina sighed. “That they do, which is just one of the reasons why he will not stay with one long enough to form a commitment. His father—my son—is the chief of our tribe and the Alpha of our pack, but Kuruk is not yet ready to begin growing into his role as his father’s successor.”

Sookie smiled as she thought of Eric. From what he’d told her, he’d been similar as a teen. “Perhaps, Kuruk could stay a while after dark. Then Eric could speak with him,” she offered.

Elina looked intrigued. “Why?”

Sookie’s smile widened. “Well—first of all, Kuruk would get over his crush on me real quick if he understood that I belonged to a thousand-year-old vampire.”

Elina laughed heartily. “I bet he would!”

“Also,” Sookie shrugged, “Eric might be able to say something to help Kuruk. It was a long time ago, and times have changed, but Eric’s human father was a chieftain, and Eric went through his own rebellious phase.”

Elina was thoughtful for a moment. “We will stay past nightfall,” she agreed. “If you will permit me, I will cook dinner while you spend the rest of your day with the fairies. Yesterday, I brought some deer meat, and it would make a nice venison stew with some of the vegetables I brought.”

“That’d be nice,” Sookie smiled even as she heard two popping noises.

Elina immediately took up a defensive pose in front of Sookie as Kuruk came back out onto the porch. The air shimmered around him until Elina spoke some words to him indicating that there was not a threat.

Claudine stood about ten feet from the house. A beautiful, redheaded fairy stood next to her. Leonie looked a little older than Claudine, but she was still one of the most beautiful creatures Sookie had ever seen.

Kuruk gasped at the sight of the lovely fairy, who immediately gave him a disarming smile in return.

“I do have a taste for younger men,” Leonie said coquettishly, “but I am not certain your people would approve of the things you wish to do to me.” Her voice tingled with both amusement and interest. “However, if they didn’t mind, I would be willing. I do not mind public displays.”

Immediately Kuruk turned beet read as Leonie laughed merrily before turning to nod in Elina’s direction.

“Well met, great mother bear of the mountains,” the fairy said to the elder Werebear.

“And you as well, lady of the Fae.”

“Do you—uh—know each other?” Sookie asked.
Leonie shook her head. “No, but I make it a habit to learn about strong women in all the realms I visit. ‘Elina’s is a name I have heard before.”

“I am honored,” Elina said with a bow of her head. “I will have my grandson bring you refreshments in a few minutes,” she added before turning to Sookie. “This woman will not harm you or the vampire,” she said in a whisper.

Sookie nodded. She couldn’t help but to believe the elder Werebear, for Elina seemed to “know” things. As they’d talked the day before, Elina explained her gift as a kind of “psychic instinct” she received when she was around new people.

As soon as Elina and Kuruk had gone inside, Leonie spoke again, her intense green eyes seeming to bore into Sookie. “You keep good company, Sookie Stackhouse.”

Sookie cringed a little at that name, even as she gestured for the fairies to join her on the porch. When she felt Leonie reading her thoughts, she put up her shields tightly, but she could tell that the elder fairy had gleaned something from her head.

Leonie gave her a sly smile. “Fintan chose to be a Stackhouse—to be with his Adele. Niall, of course, did not understand, perhaps because he now resists the kinds of feelings Fintan embraced.”

Leonie smiled sadly. “Or maybe, Niall understood them all too well. After all, he also loved a human once—his Adira, Finn and Dermot’s mother. Niall’s heart broke when he had to leave her.”

“Did you—uh—know Gran—uh—my grandmother, Adele?”

“Of course!” Leonie smiled. “Finn asked that I meet her when he decided that he was going to stay with her in this realm. Of course, that was before Niall wiped away Adele’s memories of all things Fae.” Her tone had become a little sad. “I have loved all the children that I have been blessed with—my Magallen and Finn and Dermot. But Finn was always most like me, though my grandson, Claude, shares many of my traits too. Claudine,” she continued, smiling at the fairy next to her, “is similar to me in temperament as well. That is why she was willing to take the risk of letting me come here.”

“What have you risked?” Sookie asked Claudine with concern.

“Niall would be very angry with me if he ever found out I’d brought Leonie here,” Claudine answered, though her eyes were still twinkling with intrigue. “But he will likely never know,” she shrugged.

“Will he punish you if he finds out?” Sookie asked, still quite worried.

“Only with the silent treatment for a month or so,” Leonie said, rolling her eyes. “Niall can be quite the pouter when things do not go his way. And his go-to punishment is silence.”

“Well, I won’t tell him,” Sookie promised.

“Then he will never find out,” Leonie said brightly. “So where was I? Oh yes! I loved—I love—Finn and Dermot as my own. Dermot took after his father in personality, whereas Finn took after me. But I could tell that he had a lot of his mother, Adira, in him, too. Niall would often watch him from afar, just looking at him with love and sadness.” She sighed. “I have not yet found love like the love Niall had with Adira; however, I could tell how special she was just by watching Finn grow up. He was different from anyone I have ever known, and he taught me as much as I tried to teach him.”

Leonie smiled as she once again looked closely at Sookie. “You have his eyes, and I believe you
have his spirit too. The spark within you is similar to his own—and just as strong.”

“I don’t remember him much,” Sookie said in a quiet voice.

“I will find you in the future then,” Leonie promised.

Sookie looked at her in confusion.

“So that I can tell you all I know of him,” Leonie added with such sincerity that it made Sookie’s heart ache.

“I’d like that,” Sookie said in a whisper.

Before Leonie could respond, Kuruk came outside eagerly, carrying a bountiful tray of drinks and snacks that Elina had miraculously constructed with the food she’d brought the day before. The young Werebear’s eyes were locked onto Leonie.

The redhead grinned and winked at him, causing him to almost drop the tray. Kuruk managed, however, to get it onto the table before scurrying inside again.

“Ah. Youth!” Leonie exclaimed. “So easy to rattle—yet so energetic and enthusiastic to be rattled!” She giggled a little.

“Uh—sorry for sayin’ this,” Sookie said with a blush, “but you don’t seem like you’d be married to Niall at all. He’s—uh—quite—uh—severe, compared to you and Claudine.”

Leonie shrugged. “He is bit serious, but I have always recognized him as my complement, and he is a wonderful leader of our people. We have different ideas about our world and other worlds, but he always listens to my thoughts and incorporates my ideas into his. He is wise, but he must balance the old ways with the new. I had—at one point—wished that he and I could be,” she paused, “more to one another, but, alas, we do not love each other in that way. But he is a good man and a good partner. I would not have another,” she finished fiercely.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Sookie said tentatively, almost as if she were asking a question.

Claudine had already begun to snack on the food Kuruk had brought them.

“Now, tell me about yourself, dear,” Leonie said, changing the subject, as she, too, picked up some food.

“Uh,” Sookie stammered, “don’t y’all already know about me?”

Leonie smiled kindly, and Sookie marveled at the fact that the elder fairy seemed both nurturing and a little intimidating at the same time.

“To know about someone is not to know her,” Leonie said. “What do you enjoy doing? What would you like to do in the future? What are your dreams?”

Sookie felt a kind of tapping on her shields as she thought about Leonie’s questions. She figured that the fairy was trying to read her thoughts again, but she was a bit too overawed by Leonie to call her on it—as she’d done with Claudine.

“Um—I guess I haven’t really thought about the future much—beyond the fact that I’ll be with Eric now.” Sookie sighed. “And I don’t really know what that will be like. So far, we’ve mostly been concentrating on surviving.”
Leonie tilted her head a bit and smiled at Sookie. Once again, the fairy’s green eyes captivated her.

“My ability does not work on you,” the elder fairy said with a wide smile. “It never worked on Fintan either.”

“Ability?” Sookie asked.

“To mesmerize. It is akin to a vampire’s glamour. Few fairies have the ability anymore. Of my grandchildren only one, Claude, has the gift. I was trying it on you just now, but obviously you are immune to it; so was Finn. It makes me wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“Wonder what else you are.”
Sanctuary

Chapter 24: Sanctuary

“I’m pretty sure I never deserved Sookie as a friend,” Tara Thornton said, her eyes taking in the variegated colors of the darkening sky. The sun would be setting in another hour or so.

“Don’t say that,” Alcide Herveaux sighed, wrapping his arms around the woman whose safety had become more important than his own. She leaned back a little, enjoying the warmth he brought to her—the comfort.

“You tried to do right by Sookie; you tried to warn her to stay away from those bloodsuckers,” Alcide soothed.

Tara sighed. “Maybe. But did I ever even try to give her what she really needed—my support? Did I ever really try to understand why Bill was so damned alluring to her? Maybe if I had, she wouldn’t have become so wrapped up in him. Being with him made her lose herself a little. I know in my heart that he was bad for her, but she was just trying to be happy.”

Tara turned around in Alcide’s arms and looked up into his warm chocolate eyes. She nestled against his strong chest and let the beauty of the moment wrap around them like a blanket. She could hear leaves rustling. She could hear birds chatting. She could feel the gentle breeze whispering against her cheeks and causing them to flush from the chilliness.

“I never realized before that Sookie couldn’t do this,” she said, looking up at Alcide again.

“Do what?”

“Be held by someone like this—without either hearing all of his thoughts or having to struggle to keep up her shields. I mean—I knew that touch made others’ thoughts stronger to her. But I guess I never let myself think about what that really meant for her. I never considered the price she might have to pay for every hug she gave to me or Jason—or even Gran. I didn’t appreciate the fact that—despite that cost—she never failed to offer me a hug when I needed one, even before she’d learned to shield herself at all. And now it’s too late; she’s dead,” she finished in little more than a whisper.

Alcide sighed. “We don’t know that she’s gone.”

A tear fell from Tara’s eye, though she held others back. “I can’t imagine a scenario where she’s still alive. If Eric hasn’t killed her, I’m sure Bill has—or Russell.”

Alcide frowned. “I’m not a fan of vamps—and I’m definitely no fan of Northman’s—but it is possible that he came to the hospital to help Sookie, beyond just healing her. It’s possible that he wanted to protect her from Compton.”

Tara shook her head a little. “Sam once told me that Eric was ten times worse than Bill, and—if that’s true—then Sookie really is gone.” She reached up to swipe away more tears before they fell down her cheeks.

Alcide was contemplative for a moment. “Northman is ten times more powerful than Compton. And there’s no glossing over the fact that he’s a stone-cold killer. But, from what I’ve heard, it’s not a pleasure sport for him, though I’m sure he takes pleasure in it. He’s known for being a fair sheriff—brutal to people who break vampire law, but not an indiscriminate murderer. And—
whatever his motives—he seemed to want to make sure Sookie was safe. The marker he held against my father was for over twenty thousand dollars, and he was willing to call us even if I protected Sookie in Jackson. I don’t know why he cared about her, Tara, but I really think he did.”

“I want to hold out hope that she’s still alive,” Tara whispered, “but hope is a hard thing to hold on to.”

“I know,” Alcide said, pulling her tighter against his body.

In truth, he didn’t know what else to say to make Tara feel any better. She’d had such a hard life. She’d lost so much. She’d been so hurt. It wasn’t a wonder that “hope” was a hard thing for her to marshal.

At the hospital in Rustin, after Northman had taken Sookie, the group that had been holding vigil over what they’d feared was going to be her deathbed had dispersed. Sookie’s brother and Lafayette had returned to Bon Temps. Alcide had figured that—since Northman knew a lot about his own dealings and he didn’t trust the bastard—he’d get the hell out of Dodge for a while.

At first, the Were hadn’t wanted to take Tara with him.

But one look into her fear-filled eyes, and he’d caved.

It comforted Sookie’s friends and family not a bit that Alcide had also picked up Compton’s scent in Sookie’s empty hospital room after they’d returned to it. Obviously, Northman and Compton had fought. There was a Compton-sized imprint in the fucking wall to prove it! Alcide had tracked Sookie and both vampires up to the roof, where Northman’s and Sookie’s scents had disappeared.

Then, Alcide had followed Bill’s scent back down to the parking garage. He figured that Jason, Lafayette, Tara, and he were lucky that Bill had left—probably to pursue Sookie and Northman. Whatever the reason, Bill hadn’t come after the group to question them, which meant that they had a chance to get away clear.

So Alcide had taken off with Tara, whom he’d known for less than a day. Maybe it was because Alcide liked Sookie and wanted to do something to make up for the fact that he’d failed to keep the vampires from hurting her.

Whatever the reason, a second person made hiding just that much harder. Moreover, Tara had had the blood of a vampire—one who, by all accounts, was a crazed sociopath with an obsession for her. It wasn’t exactly the equation for an easy getaway.

Still, Alcide didn’t leave her behind, though—the first time that they’d stopped for gas—he’d thought about it.

The Were ditched his work vehicle as soon as he could. A buddy of his who lived about thirty miles outside of Texarkana had owed him a favor. He let Alcide hide his truck on his property, and he also gave Alcide a rickety old truck of his—but it did the job to get Alcide and Tara into Texarkana. By that time, it was 9:00 a.m. In survival mode and needing cash, Alcide went to the nearest branch of his bank and withdrew every cent he had.

Then Alcide went to an ATM and took out the maximum amount for cash advances that he could on his two credit cards. Next, he pawned the tools that had been in his work truck. With a good amount of cash in hand, Tara and he got another vehicle.

It was Tara who saved him five hundred dollars on the used 2009 Ford Focus that he bought. Because the vehicle didn’t stand out and because of its good gas mileage, the car had been Alcide’s
first choice, but the used car salesmen had seemed determined to meet—and surpass—every stereotype about his ilk. But he was no match for Tara, who spouted off an incredible amount of knowledge about automobiles and then accusations about the man being prejudiced against interracial couples. In no time at all, Tara had “convinced” the salesman to let the car go for a fair price.

Alcide knew that it was almost impossible not to leave behind a paper trail, but he’d also learned that if a trail had to be left, it should be designed to run cold very quickly. In his opinion, Texarkana was the perfect place to start and end a trail. The city was basically at the intersection of four states: Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. There were two major interstates running through it. And several other highways too.

After they’d gotten their car and a few provisions, they took Highway 82 west. At Paris, Texas, they turned north onto Highway 271. They drove through the night until they got to Antlers, Oklahoma.

There—they stayed with another friend of Alcide’s—another person who owed him a favor. Of course, upon hearing why they needed a hideout, the “friend” took a vacation of his own. He wasn’t fool enough to stay somewhere that a human with a blood tie to a vampire was staying.

After that, Tara tried to convince Alcide to take off too, but—for some reason that he couldn’t fully understand or explain at the time—he didn’t. Instead, he and Tara gathered weapons and prayed that when Franklin Mott came, he would come alone.

As it turned out, he did come alone. Franklin was as arrogant as he was unhinged. He sped to the house Tara and Alcide were staying in at 3:00 a.m. in the morning, just five days after Tara had almost taken off his head.

Alcide shook his head a little at the memory, even as he pulled Tara closer against him.

Fucking vampires and their fucking fast healing time.

Mott had been crazed, spewing ridiculous nonsense about how he and Tara were meant to be. That was the moment Alcide had realized that he’d begun to care for Tara. She’d turned out to be surprisingly good company. And she was as funny as hell. In fact, Alcide had almost pissed his pants with laughter when she’d told him about Jason Stackhouse’s V-induced swollen pecker. She called the episode “cockamamie”—emphasis on the “cock.”

Only Tara.

Yes—as soon as Alcide had heard the vampire who had brutalized Tara yelling out that she was “his,” he’d felt something in him snap.

And then it had snapped firmly into place.

He truly cared for Tara, and there was no fucking way he was going to let Franklin Mott get his fangs into her again.

And the vampire didn’t. Alcide, his resolution causing him to shift, ran out of the house and attacked Mott. The vampire, obviously enamored by the sound of his own demented ranting, had been surprised by the brutal nature of the Were’s attack. However—as he’d thrown Alcide off of him—he’d gotten an even bigger surprise.

A wooden bullet in his chest fired from a gun Tara was holding with steady hands.
“Goodbye, asshole,” Tara had said calmly just before the vampire burst apart.

Had Alcide not been falling in love with her already, he would have started in that moment.

He’d shifted back into a man, and Tara had taken a moment to take him in. And—given the fight and his bloodlust—there had been a lot of Alcide to take in. Tara had given him a little smirk before her hands finally started shaking and her emotions began to ricochet through her. Alcide had made it to her side just before she’d fainted.

Killing someone—killing a vampire who’d raped you—was an experience that would have caused even the strongest to topple over.

Alcide had lifted her gently into his arms; she’d felt “right” in them.

Since the two had never really unpacked their few belongings, Alcide took Tara to their vehicle, dressed, and then drove away from Antlers as fast as he could.

As soon as Tara had woken up, he’d taken her hand in his. As Alcide had driven on rural roads in the early hours of dawn, Tara had cried—until she had no more tears left. And then she’d slept again.

Over the next several days, they’d kept driving. Except for short breaks at country stores to get food or gasoline, they didn’t stop. They took turns driving and stayed off the interstate when they could, sticking to roads that bypassed major cities. It was slow-going, but they made their way north and then into Canada, crossing the border at Coutts, Alberta. Alcide had already arranged—through another contact—for a Were border patrol agent to meet Tara and him. The agent let them through without question—for a price.

During their long drive, Alcide and Tara had talked a lot—sometimes with great humor and sometimes seriously. Alcide told her about how his mom’s death had affected his father. In turn, Tara told him about her abuse at her mother’s hands. And—right before they reached their destination near Ponoka in Alberta, Canada, where Alcide hoped they could settle safely for a while—she’d told him everything about Franklin and what he’d done to her.

She’d trusted him, and that had meant the world to him.

An hour or so south of Edmonton, Ponoka was known to be a sanctuary of sorts for Weres without a pack. Of course, the only people who were in the “know” about this haven were certain Weres from certain packs. Alcide’s father had known one of the founders of the community in Ponoka, an honorable man named Hank Jiles. Alcide remembered Hank a little—but mostly he remembered hanging out with Hank’s son, Henry, a few times; Henry was only a few years older than Alcide.

Alcide was hopeful that Edgington’s Weres had no idea that Ponoka even existed; he’d learned about the community when he’d overheard his father telling a teenager named Tray Dawson about the place. That had been almost twenty years before. Tray had been in trouble with the law, having started several fights after his parents died. The last one had seriously injured a human, and Tray had been arrested. Alcide’s dad had bailed Tray out; being arrested and endangering the secrecy of Weres was an unforgivable offense, so Tray was given a choice: he could either go to Ponoka and take advantage of a new start or face pack justice, which would have been severe.

In truth, Alcide had been somewhat worried about showing up in Ponoka without a “reference”—as it were. But he shouldn’t have been. A Were’s nose had a long fucking memory, and Henry Jiles had remembered him right away. And he’d welcomed Alcide and Tara.
After hearing their story, Henry had suggested that they go by pseudonyms. And they came up with a Tara-labeled “cockamamie” story to explain why they’d made their way to Ponoka. Alcide—or, rather, Jim—would say that he’d been exiled from his pack because he refused to give up the woman he loved in order to marry a woman in his pack.

But—despite Tara’s making fun of what she called the story’s “Romeo and Juliet idiocy,” the cover story had worked out just fine so far. Within a couple of days of being in Ponoka, Henry, who had been selected as packmaster of the group after his father had died, found Alcide a job in construction. And Tara, who was going by the name Rae, had begun working as a school custodian—of all things.

After arriving in Ponoka and taking up residence in a little cabin secured by Henry, it had taken only twenty-four hours for the sexual tension that had been growing between Alcide and Tara to overwhelm them both.

And neither of them had been sorry in the least.

Henry Jiles had seldom found himself surprised. He couldn’t afford to be.

He’d been only twelve years old when his father had sat him down to tell him about the threats that their pack was facing. Henry’s father, whom he was named for, had been the packmaster of the second largest Were group in the deep South. Headquartered in Gulfport, Mississippi, the Gulf-Range pack boasted members from as far west as the Louisiana border and as far east as Mobile, Alabama. The pack had originally settled in the Gulf of Mexico in the 1820s and had thrived ever since.

From what his father, Hank, had told him, things had begun to change when Henry was about ten years old. A Were group from the Jackson, Mississippi area began to encroach upon Gulf-Range pack-lands. After almost two years of small skirmishes between Hank’s people and members from the other pack, Hank decided that the best thing to do would be to call his people together and to have an open discussion about what had been going on with the encroaching pack. It was at that meeting that Hank had been confronted with troubling news: many of his own people had already defected to the other pack! Moreover, most of the younger Weres, whom Hank had seen as most promising, had become aggressive—even violent—at the meeting, starting fights with their own elder family members.

It had later been found out that V was involved.

After that, Hank had tried to hold his pack together, but he faced a foe he couldn’t defeat—the draw of V and the menace of a stronger pack that threatened to crush anyone that didn’t “fall in line.” In the end, Hank had had little choice but to leave the land his ancestors had hunted on for nine generations. Hank and his family, along with several other families who didn’t want to become absorbed into the invading pack, moved north to Canada.

They’d settled in Ponoka in Alberta. Over the years, others had joined them—most of them disaffected Weres who’d left their packs for personal reasons. But a few, like his right-hand man, Tray Dawson, had left their previous lives because of trouble with the law. They’d come to Ponoka for a second chance.

Henry had followed in his father’s footsteps in that he’d always allowed this chance, but the young packmaster had quickly learned that some people would refuse to accept his authority, and Henry wasn’t about to let a few malcontents hurt his pack. Thus, he always remained wary when new Weres sought to join the Ponoka pack. And there was always a probationary period.
Indeed, if disfranchised Alpha-wannabes came sniffing around his pack, Henry made sure they were dealt with quickly and decisively. Needless to say, they didn’t last long in the pack—or in the world, for that matter.


And Henry wouldn’t apologize for that policy. He’d learned from his father that decisive action was the only way to prevent a pack from being overrun. In fact, Hank Jiles’s biggest regret had been not acting more summarily as soon as he’d sensed a threat against the Gulf-Range pack.

Not surprisingly, the Ponoka pack had grown over the years, from only seventeen Weres when it had been formed to over a hundred and fifty. And Henry was proud of his pack. In the middle of Canada and well-away from other Were groups, the Ponoka pack thrived.

In the spirit of increasing his numbers with good people, Henry had been happy to welcome Alcide Herveaux and his woman into the group. From what they’d told him, it seemed as if they’d had issues with the same group that had once caused the end of the Gulf-Range pack. And—as it turned out—that rogue Were pack was under the ultimate control of a vampire, Russell Edgington, King of Mississippi and now Louisiana too.

Henry hadn’t been too surprised to hear this. His father had always suspected as much. Henry hated the thought of Weres allowing themselves to be “service animals” to vampires, but the young packmaster didn’t hate vampires in general. He’d worked with several over the years, and as long as they treated him with respect, he’d given it back.

However, that still hadn’t stopped him from being surprised a few days before—when he’d gotten a visit from a vampiress he’d never met. She’d introduced herself as Klymene.

Generally, if Henry was to meet with a vampire, he’d be contacted by the sheriff of the area. He’d never had a vampire just show up at his residence.

The vampiress had radiated power, and Henry had sensed that she was ancient. She’d not attempted glamour, but she had asked for an invitation into his home. Henry had been cautious at first, but then the vampiress had handed him a letter from the Ancient Pythoness herself.

Another surprise.

Those surprises kept coming after he’d invited her inside and listened to her “request.”

“What do you think we should do?” Alcide asked, hugging Tara a little closer when she shivered because of the cool breeze.

“I don’t like the idea of helping any vampires,” Tara said, “not after what they did to Sookie. Not after Franklin,” she added in a whisper.

Alcide sighed. “Then we don’t have to. We can just stay here—stay out of it.”

“But you are the one who told me that this Ancient Pythoness was the shit,” Tara reminded.

Alcide chuckled at her turn of phrase. They hadn’t yet defined what they were to each other—or what they might become. But she made him laugh, and—once he’d gotten past her hard outer persona—she had shown herself to be tender and kind.

“Tell me about her?” Tara asked.
“I don’t know a lot. No one does.”

She looked up at him and rolled her eyes. “Well—tell me what you do know.”

He chuckled and kissed the end of her nose playfully. “Yes ma’am. Well—she’s ancient, thus the name. Legend has it that the Ancient Pythoness was an oracle—a future-teller—in Greece or Rome. Somewhere like that,” Alcide added with a shrug. He’d never been one for history.

He continued, “Most supernaturals have heard of her, but she’s really reclusive. Still, even bringing up her name causes most of us to sit up and take notice—on account of the fact that she supposedly really does know the future.”

“And she contacted Henry?” Tara asked.

“One of her people did,” Alcide raked his hand through his hair. “She’s the one who gave Henry the list.”

Tara let out a somewhat shaky breath. The list had apparently included the names of about fifty members of the Ponoka pack. Tara and Alcide—their real names—had been on the list too, though they were not official packmembers yet.

Tara shivered. “How did this Pythoness person know our names?” She shook her head and answered her own question: “Because she knows the fuckin’ future.”

Alcide nodded. “Yes. And, according to Henry, the list included only the people he could trust absolutely. He was instructed to include no others from the pack in the meeting last night. But, remember, we all have been given the choice of whether or not to help.”

“And we have a week to decide,” Tara said.

“Yeah. But . . . .”

“But?”

“But if we help to fight Russell and his Weres—and we win—we could go back home if we wanted,” Alcide said.

“Or we could make this our home—together,” Tara said softly, even as she leaned upward to kiss him. It didn’t take long for the kiss to become heated, and soon Alcide lifted her up and took her inside to their bedroom.

With as much patience as he could muster, Alcide brought her to one release with his fingers and mouth before sinking into her warmth. No one had ever felt so good to him—not even Debbie.

Later, as they lay in bed, Tara asked Alcide about something she’d been wondering about for several days. “You told me once that you liked being a part of a pack, but you also said that you’d left your own. Why did you leave?” she asked, playing with the hair on his broad chest.

Alcide sighed and linked one of his hands with hers. “My dad was the packmaster of the pack I grew up in—the Longtooth pack. He was a strong leader—and fair. But, after my mom died, he took to the bottle—like I told you.”

Tara nodded. In one of their previous conversations, they’d commiserated over alcohol’s effects on their parents.
“Not long after he started drinking heavily, my dad began to half-ass his pack commitments. I was too young at the time to know how to do everything, but I tried to help.” Alcide scoffed. “And for my trouble, I got punched in the face by him. I was fifteen at the time. Once he’d sobered up and had seen what he’d done, he tried to apologize.”

“What did you do?”

Alcide chuckled. “I was a testosterone-driven teenage boy, and it was near the full moon. What do you think I did?”

“Something dumb,” Tara offered with a smirk.

“Yeah,” the Were confirmed. “I hit my dad as hard as I fuckin’ could and took off, going to live with my aunt for a while. I eventually went back home when I was eighteen; by then, Dad had practically run the family business into the ground. I took it over, only to find us horribly in debt because of Dad’s gambling.” He shook his head. “Not long after that, Dad was challenged for packmaster. Why he hadn’t been before is a testament to the fact that he had been well-respected when my mom was alive, and people had hoped that he’d come out of his drunken depression. But, eventually, one of the newer members of the pack challenged him. Of course, my dad showed up to the fight drunk,” Alcide said bitterly. “And the other guy kicked his ass so easily that it was an embarrassment.”

Once again, Alcide ran his free hand roughly through his hair, though his hold on Tara’s hand stayed gentle. “My dad ran off after that humiliation. Now he lives in a trailer in the middle of nowhere. The really shitty part is that the man who challenged him is a fuckin’ asshole. But none of the better men in the pack would challenge my dad because they’d respected him. The new guy drove away most of the decent folks with his new rules. Those rules drove me away as well.”

“What rules?” Tara asked.

Alcide sighed. “Believe it or not—Debbie was once a decent person. And I loved her. We were gonna get married, but the new packmaster demanded jus primae noctis.”

“Huh?” Tara asked inelegantly.

Alcide chuckled, though there was no mirth in it. “It’s Latin. It means ‘the right of the first night.’ I’m not much of a scholar, but I learned all about jus primae noctis,” he said bitterly. “Back in the day, a king or nobleman could take the virginity of a peasant girl on the night of her wedding. Some packs used to allow the same fuckin’ thing, hoping that the line of the Alpha-male would increase. But most packs stopped that tradition centuries ago.” He sighed. “Basically speaking, it would have given the new packmaster the right to sleep with Debbie on our wedding night. Now—Debbie definitely wasn’t a virgin by the time I asked her to marry me, but I still couldn’t imagine her having to do what the packmaster was askin’, so I quit the pack. Debbie didn’t. She slept with the packmaster anyway and came to me as if that had fixed everything.” He scoffed. “She actually believe that she’d done her duty to me and the pack. She’d also talked the packmaster into taking me back into the pack.”

Alcide looked stricken for a moment. “I shouldn’t have gone back, but I loved Debbie. And I thought that the whole thing was over. It was only later that I realized that Debbie had continued to fuck the packmaster behind my back. I also learned that the packmaster planned to make Debbie and me into a “source couple” after we married.”

“What’s that?” Tara asked.
“Another fucked up, outdated tradition. You see, when two Weres mate, it’s usually only their firstborn together that inherits the ability to shift. Subsequent kids don’t inherit the ability, though if they mate with a full-blooded Were, they could pass on the shifting gene.”

“What if we had a kid?” Tara asked suddenly. “Would he or she shift?”

Alcide sighed. “Probably not, though there’s a slim chance—maybe one out of a hundred. We’d be more likely to have Were grandchildren.”

“How’s that?” Tara asked, biting her lower lip almost nervously.

“If we had a child, he or she would be half-blooded. But if he or she had a child with a full-blooded Were, their firstborn would likely shift.”

“Oh,” Tara said. “So—uh—what’s a ‘source couple?’”

Alcide scoffed. “Debbie and I would have been allowed to have a firstborn. However, after that, we would have been punished if we had other children together. Instead, we would have been required to mate with other Weres—to produce firstborns with them. I would have been expected to act as a father to any other children Debbie had. And, after donating the sperm and impregnating other women, I would have been forbidden to have anything to do with other children I’d fathered.”

“Geez! What did you do?”

“I told Debbie about the packmaster’s plans. It turned out that she’d already known about them. She was all for it, it seemed! She told me that I should see it as a great honor.”

“That’s fucked up,” Tara observed.

“Yeah. Don’t get me wrong. It’s not that uncommon for some Weres to breed with others to produce more Were children. There were even a few such cases when my dad was packmaster, but it was voluntary and initiated by the couples who did it. It definitely wasn’t regimented or forced!”

He took a deep breath. “After I’d confronted Debbie about everything and told her that I was leaving the pack for good, she told me that if I did, we’d be through.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“And you left the pack,” Tara supplied.

“Yeah. After that, Debbie turned wild, and—before long—she was hanging out with members of a pack that was known for doing V.”

“Russell Edgington’s pack,” Tara said, shaking a little, “the same pack that this Pythoness person wants us to help fight.”

“Yeah,” Alcide said. “The same one.”
What Are You?

Chapter 25: What Are You?

“The supernatural is the natural not yet understood.”—Elbert Hubbard

PREVIOUSLY: Leonie tilted her head a bit and smiled at Sookie. Once again, the fairy’s green eyes captivated her.

“My ability does not work on you,” the elder fairy said with a wide smile. “It never worked on Fintan either.”

“What else?” Sookie asked.

“What else are you?” Leonie questioned again—though seemingly asking herself.

“What else?” Sookie asked fearfully. The last thing she wanted to be was more than a fairy-human hybrid. She broke into a cold sweat as she imagined goblins or hobbits or pixies or yetis or freakin’ Big Bird coming out of the woodwork to claim her as a long-lost relative.

Sookie felt Leonie entering her mind again and realized that her shields had slipped down with her anxiety. She quickly erected them again.

“I do not believe there was ever a race of large yellow birds, dear,” Leonie laughed heartily. “And I did not mean to make you afraid. Humanity has always had its own strains of the supernatural, though those strains have become harder to find and tend to skip many generations at a time.”

“What else?” Sookie asked inelegantly.

Leonie gave her a kind smile. “In this realm, magic is different than in the Fae realm. And, in a way, it is much more—alive,” she said, her own eyes enlivening. “In a sense, magic here is inherited—as it is in Faerie—but it will manifest in the souls of only those whom it deems worthy,” she shared. “Given the fact that both Fintan and Dermot always seemed to have more magical essence that just their Fae sparks, I believe that Niall’s beloved Adira was more than met the eye—though she, herself, may not have manifested any magical gifts.” Leonie tilted her head as if coming to a sudden realization. “You cannot be glamoured either—can you?”

“No,” Sookie responded in a quiet voice. “I figured that was because of my telepathy or—uh—the fairy thing.”

“Fairies can be glamoured—at least to a certain extent,” Leonie informed. She laughed. Not that many vampires have ever tried! Vampires tend to be trying to eat us, not to glamour us.”

Claudine giggled, though Sookie couldn’t find the humor in the moment.

Smirking, Leonie continued, “Fairy minds allow us to recognize what is happening and resist—at
least to a certain extent. However, we cannot indefinitely prevent ourselves from falling into a vampire’s glamour. The same is true for mesmerizing. Other beings can be brought under my influence; however, as with glamour, fairies would recognize my presence, and their minds would attempt to repel me—unless I was welcomed. Like all other fairies I know, your mind recognized my attempt to invade it. But—instead of resistance, which I could have overcome with time, your mind literally ejected my attempts. Fintan’s mind was the same.”

“Why do you think we—uh—came out different?” Sookie asked with trepidation.

Leonie shrugged. “It is either a beautiful evolution of the Fae, brought about by the mixing of Niall’s and Adira’s essences—Fae and human DNA—or there was some kind of dormant supernatural blood in Adira. Either way, I do not think you have anything to worry about regarding hobbits and yetis. They are not real, though Mr. Tolkien’s stories made me like the idea of hobbits.”

“Me too,” Claudine said, even as she picked up a piece of cheese and popped it into her mouth.

Leonie continued. “And Goblins cannot mate with humans, so you need have no fear of them either.” She winked at Sookie. “In truth, I have always posited that Adira might be part nymph, for they were known in myth to resist the influence of even gods and goddesses. And you—like Finn—can certainly resist other Supernaturals.”

“A nymph?”

Leonie nodded. “Yes, according to the legends of this realm, nymphs are tied to nature. For instance, a nymph might be associated with a certain river, and will live as long as that river flows. But those stories are not exactly true. Most nymphs were simply humans who carried with them the magic of the natural world. That magic made them have longer than average lives. Other nymphs, however, could enchant humans with their beauty or their grace. Some were prophetesses and could see glimpses of the future. And a few were telepaths. All were known to be able to resist other supernaturals—if they chose to.”

“Telepaths,” Sookie whispered. “But fairies are telepaths too—right?”

“Telepathy is a gift that many fairies have,” Leonie responded. “But yours is different from other fairies’ telepathy, as was Finn’s. In many ways, it is more like a demon’s telepathy, but I would be able to sense demon blood in you since demons and fairies have common ancestors. Of course, the difference may be because you are part human. However, being human does not seem to have diminished the scope or the strength of your telepathy. Tell me,” she sat forward a bit, “has vampire blood made your gift grow stronger?”

Sookie contemplated for a moment. “I think so. I’m not sure though. When I met Bill, I was able to kind of latch onto the silence of his mind. Actually, vampires’ minds are like little voids to me—places where I know a mind should be, even though I can’t hear a thing in them. They’re almost like little black holes that I can rest inside of. The first time I ‘rested’ like that with Bill, I was able to make the shields around my mind a little stronger. And that was before I took his blood.”

Leonie nodded. “Yes. When I tried to mesmerize you, I felt the things that you call your shields. Can you describe them to me?”

Sookie was confused by Leonie’s question, but humored her anyway. “I think of them like little walls I can build between others’ thoughts and my own. I use them to keep myself from hearing people.”
Leonie shook her head. “No—actually you are using them to keep other people’s thoughts from invading your mind. You choose not to delve into the minds of others.”

Sookie shook her head. “I don’t know if I understand the difference.”

Leonie explained, “Your telepathy, like Finn’s, is of a different nature than mine and that of other Fae.”

“You said that before, but what do you mean?” Sookie asked.

“Sookie, I do not have shields, nor do I have the capacity to make them.”

“Me neither,” Claudine piped in, though her mouth was full.

“But . . . . Huh?” Sookie asked with confusion.

“I cannot keep others out of my mind,” Leonie clarified. “That is what your shields are currently doing. They do prevent you from hearing others, but only because they keep others out. Your own telepathy is simply not active at the moment; however, you could keep your ‘shields’ raised and seek out my thoughts at the same time. The two actions are different.”

Sookie furrowed her eyebrows in confusion.

Leonie smiled. “Let me explain this differently. Every time I have tried to invade your mind since I got here—either with my telepathy or mesmerism—you have noticed and then have actively pushed me out. That is not a Fae trait—at least not one I have come across before—except with Finn.”

Sookie shook her head again. “Maybe I’m slow, but I’m still not getting what you’re trying to tell me.”

Claudine, now finished with almost all the plate of snacks, spoke, “My telepathy is a choice, cousin. If I wish to hear another’s thoughts, I simply stretch out my mind and listen to them. I never pick up the thoughts of others ‘accidentally’—as I believe you do.”

“Dermot’s telepathy is Fae,” Leonie said. “He can stretch out his mind into another’s. In truth, fairies don’t generally use our telepathy for much beyond communication. We do not, for instance, use it to gain an advantage over enemies and the like. We have laws and traditions against such things. And we can tell when others are listening for such a reason. In many ways, our telepathy is little different from humans’ speaking aloud. We often communicate that way, but our interior thoughts stay our own.”

“But Uncle Fintan’s telepathy was different—like yours,” Claudine picked up. “Others’ thoughts seemed to seep into his brain without him trying to hear them.”

“Yes,” Leonie continued. “When he was a child, he learned to keep away others’ thoughts by constructing something like your shields. But even when his shields were up, he could speak with me telepathically.”

“So—you go lookin’ for other people’s thoughts? They don’t just come to you?” Sookie asked for clarification.

“Exactly,” Leonie and Claudine stated together.

“I can go into other people’s thoughts,” Sookie said, “but I usually try not to. But if I don’t stop
them, other people’s thoughts invade my own head. When I was little, I couldn’t keep them out.” She cringed, and a thick tear trailed down her cheek. She wiped it away quickly, angry that she was feeling sorry for herself.

Leonie and Claudine exchanged a pensive glance.

“No wonder you thought Niall a monster,” Leonie said.

“Huh?” Sookie asked.

“Regarding Hunter—Hadley’s child,” Leonie responded. “You worry that Hunter’s experience will be difficult and filled with pain, like yours.” The elder fairy looked sorrowful. “I am sorry. In the end, Finn did not tell us that your telepathy was like his; he rambled through his fever for the most part, speaking of only his love and loss.” She sighed deeply and bent onto her knees before Sookie. “I must beg your forgiveness, child.”

“Um—for what?” Sookie asked.

“For not helping you develop your shields. For not anticipating that you would be like Finn. I assumed that his particular type of telepathy was an anomaly—one of a kind.” She sighed. “And he was able to master his shields at a very young age, but—then again—he was surrounded by those who could help him. We did not anticipate your troubles until long after Niall had dampened your spark. We did not know—until it was too late—how much you suffered from your gift.”

Sookie let out a sob, not knowing what to say.

“I have visited Hunter myself,” Leonie said soothingly. “Niall sent me to gauge his spark. His telepathy is not like yours and Finn’s, Sookie. He need not listen unless he chooses to, and it will not take him long to understand that.”

“So—uh—he’s not like me?” Sookie asked.

“He is a telepath, but his ability is not like yours. To hear thoughts, he will have to actively seek them.”

Sookie bit her lip. “Eric has sent Hunter a teacher, a half-demon who will help him with his telepathy. But Mr. Cataliades said that Hunter was doing fine and that his father, Remy, hadn’t really noticed that Hunter was that different from other kids.”

Leonie returned to her seat. “Your vampire did this for you?”

Sookie nodded. “Yeah. I asked him to—before Niall tried to take me to Faerie, before we knew about the Fae bond.”

Leonie nodded. “You doubt your vampire’s love for you—because of the Fae bond?”

“Yes,” Sookie admitted. “It was born of a lie.”

“A Fae bond does not lie!” Leonie said forcefully—almost angrily.

Sookie sighed and then spoke sarcastically. “And a Fae bond cannot be formed by someone with only one-eighth fairy blood. And it can’t form between a Fae and a vampire. But here we are.”

“I see your point,” Leonie relented.

Sookie sighed. “Whether our love is based on a lie or not, Eric has shown me who he is. He may
have chosen to show me his true self because he was influenced by the bond to do so, but I have seen who he really is nonetheless.”

“Is he worthy of you?” Leonie asked in the tone with which a concerned parent might ask the same thing.

“Yes,” Sookie answered simply and without hesitation.

“He worries about completing a vampire bond with you?”

“Yes,” Sookie responded. “However, he wants the vampire bond because he thinks it will bring a kind of balance to what we have. He thinks it will help him to know what his true emotions are versus what is coming from the Fae bond.”

Leonie looked at her knowingly. “And what do you think?”

Sookie shivered. “I think I might not be able to keep him from knowing . . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“That you truly love him,” Leonie finished.

Sookie nodded. “Yes,” she responded. “I love him, but he won’t believe me if I tell him that. He’ll think it’s a lie—caused by the Fae bond. And—if he loves me back—he’ll think that’s a lie too.”
“Fear keeps us focused on the past or worried about the future. If we can acknowledge our fear, we can realize that right now we are okay. Right now, today, we are still alive, and our bodies are working marvelously. Our eyes can still see the beautiful sky. Our ears can still hear the voices of our loved ones.”—Thich Nhat Hanh

“So far you have blocked him from feeling your love?”

Sookie shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve tried. And—if he feels it—he probably thinks it’s from the Fae bond.”

“Why do you try to block your love from him?” the redhead asked.

“Because—I . . . .” Sookie paused and took a deep breath. “Because I’m afraid.”

“Ah!” Leonie said with realization. “Because you will soon feel his emotions for the first time. If you complete the vampire bond, you will be able to know what he feels. You fear that your love will be met by something very different from him,” she posited perceptively.

“Yes,” Sookie whispered. “Since we shared blood a second time, I have picked up flashes from Eric—beautiful streaks of light. But I am scared.”

“You fear that he will be bitter?”

Sookie nodded.

“You fear that you will feel his resentment for both you and the Fae bond?”

She nodded again, as tears began to fall from her eyes. Claudine came around to Sookie and placed her arm around her shoulder comfortingly. She spoke to Leonie in a language Sookie didn’t understand.

“Claudine wants me to stop naming your fears, child,” Leonie said. “Is that what you want?”

Sookie shook her head. “No. I’m tired of hiding.”

“Then what is your worst fear?” Leonie asked.

“That the Fae bond would fight against the vampire bond and hurt Eric.”

“That will not happen,” Leonie said fervently. “The Fae bond wouldn’t want either of you to be harmed—least of all by it. Tell me your second worst fear.”

“That I will feel only bitterness and lust from Eric,” Sookie answered.

“But you would accept that destiny—wouldn’t you? To help your vampire?” Leonie asked.

“Yes,” Sookie answered unequivocally. “Eric wants the vampire bond. I think he needs it. And—as long as I know it wouldn’t hurt him—I’ll give that to him.”
Leonie sighed deeply. “What about you, Sookie? Do you not value yourself as much as your Eric?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Then that is what you must learn to do; if you truly wish to give your mate what he wants.”

“How do you know what he wants?” Sookie asked.

“I have a strong feeling,” Leonie said enigmatically. “Now—tell me, Sookie—what do you enjoy doing? What would you like to do in the future? What are your dreams?” The elder fairy’s eyes probed into Sookie as she re-asked the questions she’d asked earlier. However, this time, Sookie didn’t feel a tapping at her shields.

“I like to read. I like learning new things. Books don’t think—at least not out loud,” she responded.

“What else do you like?” Leonie asked.

“I love my family,” Sookie said with tears in her eyes. “I love my friends.”

“Because they accept you?”

“No!” Sookie answered immediately. “Because they love me back even though they don’t!”

“And what would you like to do in the future?” Leonie asked. “Do you want to go back to being a waitress?”

“I’m good at it,” Sookie said.

“Yes. Because you anticipate your customers’ needs as they think them,” Leonie said, sounding a little sarcastic.

Sookie bit her lip and wrung her hands together. “What else could I do?”

“What do you want to do?”

Sookie thought for a moment. “I did the books for Sam once—when he was sick. I liked that.”

“Accounting?” Leonie asked.


“They do not talk back,” Leonie said with a little smile.

“No. And Sam’s books were a mess,” Sookie said.

“But you fixed them?”

“I tried. He wasn’t sick for long.”

“And he thanked you for fixing them? For organizing his books?”

“No,” Sookie said quickly, her brows furrowing.

“Because you made errors?”

Sookie shook her head. “No. The numbers were good. But he seemed mad at me for a little while. I
didn’t listen to him to find out why.”

“You did them better than he could,” Leonie reasoned. “So he reacted like a foolish man,” she added with a roll of her eyes.

“Oh—I don’t know. I’d never done anything like that before.”

“Did he ever ask you to do it again?” Leonie asked.

Sookie shook her head sadly. “Sam doesn’t get sick much.”

“Your own budget. Tell me about it,” Leonie requested.

“Uh,” Sookie thought for a moment, “It’s the 28th of September—right?”

“Yes,” Leonie confirmed.

Sookie sighed. “The electric bill is due on the first Monday of November, but I haven’t been at home since the third of September, so it shouldn’t be much. Even still, I won’t be able to pay it this month.” She sighed. “I’ll have until November third to pay it before they start calling, but the phone will be shut off soon since it was a week overdue when I left. Um—the electric company will probably turn off the power around the beginning of December.

“But it’s the inheritance taxes—related to Gran’s Will—that I’m most worried about. I negotiated a payment plan with the bank—a loan—but the next payment is due November 15th. I have only $63.73 in my savings account. I was planning on what Eric paid me for Dallas to help with the inheritance taxes and the property taxes; the property taxes aren’t due until February though.”

Sookie shook her head and sniffled a little. “But I can’t pay the inheritance taxes, so I’m gonna lose Gran’s house by January anyway, so I shouldn’t worry about things like the electric bill or property taxes.”

“Oh!” Sookie said suddenly. “Sixty thousand dollars!”

“Sixty thousand dollars?” Leonie asked.

Sookie nodded. “Yes. Jason is the executor of my will, and I have a sixty thousand dollar life insurance policy.” Sookie did some quick figuring in her head. “Minus fees for Sid Matt, who will help Jason figure stuff out, he’ll have enough to pay property taxes at Gran’s for at least ten years,” she frowned, “if he decides to do that. Or he might sell the house.” She sighed. “But Eric has promised to buy it for me if Jason does.”

“Why did you take out a life insurance policy?” Leonie asked.

“Gran,” Sookie answered. “Her social security wasn’t enough. Based on her age and life expectancy when I got the life insurance, I figured that she’d need fifty-one thousand dollars so that she could keep up with all the bills.”

“But you got a sixty thousand dollar policy,” Leonie said.

“Well, the insurance company projected that Gran would live to only eighty-six,” Sookie said with a roll of her eyes. “As if. Gran could have lived to be a hundred,” Sookie’s voice trailed off a little. “If not for me. But I couldn’t afford more than the premium for a sixty thousand dollar policy.”

There was silence for a few moments before Leonie spoke again. “Will you ask your vampire for a job as his bookkeeper then?”
Sookie laughed. “I don’t have any schooling for that,” she said. “Plus, I’m not sure what businesses he has left.”

“Perhaps you could build a new one together,” Leonie suggested. “Can you tell me what you want for your future?”

Sookie felt weary from Leonie’s repetitive questioning, especially given its nature. She answered sarcastically. “I want to live—maybe even see my brother and my friends again so that they don’t all think I’m dead.”

“Is that your dream for the future?” Leonie said just as sarcastically.

“I—uh—don’t know what my dreams are,” Sookie answered, now rattled.

“Everyone has dreams,” Leonie pushed.

“No—I don’t think everyone does,” Sookie returned.

“You must have aspirations, goals, desires for yourself,” Leonie said relentlessly. “You must want more for your life than being a mere waitress.”

“Hey—being a waitress is a good job!” Sookie insisted.

“I agree. It is for some. But you are not meeting your potential by being a waitress,” Leonie returned. “What are your dreams?” she asked at a slightly higher volume.

“These are my dreams!” Sookie yelled with sudden anger as she reached for Leonie’s arm, and dropped her shields. She bombarded Leonie’s mind with the dreams Bill had woven—first the one that had caused her to give her virginity to him and second the one that had elicited intense fear from her.”

Leonie cringed as Sookie pulled her hand away.

“I’m sorry,” Sookie said, immediately contrite. “I’m sorry for takin’ my problems out on you. I’m sorry you had to see that.” She shook her head. “That was wrong to do. I’m so sorry.”

Leonie shook her head and sighed deeply. She reached out and took Sookie’s hand. “If you cannot think of dreams for your future, Sookie, I fear that you will not live a happy life.”

“I’m happy when I’m with Eric,” Sookie said with a little smile before she frowned again. “When we—uh—make love. When we have sex—I mean—it’s good. And we talk; he seems interested in me. He—uh—listens to me. And I have thought about the future a little bit. We’ll have to stay together because of the Fae bond, and I’m not sure where we might go. I guess if Russell and Sophie-Anne are both gone, there would be a new king or queen, but I don’t know if Eric would get Area 5 back. Mr. Cataliades told us that Fangtasia was burned down by Russell, so I don’t even know if Eric would want to go back.”

“Do you want to go back to Bon Temps?”

Sookie shrugged. “The thought of leaving Bon Temps and Gran’s house used to be something that I didn’t even want to contemplate. I mean—I really did have a life that I liked before Bill showed up. I had Gran, and I liked being a waitress most days. It was fun to do a normal job, and Sam was a good boss. And I liked working with my friends. Gran and I had plans. We were saving for a new roof for the house. And after I took care of Sam’s books that time, I was also trying to put away a little money to save up for a computer and the Internet so I could take one of those online classes.
That’s what my savings account had been for. And Gran and I were gonna double the size of our vegetable garden next year since the town council decided to have a farmer’s market on Sunday afternoons starting in May. But everything changed when I started seeing Bill, and things changed even more when Gran died.”

“How?” Leonie asked.

“Well—uh—people in town have always thought that I was ‘off’—um—crazy. When I was four, Mamma stopped taking me to church because I asked aloud why the reverend kept thinking about lots of the women there naked. And then—once I was in school—sometimes I accidentally answered people’s thoughts aloud. But over the years, I learned how to avoid doing that, and I just tried to stay out of everyone’s way—you know, to blend in. Before Bill, most people thought of me as ‘crazy Sookie’ in their heads, but most of them actually just thought that I was a little dumb. After Bill and I were a couple, they started to think of me in much less flattering ways. Even my brother and my friends thought less of me when I was with Bill—except for Lafayette. I mean, I sort of understood about Tara. I’d never had a boyfriend before, and she was worried and a little jealous when I started spending more time with Bill. And once I found out that Sam was a shifter, it made sense that he wouldn’t like the fact that I was with a vampire.”

Sookie rambled on nervously. “After Gran died, it became clear to me that most people thought I was to blame—even more so than the person who actually killed her. And even the townspeople that didn’t blame me thought about how they wouldn’t have to tolerate me for Gran’s sake anymore.” Sookie paused for a moment. “Jason blames me for Gran dying,” she continued quietly. “He’s forgiven me for it, but he thinks that if I’d not been so selfish and headstrong about being with Bill, Gran would still be alive. The funny thing was that I wasn’t even with Bill at the time; I was on a date with Sam—actually. But it didn’t matter. Tara defended me when Jason came into the house and hit me after he found out that Gran was dead, but part of her agreed with him. I can’t really blame them—to tell you the truth. And now the farmhouse is a wreck and so many of the things that Gran treasured over the years are gone because of the Maenad. Tara blames me for Eggs dying, but I got from Jason’s head that he was the one that killed Eggs, and now he’s being driven crazy by his guilt and wonders why I had to stick my nose into Eggs’s business in the first place. The last time I talked to Sam, he thought about how he couldn’t count on me at work anymore. And Lafayette is afraid to be around me.” She sighed loudly. “And I don’t know how to fix things. If I went back to Bon Temps, it would have to be with Eric, whom Lafayette is terrified of and Sam hates. Jason would likely never accept the fact that I was with a vampire; heck, he calls them ‘fangers’, and even though he’s not with the Fellowship anymore, he still thinks it’s ‘unnatural’ that I would want a vampire.”

Sookie took a deep breath. “But despite everything, I thought I could be happy in Bon Temps with Bill. And then Bill asked me to marry him, and there was a moment—just a moment—before I knew that Bill had been kidnapped that I was so hopeful about everything. And I made plans as I looked in the mirror in the ladies’ room. I thought about how I wouldn’t have to do everything alone anymore. I decided that I was still gonna put in the garden just like Gran wanted and use that to start saving for a new roof again. I thought that, with Bill’s help, I could start fixing the house—little by little. Terry had given me some paint left over from when he painted his house last year, so I decided that I was gonna scrub and paint the front porch after Bill and I got back from Vermont. I figured that—with time—Jason might accept Bill, and since Bill had helped Sam kill the Maenad, I hoped that Sam might even be okay with my relationship too. I even had hopes that Tara might forgive me.”

Sookie shrugged and continued her long monologue, almost as if talking to herself. “But then Lorena happened and Russell happened. And then I found out the truth about Bill. And then I heard the thoughts of most of the people whom I cared about when I agreed to speak with Eric at
the hospital. Alcide was disappointed in me and jealous; he was also disgusted that Eric had given me his blood. Lafayette had resolved that he was gonna ask Sam not to work the same shifts as I worked. Tara had decided to cut me off from her life for good and blamed me for Franklin Mott too. Jason just thought about how disappointed Gran would be because of the way my life had gone, and he once again thought that Gran would still be alive if it weren’t for Bill and me.”

Sookie smiled ruefully. “That was all because of the fact that I’d agreed to speak privately with a vampire who had just saved my life. They’d been happy I was alive just a minute before, but that one choice, turned all of their thoughts in a different direction, and I was too weak to have my shields up to keep them out.” She shrugged again. “So when you ask me if I wanna go back to Bon Temps, all I can see is how none of my plans are gonna work now. I see how all of my plans were swirling around a relationship with a man who had me beaten the second night I knew him. I see how everyone would be happy that I was alive and back for a minute, but then would hate the fact that I was with Eric in the next minute. No amount of scrubbing or paint would stop that from happening. No garden would be big enough. No roof would be sturdy enough. And I would never be good enough. The only thing that I would be able to do would be to raise my shields so that I wouldn’t have to hear their thoughts.”

Leonie squeezed Sookie’s hand in comfort and looked at her with realization. “That is why you truly worry about feeling Eric’s emotions if you complete the bond. You worry because you have no shields to protect yourself with—no lie to insulate yourself with. That is why you asked Claudine if there was a way for you to block Eric’s emotions if you completed the vampire bond.”

Sookie nodded and brushed away a tear. “I thought that maybe there was something that fairies did to block things getting through when they had a Fae bond. If you could teach it to me, then I could use it to block out Eric’s feelings.”

“You truly think that he will have negative feelings about you,” Leonie stated as much as asked.

Sookie nodded again. “I know he cares for me, but—yes—I think that he probably feels other things too. But knowing that’s true and having to feel it all the time are two different things—just like knowing someone disapproves of me is different from having to hear his or her thoughts about it. Everyone has stray thoughts, and it’s those—coming from the people I love—that have hurt me the most. I’m sure that Eric—even if he does care for me—will have stray feelings.”

“And those will hurt the most,” Leonie said with understanding.

Sookie nodded. “Yes.”

Leonie sighed. “There is no blocking a bond—not that I know of,” Leonie said sadly. “At least, there’s nothing a fairy can do to block out his or her partner. But—given your uniqueness—you might be able to build one yourself, something similar to your shields.”

Sookie nodded resignedly. “After what you said earlier about the nymph thing and about how my telepathy was different, I kind of figured that.”

Leonie and Sookie looked at each other in silent contemplation for a moment as Claudine resumed eating the contents of the tray.

“I will wait here to meet your vampire when he wakes up,” Leonie said suddenly.

“Uh—I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Sookie stammered.

“Yet I will do it anyway,” Leonie said with certainty. “Do not worry. I will cause no harm to your
vampire. I simply want to meet him and speak with him for a while; then I will go.”

Sookie gulped hard, knowing that there was nothing she could do to stop Leonie from staying. “Okay,” she relented. “If he agrees. He’ll probably wake up a little before sunset and I’ll ask him.”

“Agreed,” Leonie said. “Now, do you have any other questions you’d like to ask me?”

Sookie pulled her list of questions from the Fae book and saw that most of them had been answered throughout the day, but she saw that there were a few things she still needed to ask.

“Um—my light is a weapon, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then why doesn’t it hurt Eric?”

“It recognizes him as your mate. I imagine that it will heal him if he is hurt or strengthen him if he is not. That is how it works when two Fae are bonded.”

“Do you know how he’d be strengthened?”

“I believe that your light would seek out the magic within him and bolster it.”

Sookie asked a question not on her list. “If Eric took my blood a lot, would he build up any kind of tolerance to the sun? After Bill took my blood in the van, he was able to be in the sun for a little while.”

Leonie considered that for a moment. “I do not think so. A vampire that takes a fairy’s blood will have an immediate immunity from the sun, but since you are only one-eighth fairy, it wouldn’t last for long even if Eric took a great deal of your blood. There have been many times in the history of the Fae when a vampire has drained a full-blooded fairy, and even then, it is only an hour or two before the vampire burns in the sun. This knowledge has been a great weapon for fairies.”

“What do you mean?” Sookie asked.

Leonie sighed. “As you know, vampires are very attracted to the scent of fairies. Did Claudine teach you how to manipulate your own scent?”

Sookie nodded. “Yeah—once Claudine helped me to understand how I was already masking my scent, it was easy to turn it off and on and then to amplify it. And then I tried to smell like her and was able to do it.”

Leonie smiled approvingly. “Excellent. Scent manipulation is actually one of our best weapons against vampires; some fairies can use their scents to drive a vampire into a frenzy. But all Fae will release a toxin into their blood if they sense impending death. The blood of a full-blooded Fae will always make a vampire feel—for lack of a better word—drunk. However, the toxin is even more potent, and the vampire will continue to feel intoxicated, even after the fairy blood has stopped protecting him or her from the sun. Thus, he or she will not feel the danger from the sun. In the past, fairies have watched vampires burn helplessly in the sun as retribution for killing their kin. So—if vampires catch and drain us—we are often killed, but they will die too.”

Sookie shivered. “Well—I know that my blood doesn’t make vampires drunk. Um—do you think I have the ability to release the toxin?”

Leonie shrugged. “I am not sure, but I believe so.”
“Why didn’t I do that to Bill—when he was draining me?”

“It is not released until the fairy truly gives up on living, for the toxin will kill the fairy too,” Leonie responded.


“Niall was very exact in what he told me to include. I believe that he wanted your vampire to meet his death by the sun if he ever drained you. He believed that if you didn’t know about the toxin, you would release it by instinct. He also believed that you would refuse to release the toxin if you knew of it, and he wants the Viking to die if he kills you. Niall is not confident that the Fae bond breaking would be enough to cause Eric’s final death.”

“How are you telling me this?” Sookie asked.

“Niall asked me not to write it, and he ordered Claudine not to tell you of it, but he didn’t tell me not to speak of it,” Leonie said with a twinkle in her eyes. “Now—do you have any other questions?”

Sookie looked at her list and wracked her brain. Finally, she shook her head.

“Good,” Leonie said. “It is still an hour until sunset, and Claudine told me that you were unable to teleport.”

Sookie sighed. “I’m getting better at using my light, even though it starts to weaken after I shoot it a few times in a row. And the scent thing was easy, but I couldn’t teleport. Maybe Niall was wrong about that.”

“Maybe you were not properly motivated,” Leonie remarked.

“What do you mean?” Sookie asked.

“Could you call the young Werebear?” Leonie asked. “We could use his help.”

Sookie nodded and poked her head in the door to call for Kuruk.

As soon as Kuruk appeared outside, Leonie caught the Werebear’s eye. Sookie glanced at Claudine and saw that the younger fairy looked pensive. When she looked at Leonie, she could see that her mouth was moving, but her ears couldn’t pick up what the elder fairy was saying. Kuruk, however, seemed to be listening intently. Sookie quickly entered his mind, but heard only a buzz there.

After another thirty seconds, the Werebear suddenly turned around and walked back inside.

“What was that about?” Sookie asked.

Leonie rose and motioned for Claudine to rise as well. In the next second, they were both blocking the door of the cabin.

“I have just mesmerized the Werebear,” Leonie said coldly. “He is shifting even now and will drag his claws down the chest of your mate! Unless you can teleport to your vampire and stop the bear.”
Chapter 27: A Parasite

It took a moment for Leonie’s words to sink into Sookie’s confused head, but when they did, she felt intense betrayal.

“What? Stop him!” Sookie yelled.

“Stop him yourself,” Leonie said casually.

Sookie felt her light rise into her body.

“You could stay out here and try to fight us,” Leonie said calmly, “but by the time you get in to your vampire, he will already be cut. Or,” the fairy paused, “you could teleport to him and stop that from happening!”

Sookie shook her head in desperation even as she heard a loud roar from inside the house.

“Eric!” she yelled loudly, her heart thrumming with fear.

In the next moment, she felt herself moving—almost as if she were floating away from herself. She heard a popping noise and immediately opened her eyes. Eric was in front of her, safely in bed. Kuruk was nowhere in sight.

Shaking ferociously, Sookie took in the form of her sleeping vampire. She felt suddenly light-headed as if all the air had been taken from the room.

“Breathe,” came a soft voice from behind her.

Sookie tried to obey, but she couldn’t seem to find any oxygen as she opened her mouth.

She closed her eyes as her legs began to sway. She felt two hands take her securely by the shoulders.

“Breathe, Sookie!” the voice ordered again, this time sternly.

Sookie opened her eyes and saw Elina in front of her. The Werebear shook her.

“Breathe!”

Sookie once more tried to find air, and this time was rewarded when she felt it move into her lungs.

“Good,” Elina said. “Nice, slow breaths, Sookie—not too deep,” The Werebear instructed as she demonstrated such breathing for the telepath. “Good,” she repeated as Sookie followed her lead.

A few minutes later, Kuruk peeked into the room. Sookie immediately tensed.

“I’m sorry,” the young Werebear apologized. “She asked me to wait thirty seconds and then shift and roar as loudly as I could. I didn’t know it would hurt you. She said it would help you.”

Sookie relaxed. “It wasn’t your fault,” she assured the worried young man. “And it did help.”

Elina said some words to her grandson in their language, and he left.
“It’s really not his fault,” Sookie said, having calmed down.

“I know,” the elder Werebear said. “I asked him to get you some water and to tell the fairies that you are okay and that their test was successful.”

“Oh,” Sookie said, glad that Elina wasn’t angry at Kuruk.

When the young man returned a minute later, he had a glass of water.

“Thanks,” Sookie said, taking the drink gratefully. She looked at Elina. “Will you tell them that I’ll be out in a minute?”

Elina nodded and left the room with her grandson, closing the door behind them.

Sookie sat next to Eric in the bed and ran her hand along his shoulder. She bent down and kissed him softly on the lips.

“I love you so much, Eric. I won’t let anything happen to you,” she promised. She kissed him again and then went to rejoin Leonie and Claudine.

Twenty minutes before sundown, Eric woke up to scents he did not expect. There were two Werebears in the cabin. He also smelled a fairy, though the scent wasn’t overwhelming to his senses. In the next moment, he heard a popping noise, and suddenly Sookie was next to him.

“Sookie?” he asked.

“Hi,” she returned. “Uh—I can teleport now,” she said almost apologetically.

“Busy day?” he asked with a smirk as he reached out to her.

Quickly, she sank into his embrace. “Yeah—tiring.”

He inhaled deeply, taking in her scent. He pulled back from her and quickly stood up. “You smell of the fairy outside.”

“Oh—uh—sorry. You okay?”

“Yes,” he said. “It’s just best if I’m not that close to you while you smell that way. It makes me want to do things.”

“Like drain me?” she asked a little fearfully.

“No,” he responded quickly. “But bite you—yes. And fuck you; I very much want to do that. And basically rub my scent all over you.”

She blushed a deep red and felt her heartbeat escalating, but not because of teleporting this time.

He smirked. “You would probably not like me doing those things while we have company.”

“No,” she whimpered. His words and the intensity with which he’d said them made her blood feel like lava—and her panties completely useless. “Uh—I asked Elina and her grandson, Kuruk, to stay for dinner. I thought you could talk to him.”

“Why?” he asked with curiosity. “About what?”

“About what it’s like to be a teenager rebelling against his father—who happens to be the ruler of
his people,” Sookie said meaningfully. “But you don’t have to,” she added quickly. “Elina is just worried about him.”

Eric nodded. “I will shower as I wait for the sun to go down and the fairy to leave. You will want to tell her goodbye—I imagine. Then you should shower—if you want me to behave,” he winked.

“Uh—there’s someone else here too,” Sookie said sheepishly, “another fairy. And she wants to stay past sunset to meet you.”

Eric tensed. “I smell no one else.”

“She’s concealing her scent,” Sookie said.

“Who is it?”

“Niall’s wife, Leonie. But—don’t worry—she’s actually nice. She offered to help me and answered some of my questions today—questions Claudine couldn’t answer.”

“My treaty with Niall was for Claudine only,” Eric said a little cautiously.

“I know. But Claudine asked before she brought Leonie. Niall doesn’t even know she’s here.”

“What does she want to talk to me about?” Eric asked suspiciously.

“I’m not sure, but I’ll send her away if you want. She agreed to go without question if you didn’t want to meet with her.”

Eric thought for a moment. “I will speak with her.” He walked over to kiss Sookie on the forehead before backing away a little because of the fairy scent. However, his nose twitched a little, and his lustful look suddenly changed to concern. “You cried in this room today. I can smell your tears on me, little one.”

“Can I tell you about it later?” she asked, frowning as she remembered what Claudine had told her about her grandfather.

“Yes,” he said before he approached her again and held her for a few moments.”

“What about my scent?” she asked.

He sighed. “After I smelled your tears, the Fae scent did not seem as,” he paused, “potent anymore.”

She wrapped her arms around him and lifted herself onto her tiptoes to kiss his lips lightly.

“I’ll see you after sunset,” he said once the gentle kiss ended.

Sookie smiled and slipped through the door. Although she’d teleported three times now, it tired her out. And she could tell that she wouldn’t be able to do it again so soon.

She was met on the porch by Claudine’s embrace. “I am going to miss you, Cousin,” the statuesque fairy said with a sob.

Sookie found her tears welling up too. She’d known Claudine only for a day, but it had been an emotional and full day, and Sookie found herself wishing that she could get to know her cousin better.
“I hope that Niall will one day let me come and see you again. I will nag him until he does,” she whispered. “Or I’ll just come anyway if he doesn’t.” She kissed Sookie on the cheek and smiled at her.

“Thanks for everything, Claudine,” Sookie said sincerely.

“It was my pleasure, Cousin,” Claudine said before popping away, right as the sun fell into the horizon.

Leonie smiled warmly. “I am glad the vampire has agreed to see me.”

Sookie looked confused. “How did you know?”

Leonie lifted her hair over her ears.

“Oh!” Sookie said with realization. She’d known that fairy hearing was good because of Claudine, but it was easy to forget that she was dealing with the supernatural at times.

The elder fairy smiled. “If it is okay with you, I would like to speak with him alone for one-half hour while you bathe. I heard what he said about Claudine’s scent on you.”

Sookie blushed at that.

Leonie giggled at Sookie’s reaction. “Plus,” the fairy continued, “before I go, I want to make sure you can cover your scent without the aid of the witch’s potion.”

Sookie nodded in agreement and then went back inside. She smiled in Kuruk and Elina’s direction before going into the bedroom. Eric was freshly showered and dressed.

“Leonie wants to talk to you alone,” she said as Eric applied the potion to his forehead.

He nodded. “Okay.”

“For half an hour,” Sookie said flatly.

He nodded again. “I cannot imagine what she wishes to speak to me about, but I will listen to her.”

“Thanks,” Sookie said with a smile. “I’m gonna take a shower. I learned some things about my scent today, and Leonie wants to make sure I can do them without Octavia’s little brew. Plus,” she smiled shyly, “I don’t want you to wanna do those things you mentioned earlier just because I smell like Claudine.” She leaned forward and whispered in a barely audible voice, “But I do want you to do them—later.”

Eric leered at Sookie but refrained from kissing her because she now smelled even more strongly of the fairy; knowing Sookie, she had likely just embraced her fairy cousin. He also smelled tears in her eyes; he’d been worried that Sookie would become quickly attached to her family member, only to be forced to say goodbye. She’d had to do that too much lately. He just hoped that the pros had outweighed the cons when it came to her day with Claudine. If Sookie had learned to cover her scent, that would be a pro indeed, for they had only twenty or so more applications of the potion, which would last them only a little more than a week if they both had to continue using it. Of course, once they were in California, he planned to use the larger concealment spell Octavia had given them to hide all the scents in his house there, so that would buy them a couple more weeks when they didn’t need to use the potion at all.

He nodded to Elina, who was in the kitchen, stirring a pot of savory food. He liked the smell of it;
it reminded him of his human days and the food his mother made.

“This is your grandson?” Eric asked, assessing the youth before him. The young Werebear was obviously strong, and his eyes held a kind of arrogance that Eric recognized.

“I am Kuruk,” the young man said, standing at his full height.

Eric recognized the cocky posturing of the boy too.

“I knew your grandfather. His name was also Kuruk, though he was bigger than you—quite a bit bigger, in fact, and stronger.”

Kuruk’s brow furrowed. The young man missed the fact that his grandmother’s lips curled into a smile.

“I enjoyed hunting with Kuruk.” The vampire looked at Elina with a little smirk and then asked her in perfect Apache if the “small” bear could hunt.

Kuruk snarled at the question, even as Elina grunted out an almost unintelligible response through her laugh.

“Then, we will hunt together later,” the Viking said to the young Werebear. “We will see if you are worthy of your grandfather’s name.” With that, he winked at Elina and went outside onto the porch, even as Kuruk growled sulkily.

Leonie was waiting for Eric a few feet from the porch. Her hands were out as if to show him that she meant him no harm.

“I hope you will not kill the young bear,” Leonie smiled as Eric eyed her warily. “He is cute.”

“Sookie believes I can help him.”

“Why does she think that?” Leonie asked.

“Once upon a time, I was a teenaged boy who was very full of himself; plus, Sookie has a good heart, and she is always looking for ways to help others.” Eric narrowed his eyes at the fairy as if to study her. “Do I know you? You look familiar to me, but I cannot say from where.”

Leonie smiled a little wider. “We will get to that at the end of our conversation.”

“Then let us be done with the beginning of it,” Eric said tensely.

“Very well,” Leonie said, her tone suddenly serious—almost deadly. “I want to know what your intentions are with Sookie.”

Eric crossed his arms over his chest. “What gives you the right to question me? Niall made it very clear that her Fae family would have nothing to do with her after today.”

Leonie straightened a little. “Niall and I differ in our desires for our great-granddaughter.”

Eric tilted his head. “You are a fairy. Wouldn’t Sookie’s great-grandmother be a human and long dead?”

Leonie spoke in a strong voice—almost a growl. “I raised her grandfather and his brother as if they were my own children. I am here because Fintan cannot be. And I will know your intentions, vampire! Now!”
“I intend to keep Sookie and myself alive if I can,” he snarled.

“Do you love her?” Leonie narrowed her eyes as she awaited the vampire’s response.

“My feelings are none of your damned business. I will take care of her. Our fates are tied.”

“She loves you,” Leonie said.

“I know,” Eric responded. “The Fae bond has made us both feel things we would not have otherwise.”

“She has accepted and embraced her feelings for you.”

“I know. I feel it. It is good that she has done this.”

“Why?” Leonie asked.

“Because she is more content now—less anxious—at least most of the time.”

“But she is anxious some of the time?”

“Yes,” Eric admitted.

“Anxious about the danger you are facing with Edgington?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to guess what else makes Sookie feel anxiety?”

“Any number of things could,” Eric said stiffly. “And I am in no mood for guessing games, fairy.”

“Do you know what her worst fear is, Viking?”

Eric studied the openness in Leonie’s expression and decided to respond. “Yes,” he said after a few moments. “Sookie fears most that everyone she loves will leave her—reject her. But I will do neither one of those things.”

“I am glad to hear that,” Leonie said with a little smile forming on her lips. “I can tell that you will not abandon her. But I fear for her nonetheless.”

“Because she loves me?” Eric asked.

“Yes. She is in love with you—and not just because of the Fae bond. Her love is amplified by it—no doubt. But it is also her own.”

“How do you know that?”

“Instinct.”

“I trust my instincts, fairy—not yours.”

Leonie sighed. “Regardless, Sookie will soon feel all that you feel. She asked me today if I could help her shield herself from your feelings after the vampire bond is completed.”

As if he’d been struck, Eric sat down heavily into one of the porch chairs as realization hit him. “She fears me.”
“She does not fear you. She fears for herself. But she loves you enough to risk feeling everything you feel for her.”

Eric sighed. “She did not tell me of this. But when I suggested we wait to complete the vampire bond, I felt relief from her. I thought that was because she worried it might be dangerous for us to complete it.”

“Sookie does believe it is dangerous. But I have confirmed that it will not endanger either of you physically.” Leonie sighed. “She will go through with the vampire bond—despite the fact that I could not help her to shield herself. She may develop her own shields eventually, but that is not a skill that I—or any other living fairy that I know of—can teach her.”

Eric sat in silence for a moment.

“Do you hate the bond she made with you?” Leonie asked. “Do you resent it?”

“Yes,” Eric said quickly. “I resent it.”

“Do you resent Sookie? Hate her?”

“No! Neither!”

Leonie smiled smugly. “I know you are in love with her, vampire. And you will acknowledge it soon enough. Meanwhile, you should know that the Fae bond has the ability to strengthen you both—if you let it.”

“How?” Eric demanded, pissed off at the fairy’s self-satisfied smile.

“When two fairies bond, the magic between them is shared. Sookie implied earlier that she has shot you with her light?”

“Yes. Three times.”

“And?” Leonie asked.

“The first time, she healed me of a small amount of silver poisoning. The healing was more potent than if I had taken her blood.”

“The second?”

“I asked for her light,” Eric said quietly.

“And?”

“And none of your goddamned business!” Eric snarled.

Leonie laughed.

“The third?” she asked.

“Also not your business.”

Leonie snickered yet again. “In Faerie, a bonded pair will exchange their light to grow stronger and to grow closer. Since your magic is contained in blood—not light—it is with your blood that I believe you could give Sookie more strength. Her light will, in turn, strengthen you.”
“And both will strengthen the Fae bond,” Eric said bitterly.

“Yes,” Leonie replied evenly.

“I would not have it stronger,” Eric said insistently.

Leonie sighed. “If that is truly what you feel, then do not complete the vampire bond with my great-granddaughter.”

“Why not? What will happen if we do?”

“I do not know for sure,” she said. “But I believe the Fae bond would strengthen. I believe your two bonds would feed from and be fed by one another. And since you clearly aren’t ready for that to happen, my fear is the same as Sookie’s—that you would become bitter and angry. At her.”

Eric sighed deeply and ran his hand through his still-wet hair. “And Sookie would be the one to have to suffer from my feelings,” he said in a low tone.

“Yes,” Leonie responded, “until you pulled your head out of your ass—that is.”

Eric glared at Leonie, but the fairy ignored his look.

“Sookie is a remarkable young woman,” Leonie said. “She has endured every human in her life leaving her or hurting her in some fundamental way, yet she still cares for others more than herself. She has borne the deceit of Bill Compton, yet she still has the capacity to love—and to love with her whole heart—despite her fears. And she will soon endure the disappearance of more family members from her life because she will outlive them so that you can live on, yet she would build you a home of warmth and happiness if you let her, but . . . .” Leonie stopped and looked at Eric pointedly.

“But she could not bear it if she were to feel my resentment.”

“Or your hate.”

Eric sighed deeply. “The witch—Octavia—indicated that the vampire bond would allow Sookie and me more domain over our own feelings. She thought it might offer us some level of independence—actually. Right now it is difficult for us to be physically apart, and Octavia hypothesized that if we could feel each other, the Fae bond would be more ‘satisfied.’”

“That is all likely true, but that small amount of independence would come at a steep price—for her—if Sookie felt mostly negative things from you.”

“Vampires have the ability to shut down a bond.”

Leonie nodded. “And Sookie was looking for that same ability for herself—though she wanted to shield herself from your emotions, rather than to stop you from feeling her emotions. But if either of those things happened, your purpose would be defeated. If you blocked your feelings, the vampire bond couldn’t provide the assurance you wish for it to.” The fairy sighed. “Plus, I sincerely doubt that you could block your emotions from her—even if you tried. The Fae bond wouldn’t allow that.”

Eric looked at Leonie warily. “The Fae bond will continue to strengthen no matter what we do—won’t it?”

The fairy nodded. “Yes. That is why some among the Fae believe bonds to be types of parasites. In
fact, the word for ‘bond’ in our language is the same as the word for ‘parasite.’ Many among our people disapprove of the making of bonds; Niall is one of those people.” She sighed. “Of course, he saw a bond pull his mother to her death right after his father died in battle, so his feelings are understandable—and biased.”

“A parasite,” Eric said nodding. “Yes. That is exactly what the Fae bond is.”
Chapter 28: Mistletoe

“A parasite,” Eric said nodding. “Yes. That is exactly what the Fae bond is.”

Leonie sighed. “You do not understand at all—do you?”

“I understand that something was forced upon Sookie and myself. I understand that neither of us has power over it.”

“With a blood tie, you could take power from a human,” Leonie reminded.

Eric chuckled ruefully. “Maybe feeling the effects of my own hypocrisy is the worst part then.”

“Well—at least you are not fully blind,” the fairy said almost teasingly. She paused. “Tell me—do you know of the plant, mistletoe?”

“Yes,” Eric responded. “There is a story in the myths of my people that involves the plant.”

“Will you tell it to me?” Leonie asked, sounding intrigued.

“Odin was one of our main gods and ruled Asgard, which was where the Æsir dwelt.”

“The Æsir?”

“That was the name of our council of gods and goddesses. Odin had many sons, but his second son, Baldr, was thought to be the wisest of the Æsir and was beloved by all. However, he began to dream of his own death—as did his mother, Frigg. Fearful of losing her dearest child, Frigg asked all objects on earth—save one—to vow not to harm Baldr. The one she overlooked was mistletoe. In the story my mother told me, Frigg disregarded the mistletoe because she didn’t think it was important enough to ask; plus, she could not foresee how a plant so young on the earth could cause harm to her strong son. Mother used the story to teach me never to overlook a potential foe, even if that foe seemed innocuous.”

“Your mother was wise to teach you such a lesson,” Leonie remarked. “Of course, the opposite is true too. Never overlook a potential ally—even if he or she seems young and powerless.”

Eric nodded to acknowledge the truth in Leonie’s words.

“What became of Baldr?”

“When Loki heard of Frigg’s attempts to save her child, he decided to construct a spear out of mistletoe.” Eric scoffed. “After Frigg had made bargains with seemingly all things, the gods and goddesses came up with a new game: to throw things at Baldr. They enjoyed watching all things—even the deadliest of things—bounce harmlessly off of him.”

“You disapproved of this pastime by your gods?” Leonie asked with amusement.

Eric shrugged. “I had been taught not to question the ways of the gods, but inside I thought the game was foolhardy. It tempted fate. Loki gave the mistletoe spear to Hōðr, who was Baldr’s brother; Hōðr was blind. Guided by Loki, Hōðr inadvertently killed Baldr. And then Odin made sure Hōðr died,” Eric said with disgust.
“You disapprove of Odin’s choice in that matter?”

“Yes, it was not Höðr’s fault that the gods had tempted fate. It was not Höðr’s fault that Loki was a trickster, liar, and murderer. It was not Höðr’s fault that he was blind and had no idea that he was holding the mistletoe. It was not Höðr’s fault that the Ragnarök occurred.”

“The Ragnarök?”

“Yes. Baldr’s death was thought to be a harbinger of the Ragnarök, which was the name given to a number of events that resulted in the deaths of many of our gods and goddesses—including,” Eric smiled, “Odin and Loki.”

Leonie smiled as well. “So mistletoe led to all that destruction?”

Eric shook his head. “Perhaps—but I think the story is meant to teach that no one can escape fate.”

“So even mistletoe—a young parasite that was seen to be too lowly for a goddess to take into account—can become a great weapon of fate,” Leonie remarked with a smile.

Eric sighed. “Are you trying to suggest that the Fae bond is to become a weapon of fate?”

“Perhaps,” Leonie said with a twinkle in her eye. “I don’t know.” She was silent for a moment. “Mistletoe is my favorite plant in this realm. Many believe that it harms the plant from which it is nourishing itself, but that is usually not the case. Unless it is in great distress and near death, mistletoe never takes more than the host plant can spare. It also attracts more species of animals, which feed off of its berries and leaves. It is seen that in areas where mistletoe thrives, there is a greater diversity of life. So this plant—though it is a parasite—is also “life” itself! Even when it becomes very large, it coexists with the host. And there is something even more salient to your situation, Viking—an even greater lesson to be learned.” She paused. “If you will learn it.”

“What is that?” Eric asked.

“The mistletoe, as I said, will kill the tree only in times of great distress—if the tree is weak. But it does not want to harm its host. On the contrary, the mistletoe thrives when the tree thrives and will die when its hosts dies. The Fae bond is the same. You are the tree, Eric. The Fae bond—like mistletoe—does not change who or what you are. It just takes what it needs in order to thrive, which could—in turn—make you and everything around you flourish if you let it. And,” she added with a grin, “you are not actually a tree.”

He sighed impatiently. “Do not speak in riddles, fairy!”

“What I am saying is that a tree has no brain, so if the mistletoe were to become too lush or unruly, the tree has to sit there and take it. On the other hand, you have a brain and the Fae bond need not govern that part of you—no matter how large is grows.”

Eric contemplated for a moment. “It is growing. With each day I am with her, it grows, and I am worried about it choking me.”

“It will not,” Leonie said with certainty. “The choice you have to make is whether to nurture it or to try to starve it. If you do the latter, it will make your life miserable. And hers. And I love her and would not see that happen.”

“But if I do the former, it will grow until it overwhelms me!” Eric said angrily—stubbornly.

Leonie shook her head. “I do not believe that will happen. I told you that some among the Fae think
of the bond like a parasite, and, as you can see, the bond can be interpreted as having some parasitic attributes. However, the bond is more than a parasite—much more. It actually feeds the host as well. It nourishes the host in return for its own nourishment, and that is not what a parasite does! So the bond could never overwhelm you, for it would cause you to grow as well. The bond would grow larger, and it would flower in abundance. But you—Eric. You would grow strong enough to carry and sustain all of that abundance—and more.”

Eric sighed. “I will think upon these things, but I do not think my opinion of the Fae bond will change.”

“Promise me that you will not complete the vampire bond unless it does change,” Leonie implored.

“I promise,” Eric said.

“Your promise tells me you love her—bond or not,” Leonie said knowingly.

Eric didn’t respond to that statement.

“Well—at least you two are a good match for each other in the stubbornness department.”

Eric glared at her.

Leonie rolled her eyes. “As you have pointed out, the Fae bond will strengthen—no matter what you do. I suggest that you allow that to happen—that you encourage it to happen. If you do, you may come to see its beauty.”

Eric growled. “I thought that I made clear that the last thing I want is for it to grow. It is bad enough that it is doing it without my help. I will not encourage it!”

“Yet you asked for her light the second and third times she gave it to you. You were not injured?” Leonie said as a question.

“That is true,” he said stiffly.

“How did it make you feel when you received it—stronger?”

“None of your goddamned business,” he told her, repeating his earlier words.

“Fair enough,” Leonie said. “However, I hope you will one day complete the vampire bond with her, just as I hope you will accept the Fae bond. If you accept both bonds with an open heart, then you will regain what you lost when the Fae bond was first formed.”

“What is that?” Eric asked solemnly.

“You will regain your choice,” she answered sagely. “I hope that you will choose Sookie and choose love. Otherwise, it is best to leave things as they are.”

Eric looked down at his hands. “I understand,” he said quietly.

“Either way,” Leonie said more brightly. “You can make her happy. And I hope that she will make you happy as well. You deserve that as well.”

Eric looked at the fairy again and was once more struck by the thought that he knew her from somewhere. “Are we done with the first part of our talk?”

Leonie nodded.
“Then why are you familiar to me?”

“You saw me once, though in passing,” Leonie said. “I was meeting with a friend of mine, and you came in with your maker. What was it?” she asked herself. “Eight or nine hundred years ago? Spain?”

Recognition dawned on Eric’s face. “You are friends with Klymene?”

“As I told Sookie earlier, I enjoy meeting strong women from cultures other than my own. I learn much from them. And I have learned many things from your maker’s maker.”

“Is Klymene alive?” Eric asked.

Leonie nodded. “We have spoken of you and my great-granddaughter. She helped me to understand vampire blood bonds and blood ties. We discussed the potential of seeing a Fae bond and a vampire bond coexist. Both of us wanted to witness it, but after hearing of Sookie’s fears today, Klymene will agree that it is best to wait until the Fae bond is your choice—just as the vampire bond has become Sookie’s.”

“Tell me how to contact her!” Eric ordered, feeling angry that Leonie and Klymene were discussing his life—meddling in his life!

“There is no need,” Leonie said breezily. “Klymene is well-aware of your current plight with Edgington and has asked me to give you a message.”

“What is it?” Eric asked with frustration.

“There are three heads to the serpent that threatens the vampire hierarchy on this continent.”

“More fucking riddles!” Eric growled.

Leonie sighed impatiently. “No riddles. I was not done speaking. Will you listen or will you growl?”

Eric gestured for her to go on.

“As I was saying,” Leonie continued, “Russell is but one of the three who would transform this country into a place where vampires become the true parasites, enslaving all other peoples and slowly draining their will to live as well as their blood. Felipe de Castro and Bartlett Crowe are the others. To prevent their miscreant behavior and the destruction they would leave in their wake, they must all be disposed of at once, and you have been called upon to lead that endeavor.”

“By whom?”

“By the Ancient Pythoness.”

Eric stiffened immediately. “I was not aware that the Ancient Pythoness took an interest in political matters. In fact, it has been rumored that she has,” he paused, “retired.”

“She takes an interest in some things,” Leonie said.

“What does she want of me?” Eric asked.

“Just to do what you have already sworn to do,” Leonie said. “The lady has seen many possibilities for the future, but all of them involve you killing Russell or Russell killing you. She prefers the former option”
“I agree,” Eric deadpanned. “But why would she care if I live or die?”

“If you do not stop Russell, then a series of events will arise that the Ancient Pythoness does not wish to see happen.” The fairy chuckled.

“What is so goddamned funny?” Eric asked with frustration.

“Do you know the ancient lady?”

Eric shook his head. “No. Godric met her once, but by the time I knew of her, she was already in her exile from the world.”

Leonie smiled. I have been lucky enough to know her well. “She speaks of the happenings of the world as if they were on a human television program, and she simply does not like the show as much when Russell wins.” The fairy giggled. “She called the future ‘ridiculous’ if he were put in charge of it.”

“Why?” Eric asked, getting truly impatient with the fairy.

“Well—if you fail, Russell will become the poster-boy for a new fringe movement which will rise within the Authority, the Sanguinistas. And then he will begin killing humans left and right without thought—all while the Sanguinistas worship the blood of Lilith, who was supposedly the first vampire.” Leonie chuckled and rolled her eyes. “Of course, Lilith is just a myth—and not even a good one like your tales of the Norsemen. But some vampires—including Bill Compton—will come to believe in her. In fact, Bill will eventually drink all of her so-called sacred blood—which will actually just be a brew made by the witch, Hallow, and a necromancer who will possess her. After drinking this supposed blood of Lilith, Bill will rise as a new type of being, and the Ancient Pythoness does not want to have to watch that program for a single season—so to speak—let alone for a thousand years, which is how long it would apparently take to get rid of Compton and Russell’s little cohort. So—you see—she is on your side.”

Eric’s eyebrow rose. “That all sounds ridiculous.”

“Indeed,” Leonie said, “and that is why she hopes you defeat Russell. Otherwise, you can count on the fact that the Fae will definitely stay out of this realm for a millennium or two, and the demons will also exit for a while, but the humans and those of two natures will suffer mightily, and there will be very few vampires left when all is said and done.” She sighed. “Selfishly, however, I want you to win so that my great-granddaughter will be safe. Just for that. Well—and for one more thing.”

“What?”

“The bonus of seeing Bill Compton finally dead. Sookie showed me the woven dreams he sent to her in the name of supposed love. Now—I am not surprised that his future existence could be as an unimaginable monster, for he is already one. I would, however, prefer that his future existence be as a pile of ash—lost in the wind of this world. The sooner the better—if you catch my drift,” she giggled, amused by her own bad pun.

“That would be my preference as well,” Eric commented, seething at the mention of Bill Compton. “Did the Ancient Pythoness say how I am to kill Russell? And two other kings as well?”

Leonie smirked. “She said that you should use your brain and listen to your mate.”

“My mate?” Eric asked.
“That is what the lady said my great-granddaughter is to you; for better or worse, you and she are bonded. You are her mate, and she is yours.”

Eric stood from his chair. “So she gave you no hints about what plan I am to enact to face a three-thousand-year-old vampire and his cohorts?” Eric asked with a scowl.

“Well—as you know, the Ancient Pythoness does not like to get directly involved in matters of the world. Klymene and I received only cryptic information from the lady, and now I am telling you what she told us, and that did not include ‘how’ you are to accomplish your goal.” Leonie paused and grinned. “She did, however, tell us a when.”

“When?” Eric asked.

“At Rhodes,” Leonie answered with a smile. “The Ancient Pythoness is insuring that Russell acts then.”

“How?”

“By being the bait,” Leonie smiled.
The Tale of Ione

Chapter 29: The Tale of Ione

Leonie held out a business-sized card to Eric. It was blank, save for a phone number.

“What is this?” the vampire asked.

“It is my phone number in this realm. Though Claudine is returning to Faerie tonight, I will be staying in this realm for the foreseeable future with my grandson, Claude.”

“Why are you giving this to me?” Eric asked, looking down at the card.

“I’ve been told that you will need it.”

“By whom?”

“You know whom—Pythia.”

Eric shook his head. “What the fuck does she want from me?”

“For you to win,” Leonie said, her eyes flashing.

“Then why won’t she tell me how?” Eric asked somewhat petulantly.

“Because—with too much knowledge, you might just mess things up,” Leonie said with an amused air.

“Knowledge is power,” Eric said stubbornly.

“Sometimes,” Leonie agreed.

Eric scowled with frustration. “Fine. Are we finished here?”

“I have a message for you from Klymene,” the fairy said.

“What is it?” Eric gritted out.

“She will be sending you some information soon—through someone you trust. She has been busy collecting what you will need to plan the battle at Rhodes. She regrets that she cannot help you make these plans beyond what she will supply; however, the Ancient Pythoness has made clear that the plan must be yours—and Sookie’s—if it is to work. Thus, your allies will simply be awaiting your orders.”

“Allies?” Eric asked with his eyebrow raised.

“Yes,” Leonie said. “You have many assets at your disposal, Viking. Klymene and I are but two. My grandson will also help you and his cousin; I am sorry I cannot offer more people, but I do not want Niall getting wind of all of this. He would order all Fae from this realm and then would close the portals if he knew of the potential danger. Of course, if you fail, I will help him to do this. But it would be best if you succeeded.”
Leonie went on. “The demon, Cataliades, is also willing to help and will be at Rhodes with Russell and Sophie-Anne. I have a feeling that he will bring his nieces, Diantha and Gladiola, with him. Perhaps, your witch friend will come as well?”

Eric was already moving chess pieces in his mind. It was September 28, and the Rhodes conference went from October 29th to November 2nd, with a masquerade ball on Halloween night being its central social event.

Leonie continued, “Did you know that the Werebears inside your cabin are meant to accompany the king of New Mexico to the summit in Rhodes?”

Eric smiled, adding more pieces to the board. “I did not.”

“Yes. Queen Dulcina of Texas and King Mitchell of New Mexico are to marry at Rhodes. They will be using the conference as the opportunity, and many of their people—who otherwise would have no reason to be there—will also be attending.”

“It seems that my maker’s maker has been finding out some helpful information,” Eric smiled. “I’m sure you will think so when you are in possession of all she will offer. But, of course, Russell and his cohorts have many assets as well.”

Eric nodded in agreement, already placing them on his chess board as well.

“I pray for your success, Eric,” Leonie said. The vampire looked at the fairy through narrowed eyes and saw only sincerity in her countenance. “I thank you,” he said.

“To thank me—you must make a very good plan during the next month, or the Ancient Pythoness will be forced to watch a show she does not enjoy, and—much worse than that—I will be forced to watch my great-granddaughter die,” she finished soberly.

Eric cringed at that thought.

Leonie reached out and touched his arm lightly. “Hold to that fear, and keep her alive for us.”

The vampire nodded. “I will try.”

Just then, both of the supernaturals on the porch turned their heads toward the door—Eric because of his nose and Leonie because of her hearing. Eric had smelled that Sookie had exited the bathroom.

“How good is your hearing?” Eric asked.

Leonie used the same joke Claudine had used earlier as she showed Eric her pointy ears. “They are not just for show.”

Eric nodded, adding that to his list of assets, even as he looked down at the table. For the first time, he saw the box that Claudine had brought for Sookie.

“We brought Sookie something of her grandfather’s as well as a picture from home.”

Eric opened the box and picked up the pocket watch. “I would ask you to send my thanks to Niall, but I doubt you want him to know we spoke.”
“Correct,” Leonie agreed, even as she seemed to be studying Eric. “Have you ever heard of a cluviel dor?” she asked, looking for his reaction.

“Your coming here to speak with me was not a last minute decision, was it?” Eric asked, grasping the watch tighter.

“No,” she responded. “So you have heard of it?”

“I have heard a myth—one of a fairy princess whose tears were so powerful that they resurrected her beloved from death. Some believe that her lover was the first vampire. The princess’s tears also fell onto a flower, which has never died. A cluviel dor is said to be made when a petal of that flower is plucked, and its juice is placed onto an object that symbolizes great love.”

Leonie tilted her head to the side. “Where did you hear this story?”

“From your friend.”

Leonie smiled fondly. “Klymene always did embellish stories a bit; of course, we exchanged our myths many years ago, so I might have been the one to make up the part about the vampire being made—you know, to add more drama.” She winked. “However, I believe that she was a bit drunk from my blood the night I told her the story of Ione, and I had had much mead as well, so I cannot remember exactly what was said.”

Eric couldn’t help but to smile. “I find that I like you better than your husband.”

Leonie smiled. “Niall has his moments.”

“Tell me about a cluviel dor,” he requested.

“Here is the myth as it was told to me by my mother,” Leonie began. “A beautiful fairy maiden named Ione was the first to use magic to make a portal to this realm—the human realm. An explorer by nature, Ione impulsively decided to visit this realm without telling anyone, and she did not return to Faerie for many, many years—for, then, what was nine hundred years there was only sixty here. When she did return, she carried only one thing with her, an unusual plant. For the rest of her long life, she said not a word.

“Once back in Faerie, Ione found a home with her sister’s child, a girl who had been named for her. But, still, the elder Ione did not speak. She spent many years at her loom, however, and eventually she wove the story of her time in this realm. The tapestry she made showed how she traveled here and met a man—a human. She bore him a daughter, and they were happy. But one day, the man was mortally wounded by an enemy bent upon taking his wife and daughter, who had grown into a lovely maiden in her own right. Ione killed the foe and tried to heal her mate with her Fae magic, but it was not strong enough. In desperation to save her father, Ione’s daughter ran to collect a plant, which the humans of the area believed had magical qualities of healing. The daughter took a sprig of the plant and ground it into a paste, but still her father’s fever rose.”

“However, by luck, one of Ione’s tears fell onto one of the plant’s white berries, and from that, a beautiful white flower bloomed—though that particular plant had never been known to flower in that way before. Ione’s daughter tried to save her father again—but, this time, she made a paste from the lone white flower.

“Ione’s husband was healed. Together, Ione and her family lived on, and—again—they were all very happy. However, the man eventually died of old age. Ione and her daughter placed many springs of the plant that had once helped to save his life onto his grave, and Ione spent many days
weeping at the place where his body was buried. Eventually, all the sprigs—save one—withered and died, for there was nothing in the ground by her husband’s grave to sustain them.”

“And the one that did live?” Eric asked. “That is what she returned to Faerie with?”

“Yes,” Leonie answered. “That plant has stayed perpetually green—though it is rooted to nothing.” Leonie smiled. “Well—it is rooted to nothing but love. Some say it does not die because of a magic spell—something like a stasis spell.”

“But you don’t believe that,” Eric commented. Leonie shook her head. “No—I don’t. I believe that there is magic in the plant—the magic of this realm, seeped into the plant and then mixed with Ione’s tears,” she said with a sad smile. “I believe that the plant will exist for as long as Ione’s love for her mate exists.”

“What of Ione’s daughter?”

“According to Ione’s tapestry, the plant produced another flower as it lay on the grave of her husband; this occurred many years before Ione left this realm to return to Faerie. Ione ground that flower and made a paste, which she put onto a brooch that her husband had given to her. She gave that object to her daughter, who had twins: a boy and a girl. When the little boy died of a fever, the daughter made a single wish. She called upon the magic and the love within that brooch to resurrect her child. And the child revived. Thus, the legend of the cluviel dor was born. However, not long after that, tragedy befell Ione yet again. Her daughter, her son-in-law, and her grandson were all killed in a raid. Ione had been at the grave of her husband when it happened. The tapestry depicts how Ione hunted down the raiders.” Leonie paused. “Even represented in thread, the deaths of those raiders were the most gruesome I have ever seen. And Ione carried their blood with her to Faerie. The plant, too, was soaked in blood.” The fairy sighed. “It is there that the tapestry ends.”

“What of Ione’s granddaughter?”

Leonie shrugged. “That girl’s fate was not woven into the tapestry. And—of course—Ione never spoke of her.”

“And what happened to Ione—after her return to Faerie?” Eric asked with interest.

“After she completed the tapestry, she died. According to legend, she withered away, while the plant stayed the same.”

“What became of the plant?”

“It was passed down—along with the tapestry—by her family.” Leonie winked at Eric. “My family. The plant has—on two other occasions over the years—produced a single flower. The first time, my great-great-grandmother discovered the flower and added its magic to a charm that my great-great-grandfather had given to her. That charm has passed through many hands, and—as far as I know—has not yet been used. I do not know where it is now.”

“And the second flower?” Eric asked.

“When I retrieved Fintan’s watch, I saw that Ione’s plant had produced once more, and I took that as a sign. This watch symbolizes the love of Fintan and Adele, and now it has been infused with the love of Ione for her mate and her children and her children’s children—the love of family.”

“So this is a cluviel dor?” Eric asked in wonder.
“I don’t know for sure,” Leonie answered honestly. “But I have faith that it is. As I said, the only other one to be made has either not been used or not been spoken of. And all we have is the legend depicted in Ione’s tapestry. But,” the fairy said brightly, “it can’t hurt.”

“Does Sookie know of this?” Eric asked.

Leonie shook her head. “I have not even told Claudine or Klymene of it. I am telling you, and that is all.”

“Why not Sookie?”

She sighed. “I can only speculate about who can use the cluviel dor and how it can be used.”

“Then speculate,” Eric said.

“I believe that only the mixing of great love and grief can unlock a cluviel dor’s magic to create a miracle. Sookie certainly has love for you, but she would not grieve at your death.”

Eric looked at her in confusion.

“She would not have the chance to grieve, Eric,” Leonie clarified. “If a bonded fairy dies, then the mate of that fairy dies but a moment later. No—in the same moment—as soon as the bond registers the loss.”

“So Sookie wouldn’t have time to use it—to save me or herself,” Eric observed astutely.

“No. She would not.”

“But if she dies?” Eric asked stiffly.

“You are already dead, so I am hoping that will change the rules and that you would have time to use the cluviel dor to wish her back to us. Of course, you might die along with her—just as fast as a bonded fairy would. Or Ione’s tapestry may have been interpreted wrong. Or—if you are right about not truly loving Sookie—then your affection would not be strong enough to enact the spell. Or you might even decide not to try to resurrect her, for—if you survived Sookie’s death—you would be free of the Fae bond and could continue your life as before.”

Eric tensed a little.

“It is in your hands now, Eric,” Leonie said softly, “but I have decided to have faith in you.”

“Why?”

“Because—Ione’s plant was viscum album, Eric.”

“European mistletoe,” he whispered.

“Yes. A beautiful parasite that granted life where there had only been death. A beautiful parasite that found a way to resurrect love itself.”

Overcome with emotions he didn’t want to show the fairy, the vampire stood and turned away from Leonie. He opened the watch and read the inscription from Adele to Fintan: Always remember—if I could love you for all time, I would.
Sookie paced for the last five minutes of the half-hour of Leonie and Eric’s private conversation. As Kuruk had built a fire, the young Werebear had watched her as if she might explode.

Neither of the Werebears could hear what was happening outside. Sookie knew that for sure, for she’d asked them both—multiple times. Elina, however, could smell magic and had posited that Leonie was purposely covering up her conversation with Eric.

As the final seconds ticked down—according to the old clock on the mantle—Sookie actually ran to the front door, but then knocked before tentatively walking outside. Since the temperature had dipped considerably with the setting sun, she had put on a wool hat and a scarf, as well as her fleece jacket.

Once outside, she looked from Eric to Leonie, who were both sitting placidly at the table; she was grateful that no blood had been spilled—at least none that she could see.

“It seems your kinswoman knows Klymene,” Eric said as he reached out automatically and pulled Sookie onto his lap.

Sookie sighed contently at the contact and then looked at Leonie with surprise. “You do?”

Leonie nodded. “Yes—we are what you would call ‘old friends.’”

“Uh—we’ve been tryin’ to get in touch with her,” Sookie said.

“I know,” Leonie said. “She will soon make contact with you, through a friend.”

“I will tell you of that later,” Eric said, pulling Sookie closer to him, needing to feel her nearer. He glanced at the box on the table, which once again held the watch, along with the picture of Sookie’s human family.

“I should go soon,” the fairy said.

“Oh. Then should I try to do the scent thing?” Sookie asked.

Leonie nodded and stood up.

Eric also rose, and set Sookie onto her feet. She looked up at him. “Today, I learned that I have already been masking my fairy scent. I just didn’t know it.”

Eric’s eyebrow rose in question.

“As soon as her spark was lit by your blood, her scent would have changed,” Leonie informed. “All Fae gifts are governed by instinct, however,” she continued. “We use them for fight or flight. We use them to conceal ourselves or to antagonize enemies. We use them for knowledge or secrecy. We use them for protection or attack.”

“So when my blood enlivened her spark . . . ,” Eric began.
“It also enlivened her ability to conceal her Fae scent, a very handy gift in a sea of vampires,”
Leonie finished with a smirk.

“It’s like a faucet,” Sookie said. “Or—at least—that’s how I’ve started thinking of my scent. I can
turn it up or down. But before Claudine told me about it, I didn’t even know it was there.”

“So right now?” Eric asked.

“It’s on what I’d call normal. Apparently, this is where it’s been since Dallas.”

“You smell exactly as you did when I first met you,” Eric said. “The only difference is that I can
smell my blood in you.”

“Turn it down, Sookie,” Leonie said.

Sookie nodded and closed her eyes as she concentrated upon removing her scent.

Eric looked at Sookie with immediate surprise. “I cannot smell you at all; I can’t even smell my
blood in you!” he added.

She smiled proudly. “The clothing touching my body takes on my essence; the only problem is that
the rest of my things will still carry my scent unless I have been cloaked like this for a while, but if
I keep myself like this, my scent will fade from my things, especially if we wash them carefully.”

“Do you have to concentrate to be like this?” Eric asked.

“No. Once I turn the faucet one way or the other, I can just leave it there. It’s easy!” Sookie said
excitedly.

Eric looked at Leonie. “Can you smell her at all?”

Leonie shook her head. “No.”

Eric looked back at Sookie and asked her to hide in the shadows before he opened the door and
called for Elina.

“Where is Sookie?” the elder Werebear asked, a little concerned, as soon as she opened the door.
“Did she teleport away?”

Eric grabbed Sookie’s hand and drew her from the shadows. “You cannot smell her?”

Elina shook her head as she looked at Sookie in surprise. “No.”

“Thank you,” Eric said nodding for Elina to go back inside.

“What of the blood tie?” Leonie asked. “Can you still feel her?”

Eric nodded. “Yes. It is disorienting not to be able to smell her, but this is a good thing. It will keep
her safe without her needing Octavia’s potion.”

“Would you—uh—like to smell—uh—me?” Sookie asked with trepidation. “I mean—the way I
smell if I’m not cloaking at all? The real me?”

Eric took air into his lungs sharply. “I do not want to risk hurting you,” he said as his body shook a
little.
“Leonie says that you can’t because of the Fae bond, but she also said that she would blast you if you tried to eat me; that’s why we wanted to try it for the first time while she’s here,” Sookie said hopefully.

Eric looked at Leonie. “Do not let me hurt her.”

The fairy nodded, a knowing smile on her lips.

Eric backed away a little and then nodded for Sookie, who closed her eyes.

Almost immediately an exquisite scent filled Eric’s nostrils, and he took a step toward her; however, he was in control.

“Do you like it?” Sookie asked nervously. “Like me?”

“Yes,” Eric answered gruffly.

Sookie smiled. “Do you want to eat me?”

“Yes,” Eric answered, waggling his eyebrows. “And bite you, and fuck you, and rub myself all over you.”

Sookie blushed so red that even the dark night didn’t conceal it. She glanced at Leonie nervously.

The fairy giggled. “I think your vampire is in control of himself—at least within reason—but you had better not stay like this for long, Sookie. The young Werebear would likely try to fight Eric for you, and poor Kuruk would die a very painful death if he did. Oh—and remember to keep your telepathy stretched out as far as possible when you are allowing your scent to come forth.”

Sookie nodded.

The fairy looked at both Eric and Sookie in an almost motherly way. “I cannot say why, but I feel a strong kinship to you both. When you need me, I will come.” She smiled. “You are each other’s best assets. Do not forget,” she added pointedly before popping away.

Sookie looked at the spot where Leonie had been. “I didn’t get to say goodbye to her,” she said sadly.

“You will see her soon,” Eric assured.

“What do you mean?”

“Can I tell you later?” he asked as he took another step toward her.

She nodded and smiled. “What do I smell like to you?”

He closed his eyes as if savoring. “Your scent is sweet, like honey. You’ve always smelled like that, but now I can taste it on my tongue. And there’s more too. I cannot describe it—other than to say that it is my favorite. You’re my favorite.”

Sookie’s lips turned upward as he took her into his arms and kissed her firmly on the lips.

“I like being your favorite,” she said when he broke the kiss.

They both saw the curtains rustle a bit.
Eric smiled against her mouth. “You’d best cover your scent before I am forced to kill the cub.”

“Kuruk is sweet,” Sookie said in a whisper as Eric kissed her once more.

“You are mine, Sookie,” he said possessively.

“Yes,” Sookie admitted breathlessly. “Are you mine?” she asked, more hesitantly.

“I don’t know,” Eric said honestly. “But I will never belong to another. That—I can promise.”

Sookie smiled as she looked into Eric’s eyes. She saw so much there. She’d been worrying about what Leonie was telling Eric. She’d worried that she would tell him how scared she was to finish the vampire bond. She’d worried that Eric would be disappointed if they didn’t finish the bond.

But, in that moment, Sookie was no longer worried. She somehow knew that Eric was aware of every single one of her fears. His eyes were telling her that he knew. She toned down her scent to “normal.”

“Eric?” she whispered.

“Sookie?” he answered before crushing her lips with his once more.

“Leonie told you that I was scared to finish the bond—didn’t she?” she asked when he let her up for air.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry that I’m scared.”

“You have no reason to be sorry,” he assured.

“Did she tell you why I was scared?”

“I figured it out. You are afraid that you would feel my resentment and bitterness of the Fae bond; you are afraid those feelings would extend to you.”

She shivered and he pulled her closer. “I’m sorry,” she said again.

“As I said, little one, there is no reason for you to be sorry. And there is another reason to wait to complete the vampire bond too. Leonie told me that the vampire bond would likely strengthen the Fae bond, and that is the opposite of what I thought it would do. Leonie fears that if that were the outcome, then I may very well grow to have bitter feelings for you. And I don’t want that to happen, Sookie. I might dislike the Fae bond, but I care for you. You must never doubt that. Tell me you don’t,” he said almost desperately.

“I don’t,” Sookie assured.

“Good,” he smiled as he kissed her nose. “We will talk more of finishing the bond once we are in California. Until then, I would like some time to think. And you should take some time as well.”

She nodded.

“Excellent. Now, let’s go inside and eat our meal with Elina and the cub. Then, I will school Kuruk for a while, and after that, I will have my way with my fairy.”

Sookie giggled. Now that Eric knew of her fears, she felt as if a weight had been taken off of her
shoulders. At the same time, however, she knew that her fear had transferred to his shoulders. “It’s okay. If you never wanna finish the vampire bond because the Fae bond would get stronger, it’s okay,” she whispered.

“We will talk more of it later, and we will decide together, lover.”

Eric rested his forehead against Sookie’s for a long minute. She loved it when he did that.

She loved him. And for the first time, she felt brave enough to let him feel what she felt—without trying to shield her emotions.

However, she still couldn’t say it out loud.

The young Werebear was formidable and fast, but no Were was a match for a thousand-year-old vampire. The only Were who had ever come close to besting Eric had been hyped up on vampire blood and—therefore—much stronger than normal.

But, despite the inequality of their species, Kuruk was handling himself well.

As soon as Eric and Kuruk had disappeared into the woods, their hunt had become a sparring match—not that Sookie needed to know or worry about that.

“Come on,” Eric taunted. “Don’t try to slash me with those claws of yours. Do it!”

Kuruk used the considerable weight of his body to recklessly propel himself toward Eric. The vampire smiled, even as he easily side-stepped the raging bear. Immediately Kuruk turned, showing a lot more agility and speed than most Werebears would have been capable of.

“Good,” Eric nodded with approval. “But—this time—do not come so hard at me. Maintain your control, and—as I move to the side—plant the claws of one of your hind legs into the ground and slash at me as your body turns with the inertia.”

Kuruk growled, but seemed to nod as he got into position. He charged Eric again—this time maintaining more control. As Eric had suggested, Kuruk planted one of his hind legs into the soft dirt, which jarred his body around. A normal bear’s leg would have hyperextended, but Kuruk was no normal bear, and his lithe body turned with his planted leg even as he reached out to slash at Eric’s chest.

The vampire was able to move in time—but just barely.

“Your grandfather made that move on me once—as he and I sparred. However, I wasn’t expecting it, and he was able to cut me.” Eric grinned. “If you do that to an unsuspecting vampire, you will gash him or her.” The vampire chuckled darkly, “Unless, of course, the vampire is three thousand years old.”

For another hour, Eric yelled out instructions to Kuruk, and the Werebear obeyed—for the most part. When he didn’t, Eric layed the beast out onto his back and made sure he left a bruise that would be felt for many days.

Finally, exhausted, Kuruk transformed back into his human form and put back on his clothing. Meanwhile, Eric sat onto the ground—his back to the young man.

Kuruk said nothing as he sat down a few feet from Eric. Both vampire and Werebear looked up at the stars in the night sky.
“Ursa Major,” Kuruk commented after the silence had stretched between the two for almost half an hour.

“The Great Bear,” Eric said. “My people did not see the stars of Ursa Major as a bear. Some of its stars belonged to Duneyr, a deer. Others were part of Karlwagn or Hellewagon, which is the wagon of Odin or of Thor—depending upon who is asked. Scholars these days!” The vampire shrugged. “They never agree.”

The Werebear chuckled.

“It is interesting—don’t you think—that different cultures have found different meanings in the sky,” the vampire stated.

The two were quiet for a few more minutes.

“My father wishes for me become like that bear in the stars,” Kuruk sighed. “He wants me to do so many things—great things—and I am not sure I can do them. He gave me my grandfather’s name in hopes that I would have his spirit.”

Eric glanced over at the young man. “And so you do—already—whether you wish it or not.”

Kuruk looked at Eric with a little surprise. “I don’t feel that way,” he said.

“And yet you are that way. Some things simply are, Kuruk. I knew your namesake well, and I liked him very much. You are like him.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” the vampire affirmed. “And if you temper that spirit with the wisdom of your grandmother, you will become even greater than my friend, Kuruk.” He smiled. “I mourned when I heard about his death. However, I will mourn less now—knowing that he has left such a legacy behind.” Eric rose to his feet and reached out a hand for the young Werebear.

Kuruk took the vampire’s proffered hand and was soon on his feet too.

“Many years ago, my own father looked to the sky and hoped that stars would be named for my deeds,” Eric confided. “But none were. However, the stars still shine despite that—and they still watch. Never doubt that they will continue to shine in order to witness your deeds. You need not have them named for you for that to be true.”

Eric turned to walk away.

“Mr. Northman?” the young Werebear ventured.

“Eric,” the vampire said. “That is the name my friends call me.”

Kuruk smiled a little. “I will remember your lessons—and what you said.”

The vampire nodded and walked into the night, anxious to return to his woman.
“Do you like it?” Sookie asked.

She was sitting at the window, where the light-tight shades had just risen. Her brown eyes were locked into his blues, boring into him like lasers.

“Yes,” he said honestly.

“So you like redheads?” Sookie chuckled, dragging her fingers through her now copper-colored hair.

He met her chuckle with one of his own. “I have enjoyed a few over the years—yes. But blondes and brunettes can be lovely too. And you are striking with any color on your head.”

“You don’t have a preference?” she asked as she continued to comb through her still-damp hair. “For me?”

“Blonde,” Eric said, sitting up in the bed. “I don’t like you having to look different than you are.”

Sookie half-smiled and half-smirked. “Well, that’s the point of dying it, right? To look different?”

Eric chuckled, got up from the bed, and came over to kiss her newly changed hair and then her lips. “I’ll take a shower, and then we should go.”

Sookie nodded and bit her lip. “Everything’s packed except for your bag.”

He gave her another kiss, this one slower and more passionate. She lost herself in it for a few moments.

Sookie panted as he pulled away. “Take your shower.”

Eric backed away and nodded. “I’ll be quick. And we’ll finish that later.”

“I’ll be waiting,” she smiled flirtingly.

He zipped into the bathroom. Sookie tidied the bed and folded their quilt to take with them. She thought about her last twenty-four hours in Taos with fondness. After Leonie had left, Elina and Kuruk had stayed for a couple of hours. After dinner, Sookie had enjoyed a nice chat with Elina by the fire while Eric spent time with Kuruk. Sookie didn’t ask what they did, but when they came back inside, Kuruk looked slightly the worse for wear. However, she picked up from Kuruk’s mind that Eric was kind of his hero now, so she figured the young Werebear was okay.

After that, Eric had made good on his promise to have his way with her. Given the fact that she had been tired from a long day with Claudine and Leonie, Eric was very gentle when they had sex that night, and Sookie tingled from the memory of his touch. He’d not drunk from her; instead, he’d given her a few sips of his blood so that she could recharge faster. They’d been careful not to make an exchange that would finish their vampire bond, but drinking from him—and having him drink from her—was still extremely pleasurable for both of them.
They’d talked a little about her training with Claudine, and then Eric had told her about some of the things he’d talked about with Leonie before they’d made their plans for the next night. Sookie had fallen into an exhausted sleep at about 4:00 a.m.

Sookie had woken up at around noon when she “heard” thoughts come into her range. She’d realized that, while she and Eric had been traveling, she would be woken up by any thoughts that her subconscious mind picked up as out of the ordinary. She’d also been learning how to keep her telepathy “turned on” all the time without having to really think about it or concentrate on the specific thoughts that were within her range. Thus far, she’d only been able to do it in the less densely populated places they’d visited, but she could feel herself gaining more and more control over her ability. Her gift.

And she’d also been gaining more confidence—in herself.

The Fae book didn’t say much about her telepathy—probably because hers was different from other fairies’—but Eric and she continued to work on it together.

The thoughts that she’d heard approaching had belonged to Elina and her daughter Onawa, whom Sookie had been a little nervous to meet—since she and Eric had once had sex.

Onawa had been just as beautiful as she was in Elina’s head, but other than a very brief flash of a memory about Eric and her time together, the Werebear didn’t think about the vampire. She was excited about her own children, and Sookie could tell that she loved her husband deeply. While Sookie had visited with Elina, Onawa had driven the Prius into town and bought some supplies before filling the car with gasoline. Included in those supplies were quite a few new items of clothing since Sookie and Eric were headed into the mountains again once they got to California. Sookie smiled a little as she thought about the snow that would soon be in the California mountains. She hoped it fell before she had to leave them.

Onawa had also brought food enough to last a few days and a fresh case of TrueBlood for Eric.

After saying goodbye to her new friends in the afternoon, Sookie had ordered some furniture and supplies to be delivered to their final destination in Mammoth Lakes, California. And then she had taken a shower and dyed her hair again since the most dangerous leg of their trip was coming up. Part of Sookie just wished that they could stay in Taos, and she’d spoken with Eric about it the night before. However, in California, fewer people would know where they were, and his house there was even more secure than the Taos cabin. It also had the added benefit of being in a state with heavily patrolled borders.

The plan was for Eric to drive them to Gallup, New Mexico, which was close to the Arizona border. That leg of the drive would take them almost five hours. Eric had a small safe house outside of Gallup, but he didn’t intend for them to use it during the day. Instead, they would stay there only for the rest of the night. Eric would glamour a human to fill up their car, and at first dawn, Sookie was to begin the almost six-hour trip across the state of Arizona. Given that Arizona was allied with Nevada—since the king was Felipe de Castro’s child—the less time they were in that state, the better. Plus, according to Eric, the Were population in Arizona was quite high, and most were on the king’s payroll. Sookie would be driving on one of the main thoroughfares through the state, Interstate 40, and her goal was to stop as little as possible before getting to the next safe house on the route, which was in Needles, California. She and Eric would not spend much time there either, however. Though in California, Needles was practically on the Nevada border, so as soon as nightfall came, Eric would be driving them to the place that they’d call home for the next month, a cabin outside of Mammoth Lakes.

Sookie was anxious, but excited too. Traveling had been fun in a lot of ways, but she was looking
forward to settling someplace for at least a little while. They would also be using the large concealment spell from Octavia to cover the house there. It wouldn’t work for their full time there, but it would last long enough to give them a good start.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Victor? Have you found Northman or not?” Russell yelled impatiently into the phone.

Bill woke up from his day-sleep and found himself with a fuming Russell and an irritated-looking Talbot. Both of them were naked—just as he was. And both of them had blood on them—just as he did.

Even as Talbot tried to comfort Russell by rubbing the elder vampire’s arm, Bill rose from the other side of Talbot after kissing his shoulder and gesturing that he was going to go shower.

Bill was—in truth—just as impatient as Russell to find Eric, but he had learned that it was best to be out of sight when Russell was in one of his fouler moods. Talbot was the only one that Russell didn’t lash out at. Bill had learned that the hard way when Russell had flung him across the room in his anger after a phone call from Nan Flanagan.

Unfortunately, the lead in Houston had been more trouble than it was worth. Victor and Russell had discovered that Eric had indeed been at a safe house there just a night or two before their arrival; the freshness of his scent had proven that, but the Viking hadn’t left a trail. And now the Authority—instead of Victor—was watching the property. Russell seemed to trust Nan to do a good job, and, for some reason, she was giving him nightly reports—not that Bill was supposed to know that. However, the other Authority representative was a nuisance.

Bill turned on the water and looked in the mirror. There was caked blood on his chest from the human that he had shared with his lovers the night before. He had chosen the young sacrifice because of her physical resemblance to Sookie, and Russell had allowed him to glamour and fuck her before she was drained. From the back, she’d looked almost exactly like Sookie, save a small tattoo on her left shoulder. But that was easily ignored. However, she’d not smelled anything like Sookie, and she’d certainly not tasted like her, but she had sated Bill’s lust and bloodlust for the short-term.

Moreover, her death had led to more pleasurable activities for Bill with Russell and Talbot. Bill sighed as he thought of his two lovers. During the past he may have felt shame for the relationship they shared, but Russell had been tutoring him in many arts, including the art of love with other men.

And Bill did love his mentor. In fact, in a short time, he’d come to love him very much. And Russell valued Bill as he had never been valued before, entrusting him with finding their long-term donors but also helping him to understand so much more about the way the world could be—ought to be.

Russell had taught him that humans were like locusts, something that Bill couldn’t really argue with once he’d heard Russell’s logic. It was an undeniable truth that humans were using up the earth’s natural resources and destroying the environment at a fast rate. Russell actually loved the concept of “humanity” very much—as it turned out. He simply wanted to take things back to a less complicated time—a more genteel time.

A time before humanity had become its own worst enemy.
That was why the human population needed to be thinned out and herded. Some modern technology would be kept for the benefit of vampires; however, humans needed to take a step backward—to a simpler time in their evolution.

Bill smiled as he thought about his own childhood, growing up on his family’s little plantation. Because it was the South and his family had some wealth, they’d had slaves, about ten in all. But his family had treated their slaves well, and many of them had families of their own. Bill recalled that the Stackhouses were poorer and didn’t have slaves, but his family had not looked down on Sookie’s ancestors. On the contrary, he remembered his father giving the Stackhouse family an old plow on one occasion. Yes—Bill thought—Russell was right. In the past, humans had been a much more civil race—before technology had made them unfeeling.

Bill had—with Russell’s permission—continued to dig into Sookie’s family line, but he’d found nothing new to go on. Sadly, the Stackhouses had been dying out since three out of the four Stackhouse children had died before having children in Bill’s own generation. The two eldest sons had died in Gettysburg. The daughter, who had been a friend of Caroline’s, had died of a fever. The youngest son was the only one who had continued the family line, and it had dwindled ever since. In fact, only two people remained: the absolutely useless Jason Stackhouse, who smelled only slightly better than a full-blooded human, and Hadley.

Bill smiled a little. Hadley had proven to be an excellent addition to Talbot’s cuisine designs. And Sophie-Anne had—surprisingly—turned out to be a delightful dinner companion as well.

As soon as the queen had accepted the hierarchy of Russell’s kingdom, things had begun to run smoothly. Plus, Sophie-Anne had learned that Russell was more than happy to do all of the work in Louisiana and Mississippi. The queen had always preferred leisure anyway, and she often stayed in her wing of the Russell’s mansion for hours on end, playing Yahtzee or her new favorite, Jenga. She did join the main household for a formal dinner every night, however, and was always dressed to the nines. Bill enjoyed the pageantry of it all.

As a bonus, the enmity between Talbot and Sophie-Anne had been very short-lived. Talbot had come to love the queen being around since he now had a woman to help dress up, and Sophie-Anne was—undeniably—a beautiful woman. She and Talbot were found giggling together many nights a week as they planned her wardrobe for Rhodes and gossiped about kings and queens from other states.

“William dear!” Talbot’s voice came from the bedroom. Done with his shower anyway, Bill quickly turned off the water and wrapped a towel around his waist. Russell was nowhere to be seen as Bill entered the bedroom. But that wasn’t a surprise. The king often liked to have a quick snack when he first rose and then he enjoyed washing off in a lake on the property. He said it reminded him of his younger days.

“Yes?” Bill asked the Greek.

“You’re dripping,” Talbot said in mock outrage.

Bill smiled. He had learned quickly about the things that Talbot truly valued and the things that he liked to replace often. “Then you will just have to get a new area rug,” the Southern gent said.

“You are a darling,” Talbot returned giddily, getting up from the bed and approaching Bill. He gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Russell is in a tizzy. And Felipe has refused to visit me because of it.” He sighed. “Oh well. Victor is following a lead in Arizona and will be staying with Felipe’s child Sampson. Have you met him?”
Bill shook his head. He was not sure whether Talbot was talking about Sampson or Felipe, but since he’d met neither, it didn’t matter.

“Oh—Sampson will be at Rhodes, but do not get your hopes up. He is pretty to look at but is into women now.” Talbot rolled his eyes. “But Russell and I used to have fun with him. Anyway, I must go to Sophie’s fitting tonight. She wishes to have my feedback regarding her ball gown. Would you be a dear and make sure the room next door is cleaned—and the sheets in here, too.”

“Of course,” Bill said with a smile. In addition to the regular donors in the house, Bill had learned soon after he’d taken up residence in the mansion that Talbot and Russell drained humans several times a week. At first, Bill had staunchly disapproved of this. But Russell had taught Bill that thinning out less worthy humans from herd was actually a service to them and to the world at large. And—when Bill was ready—Russell and Talbot had let him join in on their fun. Now, Bill was also the one in charge of picking the humans to be sacrificed, and he had found that there were many useless or degenerate humans that really ought not to be allowed to live.

In Sophie-Anne’s court, he’d procured only the best humans, and—in Russell’s—he still found some humans who were worthy of becoming regular donors, but there were others that added nothing to the world—except for their blood. The woman they’d had the night before was one such human. She’d had no education and no job, and she had been living off of the government—a sponge on the earth.

“You are a godsend!” Talbot said as he went into the bathroom and started the shower water before poking his head back out the door. “Oh—and Russell is in such a terrible mood that it would be good to bring in another human this evening. You know Russell’s favorite kind, and make sure he’s pretty and untouched by men so that Russell can have his fun with him,” Talbot said with a wave of his hands. “We can feed before sleeping in the morning. You know how sleeping amidst a kill helps to calm Russell.”

Bill nodded. He was yet to be completely comfortable when they went to their day-death bathed in blood, but it did seem to relax his patron and teacher, for it reminded Russell of his own youth as a vampire.

“I shall procure two—one dark for him and one blond for you.”

“You will spoil us, darling,” Talbot said joyfully, “but after that call from Victor, Russell could use a little spoiling.”

“What happened?” Bill asked.

“The usual,” Talbot said as he got into the shower. He continued speaking over the sound of the water, and with his enhanced hearing, Bill had no trouble hearing him. “Each night, Victor thinks he has a new clue, but each morning, it has turned out to be nothing.”

“What of the lead from Arizona?” Bill asked.

“That lead may not even have been for Northman specifically,” Talbot said with an exasperated air. “One of Sampson’s Were’s thought that he smelled a vampire and then saw a suspicious woman.”

Bill walked into the bathroom to continue the conversation and to enjoy the view. “A woman?”

“Yes,” Talbot said as he turned off the water and got out of the shower. Bill’s eyes swept admiringly over his body. Talbot continued. “The Were thought he saw,” the vampire paused for a moment as he carefully chose his words, “a woman who was associated with Eric in the past. That
occurred in Kingman, Arizona, which is near the California border. And then the Were thought he smelled a fairy.”

“Why would he think the situation involved Eric? Who was the woman?” Bill asked.

“I don’t know,” Talbot said, though Bill had a feeling the Greek was lying.

Talbot went on, “But I am almost certain the Were was mistaken, though Victor is going to check out the lead more fully. The Were thought the woman was returning to a car, but then she seemed to spot him and turned away. When the Were looked more closely at the car, he realized it had been custom-built to transport a vampire, and as he got closer, he smelled one of us inside.” He sighed. “Though why Victor is so certain that it was Northman is beyond me!”

“What of the woman?” Bill asked with interest. “Did the Were capture her?”

“No,” Talbot said with irritation. “He was completely useless! After she saw the incompetent Were, the woman retreated back into the little café she’d been in. The Were decided to wait for her.”

“Then what?”

“Well—the Were picked up a delicious scent coming from inside the café. He went in to investigate, but he couldn’t track the scent. And when he came back out, the car was gone. Luckily, he’d taken down the car’s license plate number, and some of Felipe’s men arrived about the same time as well—since Felipe was making a visit to his Sampson. Anyway, they were able to find the car and tracked it south. Apparently, there was quite a pursuit for a while,” Talbot said wistfully. “Victor does not know all the details, but most of the Weres were killed in a confrontation.”

“Really?” Bill asked.

“Yes. Apparently, the delicious scent was a fairy—given the state of the scene that was left behind.”

“So the fairy got away?” Bill asked with disappointment. “I assume the vampire did as well?”

Talbot nodded. “Yes. And such a shame about the fairy escaping. I’ve never had one before, and the lone survivor of the incident, the Weretiger Quinn, is saying that he thinks she was a full-blooded fairy! Anyway, Victor thinks the whole episode is somehow related to Eric; you know how he is with his ‘instincts.’” Talbot rolled his eyes and used air quotes as he spoke.

“But why would a fairy be with Eric? Why would any fairy be with a vampire?”

“My point—exactly!” Talbot exclaimed as he dried his body and continued to vent his frustrations. Even as he did, the Greek made certain that he was moving slowly enough so that Bill could appreciate his body. Russell’s anxiety had made him anxious too, and he knew that Bill could please him for the short-term. Both he and Bill preferred to let Russell be the “top” when it came to sex, but when they were alone, Talbot was able to be the top, which he enjoyed with the younger vampire. It was a nice change.

As Talbot continued his complaints about Victor in a muddle of Greek and English, Bill watched the older vampire with growing lust. Bill couldn’t really understand what Talbot was saying, but the older vampire’s words were fueling his passion, which was—in turn—fueling his own. Bill was just about to give Talbot’s mouth something to do other than to curse when he heard the word “Sookie” in Talbot’s rant.
“Sookie!” Bill exclaimed. “What of Sookie? Does Victor think that this fairy in Arizona has something to do with Sookie?” Bill asked. “Could Eric have found some of her kin?”

“Victor is grasping at straws, William. He is trying to placate Russell since he’s found very little as of yet,” Talbot said dismissively. “It wasn’t even Victor that found the Houston home; it was the demon—who passed along information about Eric’s holdings to Russell. Victor hasn’t really done anything, so I don’t see why he cannot just come here and play with us,” Talbot pouted.

“Perhaps I should go to Arizona,” Bill said with a desperate twinge to his tone. “I could help. I was most familiar with Sookie’s scent, and any fairy kin of hers might smell similarly.”

Talbot placed his hands on Bill’s cheeks to calm the younger vampire. He now wished he’d never let the name “Sookie” slip from his mouth—despite the fact that the Were who’d first sighted the woman had said that she looked like Sookie Stackhouse. But that was impossible! She was dead. Plus, Quinn had later given a different description of the woman. Regardless, Bill always became inflamed—and not in a good way—when she was mentioned.

“Victor has learned to recognize Miss Stackhouse’s scent from being in her home,” Talbot said soothingly, “and I believe all this is much ado about nothing, but if Victor requires you, I am certain he will call. Victor knows of your value, but right now, you are needed most with Russell and myself. Rhodes is coming up, and Russell wishes for you to help with security. Plus, he wants to go over your brilliant database idea with you and see what you have already done with it. As you know, he hopes that you will have a preview version that could be sold in Rhodes.” Talbot leaned forward and lightly kissed Bill’s lips. “And right now, I need you to keep me company for a little while,” he said seductively.

Bill nodded, placated for the moment and happy to be receiving Talbot’s attentions and appreciation as the older vampire rubbed Bill’s growing member through the towel. Yes—Bill thought to himself—Talbot was right; Victor was likely off on another wild goose chase. And if Victor did come across a scent that was close to Sookie’s, then Bill was certain he’d be called in to help with the investigation. After all, he was now a valued member of Russell’s inner circle. In fact, Bill was even privy to the fact that his king, as well as Felipe de Castro and Bartlett Crowe, had big plans for making the United States a nation that all vampires would envy. And he had recently even been told about the Sanguinistas, a group which believed in vampire superiority. Russell didn’t really care for the growing group—since it was based on what he called “mystical nonsense”—but the king was certain he could use them to his own advantage.

Talbot purred, “William, would you help me dry myself, darling? There are a few spots I cannot reach, and my own towel is too wet.”

Bill watched Talbot drop his towel onto the floor and licked his lips as he gazed at the older vampire’s beautiful cock. Bill smiled, loosened his own towel, and let it fall to the floor as well.

“You are beautiful,” Bill said as he took in Talbot’s smooth body.

“Show me how beautiful you think I am,” Talbot said as Bill sank to his knees before the king’s consort. Within minutes, they had both forgotten about the mysterious fairy scent which had been detected fifteen hundred miles away.
Aftermath

Chapter 32: Aftermath

Sookie pulled into the garage in Needles with her eyes glued to the rear view mirror.

“Calm down,” came Eric’s voice through the Bluetooth. “You are fine. Just breathe. I will be with you in two minutes.”

“Eric,” Sookie said as she held her breath while the garage door closed behind her.

“Shhh, little one. All is well. Just take deep breaths. You did well.”

“Eric,” she said again, this time, even more shakily.

“Count to sixty and I will be there.”

Sookie began counting quickly. “One. Two. Three.”

“Slower,” Eric said.

“Four. Five. Six. Seven.” She said, slowing down.

“Good,” keep going like that. “You are safe. We are fine.”

“Eric. I was so scared.”

“I know. Count.”


“Count.”

“Eric.”

“Count.”

“I love you, Eric.”

“I know. Count, Sookie.”

“I can’t remember where I left off.”

“Count down from ten.”


“Slower.”

“Seven. Six. Five. Four.”

“Slower.”

Sookie took a deep breath. “Three. Two. One.”
In the next instant, Sookie heard the mechanism that controlled Eric’s coffin open. And then suddenly she was in his arms. All of the adrenaline that had fueled her for the last eight hours was gone as her tears started to fall.

“What if?” she stammered.

“Shhhh, min älskade,” he soothed. “We are together and we are fine.” He kissed her forehead.

“Eric,” she sobbed, all of her fear and anxiety from the day overwhelming her—draining the adrenaline that had been keeping her going, “I love you. I wanted to tell you so many times. I love you. I love you.” she repeated over and over as her tears overtook her completely. “I love you and I could have lost you. I could have lost you without ever saying it when you could hear it! I could have lost you. Lost you. Lost you. I love you. Love you. Love you,” she cried.

“Shhhh. It is fine now. I hear you, Sookie.” He rocked her body in his arms.

Eventually, her crying became hiccups, and she became aware that she was in a bed. Eric seemed to be all around her, holding her as tightly as she needed to be held.

“Sleep,” he said softly. “You took care of me. I will take care of you.”

“Eric, I thought I was going to lose you.” she repeated in a hoarse whisper.

“Sleep,” he whispered into her ear. “I have you. I promise. It is my turn now—my turn to take care of you.”

“Eric,” she said with a sigh as she finally let herself sink into him and into sleep.

After her breathing evened out, Eric kissed her forehead lightly and got up. Immediately, she stirred, her arms—even in her sleep—reaching for where he’d been.

“Shhh,” he whispered, as he bent down next to her. “I will be back soon. Sleep. All is well, min vackra älskade.”

She managed a nod. “One day I’ll learn that language,” she said almost imperceptibly and then fell back into an exhausted sleep.

Eric stared at Sookie for a few moments before leaving the bedroom and going to the garage. He grabbed his duffle bag and sped back into the house—this time to the bathroom where he stood looking at himself in the mirror. Blood smeared his face and had gotten into his hair and onto his T-shirt.

But he was alive. He was alive because of Sookie—because of his bonded.

He went back into the bedroom and gazed down at her for a moment. He felt the Fae bond inside of him throbbing and knew it was because of the trauma and stress they’d both endured that day. His own body was still weak—despite his having Sookie’s blood earlier—and he could feel Sookie’s exhaustion through the tie.

The day had almost taken her from him.

“Ek elska þik,” he whispered, in the first language he’d ever known. “I love you so fucking much it hurts,” he said as a tear slipped from his eye. The vampire wasn’t sure what to do with the words that he heard coming from his mouth—in two language, no less—or the feelings that fueled them, but he knew they were true. And it had taken almost losing her to make him understand that truth
—and to understand that the origin of his feelings simply didn’t matter.

They were inside of him. They were a part of him.

And that—suddenly—was both enough and too much all at once.

But it was also bliss.

Eric pulled himself from Sookie’s side and moved quickly to the garage. He pulled all of his and Sookie’s belongings from the car and stacked them in a corner of the garage. He smiled when he ran across the coffeemaker Sookie had taken from the house in Taos because she knew that the Mammoth Lakes house wouldn’t have one yet.

His beloved needed her coffee. That was just one of the many things he now knew about her.

After everything was out of the car, he quickly lifted out the spare tire and removed the various license plates he’d had concealed in the bed of the vehicle—except for the plate that had been on the car at the start of the day. He then exchanged the California plates that were on the car with plates for Nevada. Eric smiled to himself. He was going to be putting the car right into the back-fucking-yard of one of Russell’s biggest allies, Felipe de Castro.

“Let Madden try to figure that out,” Eric said to himself with a smirk, as he quickly went inside and wet some dishrags. With them he wiped down any surface of the car that might hold Sookie’s finger prints, though he made sure to leave some of his own behind. The Viking couldn’t be certain that Victor would even check for prints, but Eric knew that he would if he were in Victor’s position—one he’d exhausted more traditional and “vampire” means of searching, that is. Eric also knew that Victor had likely already lifted some of his prints from one of his homes in Shreveport or from Fangtasia, so he’d have a lot with which to compare the prints in the car.

The Viking, however, didn’t want any trace of Sookie to be left behind, so he cleaned the car meticulously even though a slight trace of her wouldn’t seem out of place. After all, Russell and Bill knew that he’d taken Sookie from the hospital in Rustin. And they knew that she’d been with him for a couple of days before he’d supposedly killed her. Still, that had taken place weeks ago, so a small trace of Sookie could be explained, but a large amount of evidence of her might make them suspicious, especially after the day they’d just experienced.

Even as he was doing his cleaning, Eric was scanning the area using all of his senses. Since the next part of his plan was to be precarious and dangerous for his confederates, he waited for quite a while until he found a suitable human to do as he needed. He located a jogger, just as she was yelling a quick goodbye to her husband and telling him that she’d be back in an hour or so.

Perfect.

Making certain no one else was around in the early evening, Eric intercepted the human after the first block of her run and quickly glamourd her to proceed to the address of Eric’s safe-house, which was another three blocks down the street. He also glamourd the woman to wait in the shadows next to the house.

Then, Eric quickly flew back to the safe house and showered, making sure to scrub his head thoroughly in order to remove all of Octavia’s potion. He needed to leave his scent in the car.

His shower done, he quietly went into the bedroom and checked on Sookie. He found the usual stash of clothing and money waiting in the dresser there. He put a modest amount of money into the new duffel bag he found in the closet. He quickly dressed so that the clothing would smell like
him and then undressed, placing that clothing into the duffel bag too. He tossed in his half-used bottle of shampoo and the towel that he’d just dried himself with. Its dampness would cause the contents of the bag to be a bit musty when Victor found them, but it would also suggest that Eric had been in a hurry.

And—as a bonus—the “ripe” scent would be unpleasant for Victor.

After the new duffel bag was packed to his liking, Eric dressed in fresh clothing. He checked on Sookie again, and finding her still in a deep sleep, he went to the garage and threw the duffel bag into the hatchback. He then got into his “car cubby” in order to leave his scent now that the potion wasn’t covering it. His also sat in the driver’s seat of the car for several minutes, as soon as he’d made sure that everything he and Sookie wanted to keep was out of the car. He took the spare car key from his pocket and put it into the ignition.

He chuckled as he noticed that the keychain was the one that Pam had given him when they’d opened Fangtasia. It had the Fangtasia logo on it and said, “Life sucks.” He decided to leave the keychain with the key as a little “fuck you” for Russell, Victor, and Felipe.

Next, Eric opened the garage door and found the human he’d glamoured. He gave the human a pair of gloves and a wad of cash and ordered the woman to take the car to a local carwash and vacuum the inside thoroughly before filling the car up with gasoline. Then, the woman was to drive back and park the car five blocks to the north of where they were. There, she would leave the car unlocked and the key under the floor mat. The woman would then throw the gloves away and forget that she’d done anything except have a nice jog.

Eric waited one minute after the woman had driven away. In order for Octavia’s potion to cover the scent of his possessions as well as his body, they had to be within a hundred feet of him. Once he was certain that the Prius was well out of range, he quickly took his remaining bottle of Octavia’s potion from his jacket pocket and applied a few drops to his forehead.

He then grabbed a few TrueBloods from the case in the garage and went inside to sit next to his bonded. All he could do now was to wait.

Forty minutes after the human left, Eric saw Sookie stirring. A moment later, he heard a vehicle approaching.

“Is it Leonie?” he whispered to a still half-asleep Sookie.

He could tell that she was reaching out with her telepathy. “Yeah,” she said tiredly.

“Stay here, min älskade,” Eric cooed. “Sleep. I will return soon.” She nodded and was soon out again.

Eric opened the garage door and was met by headlights. A dark SUV with tinted windows pulled into the space; as soon as it was parked, Eric closed the garage door.

He stayed back a bit as two people emerged from the vehicle: Leonie and her grandson, Claude. They had already figured prominently in the day’s events.

“How is Sookie?” Leonie asked, the concern in her voice clear.

“She is sleeping—resting.”

Leonie looked relieved. “Good. This is Claude. You two didn’t officially meet earlier.”
The two men exchanged a brief nod, with Claude leering at the handsome Viking.

“Any problems?” Eric asked, gesturing toward the car.

“No,” Leonie said. “And don’t worry. We bought the vehicle under the false name that Claude used to use when he was a dancer. No one will be able to trace it to you.”

“Thank you,” Eric said a little stiffly. “Thank you both.”

“Have there been any changes in what you need for us to do, Eric?” Leonie asked.

The vampire shook his head.

The beautiful fairy before him smiled kindly. “Tell my great-granddaughter that I will see her soon.”

“I will,” Eric said. “The car is approximately five blocks north of here. It will smell of me.”

Leonie nodded. “I will contact you when we are done with our task.”

Eric nodded as the fairies left the garage. Immediately, he packed up the new vehicle, stuffing everything into the back cargo space so that the back seat was free. He arranged the quilt and pillow Sookie had taken from the Slidell house a little more than a week before. He sighed as he thought about everything that had changed between them since then.

Tonight—in his arms—she’d cried herself to sleep for a very different reason than she had cried the week before as she’d lain in the car so that she could be close to him. A week ago, the Fae bond was something that he was getting used to—something that he resented deeply—but today it had helped to keep them both alive.

It had saved his life.

Sookie had saved his life.

Eric shook himself out of his musings for the moment and went into the house. He got his duffle bag and took it to the car before checking to make sure nothing was left behind.

Finally, the vampire went back to his sleeping bonded—his mate—and carefully picked her up, taking the quilt on the bed with her. It was in a style that Sookie liked; plus, it would add to the padding in the vehicle, thereby adding to her comfort. He thought about waking her to take care of her human needs, but he didn’t want to stop her from taking the rest she desperately needed.

Eric drove west on Interstate 40 with his eyes in his rearview mirror. He was still a little more than 370 miles from his and Sookie’s final destination and a half an hour out of Needles, and so far, there had been no signs of further trouble.

Though the SUV Leonie had secured was exactly what he had requested, it got poor gas mileage compared to the hybrid, and he knew he would have to stop for gasoline at least twice along his route.

He sighed as he thought about the Prius. On the open highway, that car was able to get almost 50 miles per gallon, and with an almost 12 gallon tank, the car could travel almost 600 miles in optimal conditions.

However, that day had not been optimal. He looked at the sleeping figure in the back seat. Sookie’s
trip that day was supposed to be precisely 391.7 miles from her starting point outside of Gallup, New Mexico to the garage of his home in Needles, California. It should have taken her between five and six hours to get there.

Instead, she had been in the car for the whole day—more than twelve hours. And she’d driven almost 800 miles.

Eric monitored Sookie closely through their blood-tie as he re-lived their day and tried not to think about how he’d almost lost her.
In the dead of night, there was very little traffic, so Eric let his mind travel back to 24 hours before.

So that Sookie could get some sleep, Eric had driven them from Taos to his safe house in Gallup, where he and Sookie had spent a few glorious hours. There, they’d had sex—no, they’d made love—and then he’d held her close as she’d rested for her upcoming drive. About twenty minutes before dawn, he’d climbed into his coffin in the Prius, and they’d taken off in the predawn hours. Sunrise was at 7:09 a.m., but he’d stayed awake for a few minutes after that, enjoying the sound of Sookie’s voice in the Bluetooth.

Yes—the night before and that morning had gone exactly as planned. But things went to hell when Sookie succumbed to the demands of her human bladder and stopped at a small café in Kingman, Arizona. She’d chosen a perfect place to stop, having absorbed all of the lessons he’d taught her about concealing her identity while she was “on the run.”

Indeed, she’d done everything right; however, things had gone horribly wrong for her.

[FLASHBACK: 12:06 P.M., EARLIER THAT DAY]

Eric was rocked out of his sleep a little after noon according to his internal clock. He immediately felt Sookie’s stress along with the pain of the liquid silver shooting into his body.


Hearing the panic in her voice, the Viking put aside his pain. Instinctively, he inhaled deeply, gauging his surroundings; there was a Werewolf very close to the car—probably only twenty or so feet away.

“I’m here,” he answered Sookie. “What is wrong?”

“We’re at a café outside of Kingman, Arizona. I was in here using the bathroom and getting coffee when I heard a Were brain outside. At first, he didn’t seem dangerous. He was just thinking about whether to get a piece of pie while he was waiting for the people he was gonna meet here.” She was breathing hard and talking very fast. “But then he started thinking about who he was meeting.”

“Who?” Eric asked. He was closely monitoring the scent of the Were, hyperaware of the fact that Octavia’s potion wouldn’t cover his own scent if the Were got to within ten feet of him.

Sookie took a deep, shaky breath. “Felipe is coming to visit King Sampson tonight. Sampson has a ranch nearby, and the Weres meeting the one that’s here are some of Felipe’s guards. They are going to discuss security. I heard him—his name’s Ray, by the way—thinking this while I was at the counter, paying for my coffee. The problem was that he was waiting right outside the door, smoking a cigarette. I figured I could just wait inside and be inconspicuous until he came in; then I planned to slip out. But then Ray decided to skip the damned pie!” she said with exasperation. “He decided to wait for Felipe’s people outside so that he could keeping smoking.” She paused. “Eric, that’s when I really fucked up.”

“What happened?” the vampire asked as the Were, Ray, drew nearer to the car, his pace of
approach now deliberate. Eric was certain that Ray was now in range and could smell him.

“I figured that I should just leave the café as inconspicuously as possible and go to the car,” Sookie whispered, “before the others got here. So I tried to be casual. I took my coffee and started for the car, but the idiot Were likes redheads, so he noticed me. And that was when I saw a picture of me in his head.”

“What do you mean—a picture of you?” Eric asked.

Sookie let out another haggard breath. “In his truck, Ray has a poster with our pictures on it. It lists my height, weight, eye color—everything! It says I’m telepathic. And it even describes my scent! He’s been,” she cringed, “giving himself physical pleasure while looking at my picture.”

Eric growled.

Sookie went on. “Ray’s first thought when he saw me was that it was ME—Sookie Stackhouse—only better because I was a redhead. But then he recalled that the girl in the picture he has is dead. And it’s only the vampire in the poster that they’re still looking for. He was disappointed, but then he decided that he was gonna approach me anyway—if only to—uh—have some fun with me. Ray reckoned that he’d be able to do whatever he wanted with me ’cause the owners here are scared of the biker group he belongs to. They don’t know they’re Were, but they do know they’re bad news. Ray figured that all he had to do was get me to his truck where he’s got chloroform and some of that date rape drug in the glove compartment. He was gonna force me to take some of it and then use the chloroform to knock me out. You see—he’s done stuff like this to other women too! Once I was unconscious, he was just gonna go on with his meeting; he planned to ‘play’ with me after it was over,” Sookie added with fear and disgust. “And then he’d dump me in the woods a few miles from here. Apparently, between the chloroform and the date rape drug, the girls he’s done this to before don’t remember a thing about what’s happened to them! And—since most of them are just passing through and are traveling by themselves—they just get into their cars and move on!”

Again, the vampire growled.

“After hearing this from Ray’s thoughts—seeing what he wanted to do with me—I turned around and came back into the café,” Sookie continued. “But my coming back inside made him suspicious of me again. He started to wonder if I actually could be the ‘Sookie Stackhouse’ they’d originally been told to look for. With that in mind, he decided not to come into the café after me; he figured that—if I really was a telepath—I would be able to know what he was thinkin’ and maybe sneak out. He decided it would be best to find my car and wait next to it in order to make sure I can’t get to it. Then—when the others get here—he thinks they can surround me and get me.”

“Sookie calm down. It’s okay,” Eric said when it sounded like Sookie might hyperventilate from her fear and from speaking too quickly to breathe properly. “Take a breath, min älskade.”

He heard her take a deep breath. “It didn’t take Ray long to figure out which car was ours. He noticed that its proportions were a little ‘off.’ And now that he’s realized that a vampire is inside of it, he’s really thinking it’s us! What should I do? If I zap him, I’ll draw all kinds of attention to myself! But if I don’t, I’ll be a sitting duck when the others get here.” She took another deep breath. “I don’t know what to do, Eric! I had to wake you up!

“It’s okay. I’m glad you woke me, min älskade. Where are you now?” Eric asked.

“In the bathroom,” she responded. “Locked in.”

The vampire inhaled deeply. “The Were is right next to the car now. You are covering your scent
“fully—correct?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“And you put on some of Octavia’s potion too?” he asked.

“Yes—to cover the scent of my things,” she confirmed.

“Good. What is the Were thinking now?” the vampire asked.

“His brain is still churning with the picture of me; he’s wondering what I smell like. He’s wondering what kind of reward he’ll get if we turn out to be us. He hopes that I’ll be the reward.”

Knowing he needed to stay calm for his bonded, Eric held in his growl this time. “It’s going to be okay, Sookie,” he soothed. “Just let me think for a moment.”

“Shit!” she cried.

“What is it?”

“I can hear Ray’s thoughts plain as day, and he’s thinking that he and the other Weres should take the car to King Sampson’s home and cover it with silver netting! Eric. I’m sorry. I don’t know what to do! It’s all my fault that I was spotted, and now you’re in danger!”

“It is okay, Sookie.” He heard her beginning to sob more uncontrollably. “Sookie!” he said sharply, almost harshly.

“Yes?” she whimpered.

“I need you to be strong right now. I need you, min älskade. You have done nothing wrong. And you need to hold yourself together until we can get out of this. You can fall apart later, Sookie. I swear that you can fall apart when we are safe.”

Through the tie, Eric could feel her building her resolve. He was proud of her—more proud than he’d ever been of anyone. And more frightened than he’d ever been in his long life—frightened for her.

“Okay,” she said. He could hear the scraping of her feet and knew that she was rising.

“Sookie,” he said softly. “When we talked about your scent the other day, you mentioned that you’d been working on scent manipulation with Leonie and Claudine, but you didn’t go into specifics. Can you alter your scent or just enhance it?”

He heard Sookie exhale deeply. “I can manipulate it a little. If I get an imprint from another fairy, I am able to replicate the other fairy’s scent for a few minutes before my own scent comes through. But I can do it only with a fairy and only for a little while, so I didn’t think it would be very useful to us.”

“Sookie, did you get an imprint of Leonie’s scent?”

“Yeah. I practiced with both her and Claudine’s scents.”

“Good. I need you to do exactly as I say. Can you do that?”

She didn’t answer, but Eric could feel her resolve, and the slight whishing of her hair told him that she was nodding in affirmation.
“Good girl,” he said. “First, I need you to wipe down the bathroom—any place you touched, including the outer doorknob. Do that part first.”

“Wipe down?” she asked.

“Yes. Wet a paper towel and then wash the surfaces you may have touched. You are trying to remove fingerprints.”

“Okay,” Sookie said.

Eric heard the sound of water running as she began her task.

“Is there a camera in the café?” Eric asked, ready to dial Brady if there was.

“No. I didn’t see one,” Sookie said. “It’s a busy café, but it’s not that big; it’s owned by a family—not the kind of place that usually has a camera.”

“We need to be sure,” Eric instructed. “I need you to use the fairy kind of telepathy—like you practiced on Elina. I need you to find the manager of the café and go into his head. You need to confirm that there’s not a camera.”

Eric heard Sookie inhale and exhale several times. He could feel her intense concentration; he could also feel the effort she was exerting, for this kind of telepathic exercise was new to her.

“There’s not a camera,” she said after a couple of minutes. “Eric,” she said in a panic, “the Were!”

“I know. I heard the call he made, Sookie,” the vampire said. While Sookie had been rifling through the manager’s head, the Were had called the others he was meeting. He’d relayed the license plate number of the car Eric was in and had told them about the situation, though he’d—thankfully—not mentioned that he thought that the woman inside might be the supposedly dead girl on the poster. Eric hoped that Ray would keep this theory to himself—lest the others think he was letting his imagination get the best of him. More likely, however, Ray was just waiting until he saw the other Weres to give them that information. Ray had finished the call by asking the others for their estimated time of arrival. Eric had not been able to hear their answer. “How long?” he asked Sookie.

“Five minutes until they get here,” Sookie said, even as her body shook. “They told Ray to stay put where he was.”

“Okay,” Eric said. “You’re doing great. I need you to keep a tight rein on your own scent, even as you wash off Octavia’s potion. Then I need you to take on Leonie’s scent. Amp it up, min älskade—as much as you can. The Were and I need to be able to smell it all the way out here.”

Eric immediately heard the water turn on and thirty seconds later, he smelled an exquisite scent—totally fairy and completely unlike Sookie’s scent.

“Good,” Eric said. “I can smell you. Now—when I tell you to do it, I need you to pop into this car.”

“Eric, I don’t know if I can be that accurate with where I end up,” she said nervously. “And I’ve never carried anything other than my clothes. I have my purse and keys with me.”

“You will do it,” Eric said confidently. “Those things are small, no different than the clothes on your back. Get ready. And bring the coffee you got if you can. It may have your prints and DNA on it.”
“Eric—I’m scared. The Were is right next to the car.”

“I know,” Eric said. “Just a moment or two longer, and he will smell you.”

Eric’s hands were balled into fists as he, too, waited. The Were was slightly upwind from where Eric lay. However, the Viking knew that the scent Sookie was projecting would hit him soon—despite the fact that he’d just lit another cigarette.

“He’s trying to call someone else,” Sookie whispered. “His packmaster. But it’s gone to voicemail. He’s told the machine that he might need back-up. Now, he’s hung up and is trying another number.”

“What are his thoughts?” Eric asked.

“He’s thinking—over and over—about how I look like the girl on the poster. He’s wondering if you are the vampire in the car. He’s wondering if the girl in the picture has a twin sister. He’s wondering again if he will be allowed to keep me as a prize. He wants to—uh—do things to me.” Her voice trailed off.

Eric growled, low and visceral. “He will not touch you, min älskade. I swear it.”

“Eric,” she whispered, “he’s picked up my scent. He doesn’t know what it is for sure. But he’s being drawn inside. He’s coming.”

Eric monitored the Were carefully as the creature moved toward his bonded.

His bonded!

His!

The vampire wanted to tear the Were limb from limb, but he was trapped in the car by the sun. Once the Were was twenty feet from where Sookie was hiding in the restroom, he spoke. “Now, Sookie. Come to me now.”

“Eric, I’m trying,” Sookie said into the Bluetooth. “I’m trying and nothing is happening. Oh God, he’s at the door, twisting the knob,” she said in a whisper.

“Turn off the scent,” Eric said. If Ray got to Sookie, the vampire didn’t want the Were to be in a frenzy.


Eric heard a raised voice and loud knocking from the Were, who was now threatening to kick in the door. He could also tell that humans had been disturbed by the Were’s loud banging and were rushing to him. The vampire hoped that would buy them some time.

“Sookie,” Eric said as gently as he could, “come to my side. Think of me—only me. Think of our bond. Can you feel it?”

“Yes,” she said.

Eric could feel her fear as if it were his own.

“You ran to me in the Dallas church, Sookie. You took those silver chains off of me. Come to me again, min älskade.”
In the next moment, Eric heard a popping noise. He felt through the tie that she was in the driver’s seat. He heard her breathing even though he couldn’t smell her.

“Drive, Sookie,” he said into the Bluetooth.

“Okay,” she responded, though panting and obviously tired because of teleporting.

“Get on Interstate 40 and go east,” he instructed. “De Castro’s people will be coming from the west.”

“Okay,” she said, this time a little louder. “Eric, I . . . .”

He could feel her guilt rising.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, min älskade,” he said, interrupting her. “You were perfect. You chose the perfect place to stop. You did right in trying to leave as you did. And then you used your gifts perfectly—your telepathy, your scent control, and your teleporting. You did everything right, Sookie, and we’re going to be fine,” he added firmly.

She was breathing more steadily now, and the intense fear was beginning to leave her. “Will you go back to sleep now?” she asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Min älskade,” he started cautiously, “they have our license plate number and will be looking for you.”

Immediately, her fear ratcheted back up.

“We will be fine,” Eric reiterated. “I am already planning what’s to be done. I’m going to call Leonie for help. I want you to keep heading east until you get to Highway 93. Then go south. That highway will take us to Phoenix. If Felipe is visiting, then Sampson will likely have most of his people in the north today, so we’ll go south.”

“Okay,” Sookie said.

“It will be okay. I’ll be talking to Leonie for a few minutes, but I will leave on the Bluetooth so that you can hear my end of things. Keep your telepathy stretched out as far as you can, and tell me if you pick up anyone following us.”

“Okay,” Sookie whimpered a little.

“We will be fine, min älskade.”

“You keep calling me that. What does it mean?”

“What?” he asked.

“Min älskade.”

“Min äskare?” he asked.

“No—with a ‘d,’ I think.”
Eric hadn’t even been conscious that he’d been calling her that and wondered if she could be mistaking the pronunciation. Min älskade meant my beloved one. It meant that he loved her. He’d called her his lover before, but the word for that in Swedish was älskare.

“What does it mean?” she asked again.

“It means that you are my woman, Sookie,” he responded intensely, not able to tell her what it really meant—not able to say it out loud—still wondering if he felt it.

Sookie didn’t say anything at his words, but he felt a little surge of happiness from her, even through her nerves.

In turn, he felt his own pang of happiness too. When he’d heard her say that she belonged to Bill the first night he met her, he’d hated the thought of her belonging to anyone at all—hated the thought of her being tethered. Now he knew that he hated the thought of her belonging to anyone—other than him. And he also knew that he would never tether her.

Eric took out his phone and dialed the number Leonie had given to him. He’d already committed it to memory.

“Hello?” came a chipper female voice.

“It is Northman,” Eric said.

Immediately, the fairy’s tone changed. “It is the day. What has happened?”

Eric explained the situation to Leonie, even as he felt Sookie get off the Interstate and head south.

“Eric!” Sookie exclaimed, as soon as they were on the other highway.

“What is it, Sookie?” the vampire asked, pausing in his conversation with Leonie.

“When I turned off, I heard them. They know this is the car from the café, and they are following me. They just weren’t close enough for me to hear until we exited the Interstate!”

Eric inhaled deeply. He couldn’t smell them, so he knew that they must be staying pretty far back, though being in his car coffin and struggling to stay awake certainly impeded his range.

“Can you hear them now?” he asked.

“No. There is a part-human with them,” Sookie responded. “That’s the only one I heard, but now he’s too far away again.”

“What can you tell me?”

“They have been told to follow, but not be seen. Ray is catching up, and others from his pack want to catch up too. There are a few ahead of us, and they intend to join the others in following me until I have to stop. Then they are going to surround me and take the car.”

“How much gas is in the car?” he asked.

“About half a tank—a little under half a tank.”

“So we have some time, min älskade. Just keep driving—okay?” This time he registered it as he spoke the endearment; again, he’d not intended to say it, but there is was—like a beacon to his unconscious mind.
“Okay.”

“Okay,” he said, before returning to his conversation with Leonie. “We will definitely be needing your aid now. Can you teleport to Sookie?”

“No,” the elder fairy answered, the concern thick in her tone. She’d obviously picked up on what was now happening through the Bluetooth conversation he’d had with Sookie. Eric made a mental note never to say anything he wanted to conceal when a fairy was nearby. Their hearing likely surpassed even his own.

Leonie continued. “I am not skilled in teleporting to people I have known—just to places. Claudine was able to find Sookie and teleport to her because she is a strong empath, which means her teleportation skills are maximized when it comes to people she shares a blood connection with. Neither mine nor Claude’s empathy is that strong.”

“Can we get Claudine here?”

“Not in time,” Leonie said. “The time difference has swung even farther. Right now, a few seconds there is months here. So even if I could pop to Faerie and go right to Claudine, it wouldn’t help.”

“How, specifically, do your teleportation skills work?” Eric asked. “If I give you a place, can you teleport there?”

“No. Most fairies can teleport only to where they have physically been before—somewhere that they have ‘imprinted’ themselves onto. Or we can be taken to a location by another. Wait a moment!” she exclaimed as she seemed to get an idea. Eric could make out muffled voices in the background, but couldn’t make out the language being spoken. “You are in Arizona—right?” her voice came back.

“Yes. We are heading toward Phoenix.”

Leonie spoke with someone else again—again in the fairy language. “Claude lives outside of Palm Springs part of the time. He has a home to the east of the city and a fast car. He can teleport us there, and we can be in Phoenix in three and a half hours. There is a small airport in Palm Springs, but making flight arrangements would take even longer than driving.”

“We are less than three hours away from Phoenix,” Eric said.

“Then slow down. Call me again in half an hour with the plan. We’ll be on our way to you by then.” Leonie disconnected the call.

“Sookie,” Eric said, “slow down.”

“Huh?” she asked.

“Drive seven miles under the speed limit,” he said, doing some quick math in his head.

“Um, okay,” Sookie said. “But won’t they get suspicious?”

“Maybe,” Eric said, “but slow down anyway. Just keep yourself open to their thoughts and let me know if their plans change.”

“Eric?” she asked.

“Sookie?” he returned, trying to keep his tone light.
“What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to stall.”
Chapter 34

Chapter 34: Running on Empty

Looking out at the road rushing under my wheels
I don’t know how to tell you all just how crazy this life feels
I look around for the friends that I used to turn to to pull me through
Looking into their eyes I see them running too
Running on – running on empty
Running on – running blind
Running on – running into the sun
But I’m running behind
—lyrics from “Running on Empty” by Jackson Browne

FLASHBACK, CONTINUED

Sookie was nervous—very nervous. They were circling Phoenix, hoping to stall their confrontation with the Weres so that Leonie and Claude would be able to help them.

“Calm down,” Eric said, for what must have been the thousandth time.

“Eric!” she said with warning in her tone. “I’m nervous. And I’m scared. And there are at least ten Weres behind us—and a flippin’ Weretiger! And our plan is half-based on the idea that I will be able to sustain my light powers. And we’re almost out of gas, so we won’t be able to do another lap around the city! And that means they’ll catch up with us BEFORE my freakin’ fairy great-grandmother or godmother or whatever gets there! And I have to pee like a race horse! Oh—and I’m pre-menstrual!”

There was a low growl into the Bluetooth and the sparks that she felt when Eric was awake got a little stronger.

“Menstrual blood,” Eric rumbled. “Lover, you have made my day—and nobody’s made my day in a thousand years.”

Sookie gasped. “Eric!” she yelled. “Gross!”

“What?” Eric said innocently into the Bluetooth. “I love your blood. I love your pussy. It will be like the best of everything I love!”

“Eric!” she said warningly.

“Now we must live!” he said, trying to sound playful. “I will not miss the time of your menses.”
“Eric!” she said again, this time laughing a little. She couldn’t help herself. The mixture of his playfulness and his sincere excitement was a combination that she couldn’t be upset with. And—truthfully—she needed to laugh a little. Just so she wouldn’t cry.

“How long do your menses last, lover?” he purred. His tone of voice vibrated in such a way that her core throbbed as well.

“Eric,” she half-warned and half-whimpered.

“How long?” he asked again.

“Three days,” she responded. “Sometimes four.”

“Mmmm. Will you let me taste you during that time, lover? Will you let me distract you from any discomfort you feel?”

“Eric, that’s just . . . .” she stammered.

“Gross?” he asked. “No. I assure you. For a vampire, it is nice. The blood is rich and flavorful. In fact, I am certain that the presence of a menstrual cycle is one of the main reasons why Pam prefers women.”

“Eric,” Sookie warned again. He could feel her embarrassment. “I’m not gonna talk about this.”

“Are you blushing?” he asked in his panty-melting tone.

She looked in the rearview mirror. She was as red as a tomato. “No!” she said firmly.

“Are you lying?” he followed up, playful again.

“Yes,” she admitted with a snort of exasperation.

“Would you like to hear about how my human people viewed a woman’s menses?”

“Are you trying to distract me?” she asked. “Distract me from the three cars of Weres following me?”

“Yes,” he responded.

“Fine!” she said.

She could hear the smile in his voice as he began. “Of course, the Vikings knew that a woman’s menses was a sign of fertility, so the women of my village would sometimes bury the cloth they used to capture the flow of their blood at the four corners of our crops in order to spur their growth and to protect them.”

“That’s so . . . .” Sookie started.

“Gross?” Eric chuckled. “The menses were simply a part of life to my people. As with sex and nudity, there was no shame in the menstrual cycle. Why would there be? During the time of her menses, a woman was thought to be at her full power, and when someone was injured or ill, it was seen as lucky to have a menstruating woman caring for him or her.”

Sookie laughed ruefully. “Didn’t the women of your time have cramps? And mood swings?”

“Of course,” Eric said, the smile returning to his tone. Sookie could imagine the twinkle in his
eyes as he spoke. “My father stayed well away from my mother during the first day of her menses. And I got many a broom to the side of my head because I didn’t learn that lesson until well into my teen years.”

Sookie’s laugh was genuine now. “I think I would have liked your mother.”

She heard Eric’s sigh. “She would have been happy to see me settled with a woman—though she would be disappointed that it took a thousand years.”

“Are you settled with me, Eric?”

“Yes,” he said quietly.

“And are you settling? Settling for something you didn’t really want?”

“No,” he said softly, but quickly. Again, the little electric sparks got stronger in her body. She was starting to recognize that they did that when Eric was feeling something strongly. She didn’t allow herself to contemplate what his current feelings might be, but it comforted her that those emotions were strong.

“What was her name? Your mother?”

“Astrid.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” she smiled. “And your dad?”

“Ulfrick.”

“Your baby sister?”

“Ástridr.”

“Your name seems so—uh—ordinary in comparison.”

He chuckled. “I modernized my name many years ago. In my human days, I was called Eiríkr.”

“Eiríkr,” she repeated. “I love that.”

“You have a good accent,” he complimented.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile. “When did you change your name?”

“I’ve changed my name many times to fit the times and places in which I’ve lived. Godric called me Eiríkr throughout most of my life. And I became Eric Northman in about 1700—though that was just to vampires. In the human world, I have had many, many names. I let myself be ‘Eric Northman’ to everyone after the Great Revelation.”

“Eiríkr,” she whispered again. “It suits you better than ‘Eric’—it sounds like you.”

“Why?”

“It sounds—uh—old.”

He chuckled. “Thanks.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”
“I know.”

There were several moments of silence between them.

“Sookie?”

“I know,” she said again.

“You will be coming up on the exit soon,” he said. “South 7th Street.”

“I saw a sign for it. Two miles until the exit,” she said.

“Sookie, Leonie texted. They will not be far behind us. And you will be able to hold them off until she and Claude get there.”

“Okay,” Sookie said, though her nerves and her fear had ratcheted back up. “Remind me again why I can’t just drive to the nearest police station?”

“Brady has discovered that many of the policemen in this state are on the payroll of King Sampson. And there are many Weres on the force too.”

Sookie sighed.

“How much gas do you have?” he asked.

“It’s on empty,” she whimpered. “Below the empty line.”

“It will be enough,” he said. “Not much farther.”

Sookie steeled herself and tried to push back her fear. Eric needed her. She thought about the last several hours. As they’d been driving, they’d considered many scenarios: some involving Sookie trying to get help from the police, some where she drove to crowded places, and one where she even drove to the main headquarters of that state’s Fellowship of the Sun. Eric had spent time on the phone with Brady and then had talked to Elina, trying to figure out if there were any ‘friendly’ Weres in Arizona—anyone else who could be trusted to help them. However, they’d been able to find no potential allies in the state of Felipe’s child.

After that, everything became a matter of timing as Eric’s plan came together. And that plan centered around two simple truths: the car was going to run out of gas, and that was going to happen well before sunset.

Luckily, Eric and Sookie had several things working in their favor. First, the Weres didn’t—as a whole—think that she was ‘Sookie Stackhouse.’ The first Were she’d encountered at the café, Ray, had—at a certain point—relayed to the others that she looked ‘similar’ to the telepath in the pictures that had been circulated around the kingdom beginning the night after Sookie and Eric’s disappearance from the hospital. Ray was beginning to doubt his own theory, however. Apparently, Ray had encountered a fairy before, and the Fae scent at the café had altered his idea about whom he’d seen. So that meant that Russell likely hadn’t told his allies, Felipe and Sampson, that Sookie was a fairy—just that she smelled sweeter than most humans.

Once other cars had joined the little Were convoy behind Eric and Sookie, their pursuers had become a little more brazen—though they’d not opted to attract attention by forcing Sookie off the road or anything. However, they had gotten closer to the Prius, one of the cars even passing Sookie so that the occupant—a fucking Weretiger—could try to get a better look inside the vehicle. Of course, the windows of the car, which had become darker in the bright Arizona sun, had prevented
As the Weretiger had passed the Prius, Sookie had gotten a good look at him, but his thoughts told her that he couldn’t really see her. In that moment, Sookie had become extremely fond of Eric’s love of technology—and his carefulness. The cars behind her settled into a kind of rotation after that. Most of the Weres were convinced that she was unaware of them following her—despite the fact that she’d basically “circled” the city twice.

So—at least—that was good.

Also good was the fact that one of the vehicles in the Weres’ convoy, an SUV carrying five Werewolves, had been forced to stop for gas several miles back—lowering the total number she was hearing from sixteen to eleven: ten Weres and one Weretiger.

“You will turn onto East Washington Street soon,” Eric said. “Tell me the plan.”

Sookie took a deep breath. “I’m going to the parking garage on Washington and 1st Street.”

“How do you get there?”

“From Washington, I’ll turn left when I get to 1st. The garage entrance will be on my right.”

“Good,” Eric said.

Sookie tried to keep her breathing even. “How far away are Claude and Leonie.”

“Tell me the rest of the plan,” Eric said instead.

Sookie closed her eyes and looked over her shoulder as she stopped at a red light. It was the first time she’d stopped in hours. She felt her fear rising.

“Sookie!” Eric said insistently. “Tell me the plan.”

“Brady,” she said.

“What about him?”

“He found a parking garage that doesn’t have working cameras.”

“And?”

“And I’m going to drive into it.”

“And?”

“After I’m in the garage, I’ll turn to the right.”

“Why?”

“The lower level of the garage is usually closed off on weekdays, but Brady bribed the attendants, so the gate to the lower level will be open.”

“Yes,” Eric said. “Then?”

“I’m going to drive as fast as I can until I reach the southwest corner of the garage. That should be the darkest place.”
“Then what?”

“As soon as I park, I’m going to pop out of the car.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to crouch in front of the car—in the corner.”

“Then what?”

“When they come at me, I’m gonna hit them with everything I have until Claude and Leonie get here.”

“Damned right you are!”

“Eric, I’m scared.”

“I know.”

“How far away are Leonie and Claude?”

“They will be there five to seven minutes after we get there.”

Sookie exhaled a shaky breath and looked at the gas gauge. She couldn’t risk running out of gas by circling the parking garage a few times. She needed to get underground—just in case. The Weretiger had been thinking about simply ripping the car open in the sunlight. He was curious to know what vampire was inside—and anxious to kill “it.” According to Brady, the level of the parking garage they were going to would have very little light, though there were a few windows on the sides of the structure. The corner would give them the most cover.

She made the turn onto East Washington and watched the cross street numbers become lower and lower, like a countdown.

Eric listened to Sookie’s breathing in stereo—both through the Bluetooth and through his enclosure.

Of course, he could also feel her fear through their blood tie, and he could tell that she was having to concentrate on not hyperventilating. Eric lamented that there was little that he could do to make her feel better.

“I used to feel what you are feeling before a battle,” he said into the Bluetooth.

He heard her breathing catch a little.

“Tell me,” she whispered.

“I would always feel fear before I fought; it was how I knew that I was ready to hang on to my life with both hands. But I feel more than fear inside of you, min älskade. I feel your resolve and your courage. So I know that in the moment of the fight, your fear will fall away.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you are a warrior, Sookie Stackhouse. To protect yourself and to protect those you care about, you will do what you must. And you will be ruthless as you do it.”

“You told me something like that in the first dream I ever had with you,” she said.
“It is the truth. I have always seen the fight in your eyes—the strength. But I still need you to promise me that you will flee if you must.”

“I can’t do that, Eric,” she said.

“I need you to promise me,” he said urgently. “I must know that you are safe.”

Sookie sighed. He’d been trying to get her to promise that she would run—that she would teleport away—if her light wasn’t enough to hold the Weres off. “But if I leave you, they might take you away or—worse—they might just try to open your cubby.”

“I have told you that they cannot,” Eric assured. “And you are just to hold them off for a little while—until Leonie and Claude arrive. The Weres won’t be able to remove the car without a tow truck of some kind. Leonie and Claude will be there before that could happen.”

They both felt a lurch as the car choked sluggishly on the small amount of gas it still had left.

Sookie immediately tensed.

“Where are we?” Eric asked. He had his phone set to GPS and had their exact location pinpointed, but he wanted confirmation.

“Stopped at the light on Washington and 2nd,” she answered. “One block away.”

After the light turned, Sookie pushed the accelerator, and the car moved forward. Eric heard Sookie’s sigh of relief. It was short-lived, however, as the car sputtered again. Sookie increased her speed, despite the car’s protest.

“I gotta make this green light,” she said to herself.

Eric didn’t protest her decision to use the remaining gas to avoid the light. In addition, if she barely caught it, the Weres would not. He felt the car turn left and then slow down.

“God—that was close,” Sookie breathed.

“Promise me, min älskade,” he said once more. “You must stay safe for me.”

“I promise,” she whispered.

Sookie pulled into the parking garage, and—as promised—the gate to the right had been lowered. Also—as promised—there was no attendant present as she drove into the garage.

Eric looked at the most recent text he’d gotten from Leonie. He knew that Claude was driving as fast as he dared, but there was some traffic at this time of day, and that had slowed the fairies down. They might be longer than seven minutes now.

Eric felt the car making more turns, and they seemed to be going lower. Suddenly, the car stuttered violently and then died.

“Shit!” Sookie exclaimed, trying to start the car again. The engine turned over, but the car did not start.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“In the middle of the lower level, but there’s sunlight here,” she said desperately. “It’s like it’s coming directly into the side windows because of the time of day. Eric—it’s right over us like a
fucking spotlight!” Her breathing had become faster.

The vampire ran through contingencies. In the middle of the garage, Sookie would be exposed and vulnerable. Though his cubby was pretty much impenetrable, the rest of the car wasn’t. Had she made it to the corner of the garage, she would have had some cover and could have fired at the Were using the car and the wall as her shields. But, now, things had changed.

“They’re coming,” Sookie said desperately.

Eric heard tires and brakes. “Look around, Sookie!” he said urgently. “Do you see anywhere you could teleport that would give you cover—where they couldn’t see you?”

“What about you?” she asked.

“They will sniff around the car for a while if you are gone. Leonie and Claude will come soon.”

“No!” Sookie said insistently. “I didn’t like that plan the first time you said it a hundred miles ago. I’m not leaving you like a sitting duck while I pop to safety.”

“You will have no cover here, Sookie,” Eric said. “They will get into this car, and when that happens, things will come to a head quickly. You will not be able to hold them off because they will come from all sides. Look now!” He ordered, “Do you see any cover?”

At the firmness in Eric’s tone, Sookie looked around the space. “Yes,” she whispered. “I can see some old crates and supplies in the corner.”

“I need you to pop yourself over there and then hide behind them.”

“Eric,” she said.

“Sookie, please.” He heard more tires screeching. “You must be safe. Keep the Bluetooth on.”

“Eric,” she said again.

“Please. Go!”

“Eric, I need to tell you something—just in case something happens to us.”

“Nothing will happen, min älskade. Now, please, go. Be safe. Now, Sookie, please. I need you to go! NOW!”

The vampire heard a popping noise and knew that Sookie had done as he’d asked.

The air in the car coffin was stale since the space was sealed up. But Eric purposefully took a long breath of it into his lungs and then pushed it out. And then he said a prayer for Sookie’s safety.

The air hadn’t been needed.

The prayer had been.
Chapter 35: The Measure

“The measure of who we are is what we do with what we have.”—Vince Lombardi

FLASHBACK CONTINUED

“Are you secure behind the supplies?” Eric asked Sookie moments after she’d ‘popped’ out of the car.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He heard quite a few vehicle doors opening and slamming, and he smelled the odors of eleven different creatures, most of them werewolves, though the Weretiger was among them.

“They parked a little away from the car,” Sookie whispered into the Bluetooth—too far away to be picking up your scent yet. They think I am ducked down in the car; even with their enhanced vision, they can’t see much through the tinted windows.”

“Good,” Eric returned. “You are far enough away so that they cannot hear you speaking?” he asked.

“They can’t hear me,” she confirmed. “I’m on the other side of the garage, but I can see their cars and our car. They are crouched behind their vehicles making a plan.”

“Okay.”

“The one in charge is named Quinn,” she said.

“He is the Weretiger?” Eric asked for confirmation. There were few Weretigers left in the world, and he’d heard of John Quinn, who used to be unbeatable in the fighting pits in Nevada.

“Yes. He is de Castro’s head of Were security, so the others are letting him take the lead. Plus,” she paused, “they are intimidated by him. I haven’t been able to fully see him yet, but in the minds of the others, he’s huge.”

“Keep listening,” Eric said. “And tell me when they have a plan.”

There was a minute or two of silence.

“They are going to circle the car and break in,” Sookie said desperately.

Eric heard several banging sounds as if the lids of the cargo spaces of the other vehicles had been opened and then shut.

“They have crowbars and one has a gun,” Sookie said. “Quinn just told that guy from the café, Ray, that he could—uh—have me—uh . . . ” She stopped and let out a little sob.

“What is it, min älskade?”

“Quinn said that Ray could have me first. Oh God, Eric! Some of them are planning to—rape me,”
she stammered, her fear causing her voice to quiver. “They have never seen a fairy before, but they want to—try—me before the vampires rise.”

Eric’s growl was low as Sookie continued. “They are joking that it is better to ask for forgiveness than permission from the vampires, which is why they plan to do it now. They are afraid that their chance to have a fairy will be lost after the vampires rise for the night. From their minds I can tell that only three of them don’t plan to join in. Two of the Weres think it’s wrong to violate a woman, but are afraid to go against the ‘mob mentality.’ Quinn isn’t planning to join in either. Oh God,” she said, “his own mother was gang-raped. But he is thinking about how rabid the wolves in the group are after such a long pursuit. And to keep control of them, he has agreed to let them do whatever they want to me—as long as I’m not permanently damaged.”

“That will not happen, Sookie,” Eric said in a low voice. A dangerous voice. “You will stay hidden no matter what. They will not find you.”

He received another text from Leonie. They’d just gotten off the freeway. From there, it had taken Sookie and him six minutes to get to the parking garage.

As the Weres closed in on the Prius, Eric said another quick prayer for his bonded, this time praying to Odin, the All-father.

All at once, the car was under attack from all sides as metal hit metal.

“Where the fuck is she?” one of the Werewolves yelled.

“I don’t see her in the car,” another shouted. “Did she have time to escape before y’all got here?”

“No!” came another voice. “We pulled in not thirty seconds after her, and I’m positive I saw her moving in there—looking around. Then she ducked down. So she’s gotta be in here.”

“Are you certain she smelled of fairy?” Quinn asked Ray.

“I’ve told you a thousand times—yes!” Ray responded with a snarl. “I know fairy!”

Eric committed both of their voices to his memory. And he committed the smells of every single one of the Weres to his memory too. They would die at his hands—no matter how long it took or how far he would need to track them.

John Quinn could smell the vampire in the car now that he was practically on top of it. His sense of smell was usually much more acute, but there was something else in the air as well—magic.

Quinn examined the vehicle and then the Werewolves surrounding it. All of them had been worked into a frenzy during their pursuit across Arizona. It had been Quinn’s idea to simply follow the woman in the suspicious car until she was forced to stop, which had been only a matter of time. He’d wanted to give the vampires time to awaken for the night. He’d figured that that was the only way the woman could remain “unsoiled.”

But that wasn’t possible now.

He’d been surprised when the woman had pulled into the parking garage. And now he felt unease, his senses telling him that the location of their stop had been premeditated by their quarry—that they might have fallen for some kind of ambush. Despite the fact that they were in the middle of Phoenix, they were alone. The parking garage’s basement level had clearly been shut down for the day.
“I don’t fucking see her!” Ray snarled, his eyes turning yellow with unquenched desire.

Quinn nodded in the direction of the surly-looking Werewolf. Ray had been the one who had first seen the woman, the one who had put out an alert that he’d seen someone who looked a lot like the woman they’d all been searching for a few weeks before: one Sookie Stackhouse. However, according to Ray, the woman had been a redhead and appeared a little older than the age that had been given to them for Miss Stackhouse. Quinn had tried to get a look at the woman once he’d caught up to the little convoy following her, but the side windows of the Prius were too tinted for that.

Now, he peered into the windshield, which was much less tinted, but he saw no one. The other Weres in his group were also looking baffled.

Quinn motioned toward one of the Weres to use his crowbar to break the glass of the hatchback. The first strike of the crowbar didn’t shatter the glass, and the Werewolves got even more riled up because of that. The Weretiger wished that he could have picked a more controlled team.

Hundreds of miles before, they had made clear their desire to have their way with the woman. And even though Quinn thought that was detestable on a personal level—due to what had happened to his mom—he knew well what the supernatural world was like. The fact that Quinn hated it didn’t matter; he was a part of it—a big part, given his place in de Castro’s regime.

“Goddammit!” one of the Weres yelled. “This goddamned glass won’t shatter!”

“Give it to me!” insisted Ray. Swinging as hard as he could, the Were broke through the glass and opened the hatchback using the inner latch. Immediately some of the Werewolves began trying to break into the encasement which held the vampire. Others crawled into the backseat of the vehicle, looking for the girl.

“Where is she?” Ray yelled.

Quinn growled and peered closer into the car. “Fan out!” the Weretiger ordered. “Find her! We’ll deal with the vamp later! It’s still hours until nightfall!”

Sookie heard Quinn give the order for the others to search for her both with her ears and from his mind.

“Just stay where you are and keep down,” Eric whispered through the Blue Tooth. She nodded though she knew that he wouldn’t be able to see her response.

Sookie shook as the Weres began their search. Their thoughts—so twisted, but amplified because they were all thinking about her and because she’d drunk Eric’s blood lately—made her nauseated, just as her uncle’s had done so many years before.

“They’re coming,” Sookie whispered as she picked up a thought from Quinn that they should investigate the corner that she was in. “And I’m not sure I can teleport again—not so soon after the last time.”

“Then you will fight them, min älskade.”

“Okay,” she said, her hands already rising but also shaking violently.

Eric’s whole body was shaking in his enclosure. As advertised, his encasement had not been damaged when the Weres tried to break in, but that was the least of his worries. Truth be told, he
wished that the rabid Weres had kept trying. That would have kept them busy.

He used his senses to track each of the ten Weres looking for Sookie. And the Weretiger.

Their scents and sounds were a sea of information for him.

Adrenaline. Testosterone. Endorphins.

Sweat.

Faster, harder heartbeats.

Thudding footsteps—slower at first and then faster. Seeking. Searching.

Relentless.

And then a howl.

Eric closed his eyes. That could mean only one thing: Sookie had been found.

He heard the unmistakable whizzes of Sookie’s Fae light hitting its targets. One, two, three, four, five times. Whizz. Thump. Yelp.

And then a scream. Sookie’s!

His bonded’s.

“Eric! They have me!” she yelled, her voice filled with terror. “Oh, God! No! No! No!”

It was not even close to nightfall. There were still at least five uninjured Weres. And the Weretiger. Eric closed his eyes for a split second. Leonie and Claude were coming, but he couldn’t be sure about the when. They were already past their estimated time of arrival by twenty seconds.

What if they had caught all the fucking red lights in Phoenix?!

“Stop fighting, bitch!” came a yell.

Then Eric heard a punch and felt Sookie’s pain. And then there was a rip of clothing—hers.

Sookie let out a bloodcurdling scream.

In the next instant, Eric was out of his box. He knew that being raped—being defiled by both the bodies and the thoughts of multiple Weres—would kill Sookie in a way that was more fundamental than physical death. And—as her bonded—he would not fucking allow that!

Immediately the light of the sun began to scald his skin, but Eric didn’t care. He figured he’d have a good forty seconds before he became a liability to Sookie, and he planned to make the most of them.

Quinn watched powerlessly as Ray ripped the pretty young woman’s shirt and bra. He couldn’t get a real good look at her face, but he could tell that she was lovely, and—though redheads were not to his taste—he couldn’t help but to appreciate the set of tits that were exposed, even as he judged the one who had exposed them.

“Hold her!” Ray yelled to the Werewolf next to him.
Though growling and obviously impatient for his own turn, the second wolf complied. Quinn stepped back—just hoping at this point that the girl would live, even if she didn’t want to.

In the next moment, there was a whirr that went by him faster than a jet plane. And in the next instant, Quinn saw blood—a lot of blood as Ray’s head was torn from his shoulders. Quinn had barely registered the fact that a slightly smoldering Eric Northman was in their presence before he heard two more necks snap. The redhead fell into the vampire’s arms, and he lay her gently onto the concrete floor before ripping another head from its shoulders. More heads followed.

A battle cry—a yell so terrifying and barbaric that Quinn knew it would fill his nightmares for the rest of his life—echoed throughout the parking structure.

Quinn felt as if he were anchored to the ground—unable to move, either to flee or to help the others. He’d seen pictures of the Viking and he’d heard reports of his ferocity, but it was difficult to fathom just what he was seeing: a vampire—fully awake during the day, fighting like a savage, and tearing limbs and heads from bodies. Northman was—in that moment—every inch the berserker! But he was also starting to scald in earnest now, and Quinn was smart enough to back off and let the sun do its work.

However, even as Quinn moved to take cover from the Viking’s wrath, he heard brakes. And then—in the next moment—he felt an impact against his back. He fell onto the floor unconscious.

FORTY SECONDS EARLIER

Sookie’s head hurt badly where she’d been punched by Ray. But that pain was nothing compared to the horror of hearing the thoughts of the rabid Weres.

She registered that her T-shirt and bra had been ripped. And—then she felt Ray’s hands on her. But only for a moment.

And then the Fae bond within her burned brighter than the sun, and she was free.

Strong hands laid her down on cool concrete, and she almost wept with the comforting feeling of both.

She shook her head, trying to clear it a little. She’d successfully shot a few Weres with her light before she’d been captured from behind. After that, she’d tried to teleport away, but she’d been hit from behind before she could muster her energy.

She blinked a few times, hoping the world would come into better focus. Then she planted her hands onto the concrete floor and pushed. Her hands slipped on blood.

A body fell to his knees in front of her. Sookie registered the smell of smoke before she saw it.

Suddenly, she didn’t feel her own pain. As she saw her vampire beginning to burn in front of her, she didn’t notice anything else but him.

Though the slick blood on the floor made it difficult, she managed to half crawl and half slide until she was right in front of Eric.

“Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!” she whimpered as she looked around them for anything to cover her vampire with.

Eric’s eyes were glazed over, the leftover rage and the pain sharing space in them.
She located a tarp and draped it over the both of them, not giving a damn about what was happening around them in that moment. She barely registered that two fairies had joined them in the garage. She heard one crying Were. With her mind, she also quickly registered that the Weretiger, Quinn, was alive but unconscious. All their other enemies had been killed by her or the man in front of her.

“Eric,” she said softly. “Please. Please be okay.”

Eric’s eyes slowly gained recognition, and she could see the stormy midnight blue getting replaced with the lighter shade that had made her fall in love with them.

“Sookie?” he questioned before weakly pulling her into his arms. “You’re safe?”

“Yes. Thanks to you. But you’re burned.”

For the first time, Eric seemed to diagnose that he had, indeed, been hurt. He seemed to consider for a moment, and his face distorted in pure pain as he did. “Sookie, I have to get back into the coffin in the car. I am still picking up some residual light and need . . . .”

His voice trailed off, and suddenly Sookie felt a stirring from inside of herself. Without another thought, she called her light to her more strongly than she’d ever called it before, and she touched her bonded’s chest with that light.

And—along with that touch—she also sent a prayer to God that the man she loved would be okay.
LEONIE POV

Leonie could see the light under the tarp from across the garage. She couldn’t help but to smile to herself a little. Her great-granddaughter was very powerful when motivated. Still, Leonie thought with concern, the vampire should be moved under cover. Despite the tarp and the healing that he’d just gotten from Sookie, it was still daytime.

And he was vulnerable.

She looked at her grandson. “Claude, keep these two secure,” she said, speaking of the Were and the Weretiger who were still living. The Were was just hanging on.

Claude nodded, and then—with curiosity—he looked over to the area where Sookie and Eric were concealed under the tarp. “Lanine dum vampyr nalken jin?” he asked in the language of the Fae.

“Yes,” Leonie responded. “Your cousin has, indeed, healed the vampire. But I imagine he is still weak. She, too, will be weak.”

Claude’s expression displayed a mixture of surprise and mild disapproval.

“Do not be like your grandfather in this,” Leonie scolded, even as she walked toward the tarp. Residual light could still be seen coming from under it.

“Sookie?” she asked.

When she didn’t get an immediate response, Leonie spoke again—this time louder. “Sookie?”

“Yes? I’m here,” her great-granddaughter answered somewhat weakly.

“I know you are there, my dear,” Leonie chuckled. “And so is your vampire, but it would be best if he were not. He should go to his coffin before the ambient sunlight begins to undo the healing you have just given to him.”

“No!” Eric’s voice came gruffly. “I will finish off the men who would have harmed my bonded—or let her be harmed.”

Leonie sighed and glanced over at the captives. The remaining wolf was still crying, but he had good reason. His arm had been practically torn off by the raging vampire. It hung limply by his side by only a tendon or two.

“The wolf that is still breathing is in great pain and will be dead within a few minutes,” she said evenly. “If it is your wish, I can make his remaining time alive even more uncomfortable for him.”

“No, Eric,” Leonie heard Sookie implore her mate.

There was a slight pause. “Kill the Were now,” the vampire said gruffly, reluctantly.

Leonie was just as reluctant to give the animal a quick death, but she nodded toward Claude
nonetheless. Her preference would have been to try to prolong the suffering of the creature who had planned to harm her great-granddaughter and the vampire. However, she understood that Sookie still had a human’s compassion. And Eric—to his credit—seemed to understand that as well.

Claude looked at her with surprise, but then quickly dispatched the Were with his Fae blade.

“The Weretiger was knocked unconscious when Claude hit him with his car,” Leonie informed. “You should consider letting me mesmerize him. Then, he would tell his masters whatever we wish for them to believe.”

Eric sighed. “Fine.”

“You should get to safety now,” Leonie said again. “The tarp is helping, but it is not completely light tight.”

“Sookie will take my blood first,” Eric said, his tone brooking no argument.

Leonie smiled at the thought of the vampire wishing to take care of her kin, even though he was likely still weak himself.

“I will bring your car closer as you strengthen my great-granddaughter,” Leonie said.

“Eric. No!” Sookie said insistently, even as her light continued to brighten the little enclave she’d made with Eric under the tarp. “I won’t take your blood when you need it to heal.”

“Sookie,” he said in a quiet tone. “You will have to drive us out of here, and your head is injured.”

Sookie felt her pain and some lightheadedness return to her at Eric’s words. In the next moment, she heard the tell-tale sound of him biting into his wrist.

“Please,” he whispered, even as he smoothed her hair down. “Min älskade, please.”

In light of his words and her pain, she took what he was offering to her.

Eric continued to caress her hair as she drank. “Thank you, little one. Thank you for saving my life.”

She sniffled as his wound shut. “Thank you for saving mine—for saving me.”

They held each other close as they heard the car approaching.

“Wait,” Sookie said. “The car was out of gas! How’s it movin’?”

Leonie’s tinkling laughter met their ears. “Claude has the ability to move particles. He has put some gasoline from one of the Were’s vehicles into yours. As soon as Eric is secure, he will fill up the car the rest of the way and also put together the rear window. But, for now, we should get Eric to cover, dear.”

Sookie sighed and leaned against Eric. At least for the moment—she tried to ignore the fact that her shoes slipped in blood as Eric helped her to rise to her feet. She could think about the gruesome havoc he’d wrecked after he was safe.

Keeping the tarp pulled firmly over them both, Eric slowly walked them over to the car, which was thankfully now parked in the shadows.
“I’ll see you tonight,” he said, bending down to kiss her gently on the lips. “I will not sleep, however. I will be with you the whole time.”

She whimpered a little as he bent down to kiss her gently on the lips.

“Your great-grandmother will help you now,” he said.

Sookie nodded as Eric used his vampire grace to move into his enclosure.

She waited until she heard the locking mechanism click before she removed the tarp from over her head. She left it in place around her body, however, since it afforded her some modesty, given the fact that the now-deceased Ray had ripped open her shirt and basically destroyed her bra.

She looked over to where his head lay; she was not sad to see him dead.

She quickly adjusted the Bluetooth device, which had become slightly askew in her struggle against the Weres.

Leonie approached Sookie slowly, as if afraid she might startle her. “Are you okay?” the fairy asked, the concern clear in her tone. As if sensing that Sookie would welcome direct comfort from only her bonded in that moment, the fairy stayed back a bit.

Sookie nodded. “Yes. Eric came before they could do much to me,” she said in a quiet tone. “Where were you?” she asked, her hurt clear. “What took you so long?”

Leonie sighed. “The SUV that separated from these Weres in order to get gasoline pulled into the garage only moments before we did. It was necessary for us to eliminate that threat before we could come to you,” she said with regret in her voice. “I am sorry.”

Sookie nodded. “It’s okay.” She looked back at the car—at where Eric was lying. “We’re okay?” she said, half-questioning and half-stating.

“Yes,” Eric said through the earpiece. “We are okay, min älskare.”

Leonie nodded in agreement. “The good news is that none of your things seem damaged by the shattered window glass.” She smiled. “And Claude will be able to repair that well enough.”

Sookie nodded, even as she shivered a bit.

“Here,” Leonie said kindly as she pulled out Sookie’s suitcase from the backseat of the car. “Let me get you some fresh clothing. Then you should reapply your potion so that your personal items no longer carry your scent. I cannot smell you now because you are using your Fae gift, but I can smell you on your things.”

Sookie nodded as Leonie took some clothing out of the suitcase. The elder fairy held the tarp up as a kind of privacy curtain as Sookie shed her blood-soaked jeans, shoes, and socks before removing the remaining tatters of her T-shirt and bra. As soon as Sookie was done redressing, Leonie lowered the tarp and then wrapped the soiled clothing into it. Then—with a snap of her fingers—the tarp disappeared.

“What did you do with it?” Sookie asked as she went to the duffel bag to get Octavia’s potion.

“I’ve destroyed it, of course,” the redhead winked.

“You can do that—by—uh—snapping?”
Leonie smiled. “Just inanimate objects. Claude can put atoms together. I can tear them apart. The snap? Well—it creates a spark that obliterates them.”

“Handy,” Sookie said before taking a deep breath and letting herself look around. She saw ten dead Weres—most of them missing limbs or heads—strewn around the space.

“Your mate is impressive,” Leonie said as she followed Sookie’s gaze. “Quite the feat indeed, given the fact that it is daytime.”

Sookie gasped in horror. “So much blood,” she whispered.

She heard a sigh in her ear. “Now you have seen the monster that I am,” Eric’s voice came resignedly.

“No!” Sookie whispered fervently as she turned away from Leonie in order to respond to her bonded. “That’s not what I meant. They were the monsters. You saved me from them, Eric. They had chosen to,” she paused, “hurt me. They didn’t have to make that choice.”

“Sookie,” Eric said softly, “I could not stop myself when I felt your fear, and I couldn’t show them mercy if I was to kill them quickly enough before the sun debilitated me.”

“I know,” she said. There was a pause. “Thank you for coming to my rescue,” she reiterated. She took a deep breath, and Eric felt resolution flow through her and into the Fae-bond they shared.

It throbbed with her approval of him—and her love.

It was the best feeling he’d ever experienced.

“Considering what they wanted to do,” Sookie said, her voice strong, “they got off easy.”

“Yes,” Leonie commented from behind her, “they did.”

“What should we do now?” Sookie asked Eric through the Bluetooth.

“Ask your great-grandmother if she will continue to help us,” the vampire replied.

“Of course I will!” Leonie exclaimed before Sookie could speak.

The fairy smiled sheepishly as Sookie turned around. “Sorry, dear, but you remember these,” she said, pushing her hair behind her ears.

Sookie chuckled a little. “It’s hard to forget them.”

“What is your plan?” Leonie asked both Eric and Sookie. Though she couldn’t make out the vampire’s words from inside his box, she could hear him through the Bluetooth well enough.

“As Leonie suggested earlier, she can use her mesmerizing skills on the Weretiger,” Eric said. “Quinn needs to believe that Ray described someone fitting Leonie’s description at the café. And he will need to carry Leonie’s scent with him. We want Russell, Victor, and Felipe to believe that it was Leonie—a full-blooded fairy—with me the whole time. If they do, then the secret that you are still living will have been kept.”

“Did you get that?” Sookie asked the fairy.

Leonie nodded. “Yes.”
Eric continued, “It would be impossible—at this point—to cover up the fact that I am being aided by the Fae, but that fact will just cause more questions for Russell—and, perhaps, more doubts.”

Leonie smiled and looked over at Claude. “I will take the tiger over now,” she said of the still unconscious Quinn, over whom Claude was hovering, his sword poised.

Claude nodded and approached Sookie slowly. He nodded at her. “You are my cousin, and you are well met,” he greeted somewhat formally.

Sookie tried to smile, though the horror of the day had left her a bit numb. “You too—uh—well met and all. And—uh—thanks for comin’ to help.”

“I would do or give anything for my Uncle Fintan—both when he was alive and now,” Claude said passionately. “After my own parents were lost, he became my anchor,” he smirked and a twinkle entered his eye, “despite the fact that he was younger than I. You see—I am the black sheep of the family, but Fintan accepted me without question. He and my grandmother have been the most important guides in my life. It was Fintan who intuited that I would feel more at peace in this realm. It was he who encouraged me to come here. He changed my existence for the better in more ways than I can express.”

Sookie sniffled a little at the mention of her grandfather.

“I met Adele too, but just once—so that the secrecy of Fintan’s location could be preserved.” Claude looked at her intently. “You have eyes like my uncle’s—a rich brown that I have seen only in this world.”

Sookie wiped away a tear and smiled a little more easily than before. “That’s what Gran always told me—that I have his eyes.”

“You are bonded to the vampire?” Claude asked, though it was clear he already knew she was.

“Yes,” Sookie answered nonetheless.

“Leonie is covering up my scent, but—without her near—I am what would be considered vampire-nip—like catnip,” he added. “For this reason, I do not much care for vampires.” He shrugged and seemed to be coming to a decision. “However, I do care for you, Cousin. Before she left this realm, Claudine told me you were kind-hearted and strong—like Fintan. I can see that she was right. It was an honor to see the lumenqui sanat.”

“The—uh—what?”

“The light that heals,” Claude said with a smile. “It is rare and beautiful.” He chuckled, “Of course, it is odd to imagine it working on a vampire.” He shrugged. “Usually, our light would incapacitate or kill one!”

“Claude!” Leonie said with warning, even as she revived Quinn.

“I mean no offense to your bonded, Cousin,” Claude said. “In fact, I want you to know that I accept and endorse your match. Of course, I am only the third eldest male in our bloodline, so it doesn’t really count.”

“Uh—um—thanks anyway,” Sookie said, her eyebrows furrowing, even though she was pretty sure that Claude meant well.

Her fairy cousin nodded and then gestured for Sookie to move a bit as he marshalled his magic to
repair the broken window. In under a minute, it looked as good as new.

“Wow!” Sookie said, impressed by Claude’s gift.

He winked at her. “I’d much rather be able to blow things up, but I do not have the light of the hands as you do. But this is almost as good,” he said, raising his sword.

Sookie nodded as she tried to ignore the blood on the blade.

As Claude had worked, Leonie had as well, questioning the tiger and then making sure that she implanted the information they wanted Quinn to spew out to his masters.

“You should go soon,” Leonie said to Sookie when she was done. “According to the tiger, the confederates of these men were informed of this location, and others may come, though I have mesmerized the tiger to phone his people to tell them that all is well and that they will be heading to King Sampson’s compound—with their two new prisoners, I might add. However, it is better to be safe than sorry.”

“What’s going to happen to him?” Sookie asked, looking at Quinn, who was currently in a stupor.

“That depends on your vampire. I also need to know what to do with the,” Leonie paused, “mess.”

Eric spoke to Leonie via the Bluetooth. “Can you make it look like all the Weres died by your hand—by Fae magic or Fae weapons? And then just leave the Weretiger here. His people will find him, but hopefully not until later.”

Leonie smiled. “Good plan. That way the others need not know you were ever awake during the day. Other than the one Claude killed with fairy steel, I will stack and burn the bodies with my light—oh—and I’ll let Claude hack off the rest of that one’s arm too so that it doesn’t look like a raging vampire ripped it off,” she said, giggling a little.

Sookie cringed. “Could you—uh—wait to do that until I’m gone?”

“Of course, dear,” Leonie said affectionately. “Anyway, after we are done, none will be able to tell that these Weres didn’t all die by my hand. In fact, I will also mesmerize the tiger to recall that he saw me killing his compatriots. I will make him think that I left him alive as a warning not to fuck with me or the Norseman,” she cackled.

“Eric? Wouldn’t it be best if they didn’t even know that you were here?” Sookie asked. “I mean—Ray smelled a vampire back at the café, but he didn’t know it was you. But Quinn—he knew it was you when he saw you. He recognized you.”

Eric sighed and spoke a little reluctantly, “Sookie, it is likely for the best that they know it was me. We will have to change vehicles, but that is fine.”

“Okay,” Sookie said, trying to sound strong, even though she was starting to feel overwhelmed again.

“May I?” Leonie asked as she approached Sookie, her arms outstretched.

Sookie nodded and the elder family stepped in to hug her. “Do not fear great-granddaughter.”

“Yes,” Eric said into Sookie’s ear. “Leonie is right. Do not fear.”

Sookie nodded, feeling a little better after the hug. “Okay—so we should go,” she said.
Leonie smiled. “Claude has successfully moved more gasoline to your vehicle so that it is filled up.” She gestured toward the elevator bank in the center of the garage. “There is a restroom facility on the other side of the elevators. You should use it before leaving so that you can avoid stopping again if you can.”

“That’s a good idea, Sookie,” Eric said gently. “It will be almost four hours from here to Needles.”

“You’ll stay with him—while I’m gone?” Sookie asked, gesturing toward the car.

“Yes,” Leonie promised. “And Claude will stand as guard at the bathroom door.”

Sookie nodded and hurriedly went to the bathroom.

She looked at herself in the mirror and then washed the blood off of her neck and cheeks, being careful not to wash where she’d applied Octavia’s potion. Then—as she took care of her “human business”—she made the decision that she was going to put some adult diapers on her next grocery list.

Pride be damned! She was never going to stop in enemy territory again if she could help it—not because of her bladder!

After she was done, she flushed the toilet and washed her hands before wetting some paper towels and wiping down every surface she’d touched. Then she placed all but one of the used towels into the trashcan and removed the trashcan liner.

Using the remaining towel, she opened the bathroom door without touching the knob and then wiped off the outside of the doorknob before adding that towel to the trash.

Claude winked at her, and she nodded as she passed by him.

“We will meet again, Cousin,” he said.

“I hope so,” she responded as she approached Leonie, who was standing by the door of the Prius looking at her with pride in her eyes.

“Can you—uh—get rid of this?” Sookie asked, lifting the trash bag a little.

“You have learned from your vampire well,” Leonie said, taking the bag. With a snap of her fingers, it was gone.

Leonie hugged her great-granddaughter again, and—again—Sookie felt more energized.

“Thanks,” she said before getting into the car.

“Ready?” Eric asked.

“More than,” Sookie responded.

Leonie got into the passenger side.

“Uh—what are you doing?” Sookie asked.

“I will ride with you until you are a few blocks away—just to make sure you are safe. Then I will teleport back here and set up the scene.”

Sookie nodded and looked at Leonie with grateful eyes. “Thanks.”
“You already said that,” the fairy laughed.

“But I mean it,” Sookie said sincerely.

“You’re welcome, but you will never have to thank me, dear. You and your mate are like Finn,” Leonie said softly, patting Sookie’s hand. “You are miathanan.”

“What’s that?” Sookie asked.

“Family that is chosen,” Leonie smiled sincerely—radiantly.

Again, Sookie felt more energized. She brushed away a tear, started the car, and drove out of the garage.

No words were spoken until about two blocks later when Leonie looked at her lovingly. “I am proud of you, great-granddaughter.”

At that, she popped away.

Sookie sniffled.

“You okay?” Eric asked gently. He’d been silent in order to give Sookie “private” time with her relative.

“Yes,” Sookie said with strength. “But—after today—I will be using adult diapers when we travel!”

The vampire chuckled. “Bold fashion choice, min älskare.”

She let out a shaking laugh as she looked in her rearview mirror.

“Like Leonie, I am proud of you,” Eric said sincerely. “Very proud.” He was silent for a moment. “You are the most important person in my life, Sookie—the most important person in all my life.”

“And you are mine,” she responded fervently, as she wiped away a tear. “Now—tell me a funny story?” she requested. “In fact, tell me funny stories all the way to Needles?”

“Did I ever tell you about the time that Pam and I were living in Australia?” he began immediately, his voice full of amusement.

And comfort.

That voice was like a hand holding onto hers. Wisps of light and song smoked through their fairy bond.

“No,” she said, her voice heavy with relief.

“Well—one night we saw this great white shark. It was seven meters long—at least. Anyway, Pamela bet me that I couldn’t . . . .”
Chapter 37: Not the Blood

Sunset had been at 6:39 p.m., and it had taken Eric one hour and twenty four minutes to get Sookie settled down, trade out vehicles with the fairies, and get himself cleaned up for the drive to Mammoth Lakes, California. He'd pulled out of the driveway at Needles at exactly 8:03 p.m.

Given his new vehicle’s relatively poor gas mileage, compared to the Prius, he’d needed to stop twice for gasoline. He’d also not wanted to risk breaking the speed limit or taking a route too close to Arizona’s or Nevada’s borders; thus, it had taken Eric eight hours and three minutes to reach the cabin at Mammoth Lakes.

He parked the car at 4:06 a.m. and sighed as he looked at the woman next to him.

Thankfully, she’d slept during the entire trip, her body and mind and spirit all exhausted from what had happened earlier that day.

Moreover—given the fact that Eric had been completely healed even after being exposed to sunlight in the garage for more than sixty seconds before Sookie had covered him with the tarp and the fact that he’d not even sustained the “bleeds” as he’d stayed awake to keep his bonded company during the drive from Phoenix to Needles—it was clear that Sookie had expended much of her energy to heal him.

He sighed and looked down at his hand, laced tightly with hers. For once he’d been glad to be driving an automatic so that he could keep his fingers entwined with hers. He’d needed the contact, and every time he’d had to stop for gasoline, he’d missed the feeling of her blood flowing just underneath his touch. Of course, his blood had been busily working in her too. She’d already been fully healed of the minor abrasions, the cracked ribs, and the mild concussion she’d sustained in the parking garage. And, for several hours, he’d been moving his blood at exactly the rate of hers, piggybacking on her blood cells in a way, just so that he could feel closer to her.

So that she could—even in her sleep—feel that he was close.

“My bonded,” he whispered. He closed his eyes. Sunrise would be at 6:49 a.m., so he had a little time to get Sookie settled into their new home before he had to die for the day. He was grateful that they were staying for a while.

Their new furnishings wouldn’t arrive until the next night after sunset; they’d paid a bit more so that he could be awake to glamour the deliverymen. Thus, all that would currently be in the light tight room would be a twin-sized bed. But Eric didn’t care. He was glad that he’d have to pull Sookie in close to his body in order to share the small bed with her. As far as he was concerned, she couldn’t get close enough.

The eight hours of his drive from Needles had been spent reliving the day again and again.

The piercing feeling of the silver injection that had awoken him.

Sookie’s frantic voice and worry for him.

Her fear that she’d be caught by Ray, whose thoughts had focused upon the physical and emotional
violence he’d wanted to do to her.
Her efforts to “pop” to him in the car.
The tense four hour drive from Kingman to Phoenix.
The emptying gas tank.
The fact that they’d had to stop before her fairy kin could arrive.
The Weres breaking into the Prius.
Her fear as Quinn had ordered them to come looking for her.
The Were’s graphic and abhorrent thoughts.
Having to use her light blasts before being fully confident about her skill.
Being captured by the wolf with the most repugnant thoughts of all!
Being hit in the head and then kicked by the Weres.
Having their hands on her body.
Having her clothing ripped by Ray.
Watching her mate burning.
Healing him with her light, while preserving very little energy for her own wellbeing.
Seeing the carnage left behind by him.
Another four hour drive to Needles.
Her amped-up fear as sunset had approached and her adrenaline had worn off—finally.
All of this—yet she’d survived.
Eric had lived through each occurrence with Sookie—his blood in hers telling him her every emotion. However, he was a vampire—used to battle and to blood. Part of him regretted bringing Sookie into his quest to eliminate Russell, but—then again—the Fae bond would have allowed for nothing else, especially not after the severing spell, which had, ironically, made him and Sookie closer than before.
He’d lost her blood that day, and he had ached for it again.
But now he realized that it wasn’t about the blood then.
Or now.
It was about her.
And him.
Something stronger than blood.
He loved her, and he’d never deny it again—not to her and not to himself.
Eric had already used his senses to make sure that the area was secure, but he was still cautious as he got out of the vehicle. The cabin had a small detached garage, but he didn’t park in it. He’d decided to unload the car first. Quickly, he zipped up to the cabin and unlocked the door before returning to the vehicle for his most precious cargo.

He lifted Sookie carefully from her seat.

“Eric,” she whimpered a little as the cool night air invaded the warm cocoon Eric had made her with their quilt. She nestled her face into his chest.

“Shhh, min älskade,” he soothed. “We are at the cabin—safe and sound.”

She sighed a little and wrapped her arms around his neck. He didn’t need to flip on any lights as he took her to the barely-furnished master bedroom. He’d bought the Mammoths Lakes cabin—through a glamoured human, of course—after the Great Revelation; thus, he’d felt less need to have it furnished as if a human were living there. Plus, the cabin’s location was remote, which had made it even less necessary to add the trappings of humanity to the residence.

As Eric had expected, there was only a small dresser and a twin-sized bed as far as furnishings went. He settled Sookie onto the bed and tucked their quilt around her small body. It always amazed him how little she was—especially for someone so internally strong.

When he went to pull away, she whimpered and raised her arms.

“It’s okay, little one,” Eric soothed. “I’m just going to turn on the heater and then unload the car. I will be back very soon.” He bent down to kiss her forehead. “You are safe, min älskade. We are safe here.”

She murmured something unintelligible as she nestled into her covers. He spent another moment stroking her hair before he hurried to complete his tasks.

He quickly turned on the heater and then brought in their bags and the rest of their belongings. He unloaded the cooler that contained the foodstuffs that Sookie would need the next day before they could arrange for a glamoured human to get them more. He set up her coffee maker and placed the coffee and filters right next to it. She’d also brought a few dishes from the Taos home since the Mammoth Lakes cabin had been outfitted with none. Eric stowed those in the cabinets, knowing that Sookie could place them as she preferred when they got more items.

The car unloaded, he moved it to the garage and then locked the door to the little building. His next order of business was to call Brady.

“Hello?” a sleepy voice answered.

“Is the line secure?” Eric asked.

Brady chuckled. “Who do you think you’re talking to?”

Eric couldn’t help but to chuckle too. “It’s been a long day.”

“Sookie okay?” Brady asked. The perceptive Were had picked up on the fact that the woman whom Eric was going to so much trouble to protect must be important to the Viking. And though Eric was not known for being “friendly,” the Were considered the vampire to be one of his closest friends.

“Yes. How about the surveillance in and around the parking garage in Phoenix?” Eric asked.
There was a smile in Brady’s voice. “Sadly, the city’s street cameras within three blocks of the garage had a power failure around noon. Apparently, some kind of electrical surge fried some circuits. There are crews working now, but you know how long it takes such things to be repaired.”

“Do any of the businesses in the area have cameras that could have picked up Sookie or the extra vehicle with the fairies going into the garage?”

“No,” Brady said with a yawn. “My flight landed in Phoenix at around 5:00 p.m., and I was able to check everything out before King Sampson and his people finally got here. And—like we discussed earlier on the phone—I hacked into the city’s supposedly secure website and fucked with the city-owned cameras about an hour before you and Sookie even got to the garage.”

“Good,” Eric said. “So there is no trace of Sookie?”

“None,” Brady answered. He chuckled.

“What?”

“I was making sure that the camera in the building to the southwest of the parking garage didn’t get an image of the fairies’ vehicle when some of King Sampson’s group arrived.” He chuckled again. “At that point, I was still stealing the video feeds from the garage. Guess who was with the king?”

“Who?” Eric asked.

“Victor. And de Castro. You should have seen their faces when they walked into the garage and found a pile of smoldering Were corpses and the Weretiger tied up with what looked to be small piece of string.” He chuckled again. “I gotta hand it to Sookie’s great-grandmother. I’ve gone back and watched all of the footage from the garage. Not only is she deadly, but she’s also got a lot of flare. And—she’s hot to boot!”

Eric chuckled. “She is probably two thousand years old too.”

“I do like my lovers to be experienced,” Brady responded.

Eric rolled his eyes, though—of course—the wolf couldn’t see it. “The footage from the garage itself?” he asked.

“Mostly destroyed,” Brady confirmed. “I even went into the system and doctored the records to indicate that most of the cameras on the main and basement levels hadn’t been functioning correctly for about a week.”

“Mostly destroyed?” Eric asked.

“Yeah—from one of the feeds, the only image captured was of Leonie, shooting her light and looking very un-Sookie-like. I decided to leave that one intact for Victor to find.”

“Good.”

“I would have liked to have kept a copy of the whole fight though. It was an amazing sight. Your woman held her own, and I still cannot believe that you did what you did—let alone during the daytime! I have never seen anything like it.”

“It is best that no one else sees or learns of it,” Eric said significantly.
“I understand,” Brady responded.

“So de Castro and Victor—what happened after they discovered Quinn? Did you have a chance to set up your surveillance device by then—so that we could see and hear what was going on?”

“Yeah,” Brady reported. “That was the first thing I did when I got to the area.”

“And the Weretiger didn’t know you were there?” Eric asked.

“Don’t worry. He was pretty out of it, and I ran my fiber optics through the elevator shaft, so he couldn’t have seen me, and—thanks to one of Octavia’s concoctions, which I keep handy for such occasions—he couldn’t have smelled me either.”

“What did the surveillance device pick up?”

“Victor questioned the tiger. He told a very interesting story that didn’t match the one he’d called in earlier at all,” Brady chuckled. “According to Quinn, he and the group of Weres followed the Prius into the garage, and—immediately after they’d parked and gotten out of their vehicles—a redhead banshee emerged from the Prius and started shooting them with her light.” He chuckled again.

“Banshee?” Eric asked.

“Quinn’s word—not mine,” Brady laughed. “Victor and de Castro could tell it had been a fairy though.”

“How can you be sure?”

“She left her scent all over the tiger and the garage, and she must have done something else too because as soon as the string holding Quinn was cut off, her scent became even more potent. Hell—I could smell it from where I was set up in the building across the street!” He broke down into a bigger fit of laugh. “And then Victor and de Castro,” he paused to laugh again, “started to . . . .”

“Started to?”

“Well—let’s just say that the tiger almost suffered the fate that the group of Weres apparently had in mind for Sookie,” Brady said, sobering up immediately.

Eric growled, sounding so menacing that he made Brady shake a little.

“As it was, there was just kissing and a little biting until the tiger managed to push them off of him. I thought that an orgy was about to break out among the vampires, but the fairy scent diminished after a couple of minutes and everyone got control of themselves. Anyway,” Brady continued, “by the time they left, de Castro and Victor were fuming mad, but they were also quite convinced that you were receiving help from a full-blooded Fae. And Sookie’s name didn’t even come up—at least, not that I heard. But—then again—why would it? The tiger described Leonie to a ‘T!’ and it sounded nothing like Sookie.”

Eric breathed a sigh of relief. “So—no trouble?”

“No,” Brady said. “As I said, Sookie got out clean.

“Anything else?”

“Victor called Russell while they were at the garage, and—from Victor’s expression—the king
was plenty pissed that you’d gotten away. After he’d hung up, Victor marshalled the Weres at his
disposal—including Quinn. As expected, they’re looking for the Prius; most are heading towards
Texas, hoping that you’ll return to your known safe haven there.”

“Good. Russell will be very surprised—then—when the car I was traveling in ends up in Vegas
this morning.”

Eric could hear the smile in Brady’s tone. “So you really are having the fairies drive it there?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need me to tinker with any cameras?”

“No,” Eric said. “One of the fairies has the ability to cloak the car’s appearance to a certain extent.
They plan to drive it right into the parking garage at Felipe’s main casino. Then Leonie will step
out, wave to the camera, and then get back into the car. Then she and the other fairy will pop away
—after she leaves behind a nice dosage of her scent, that is. At that point, the car will look like
itself again.”

Brady chuckled. “That’s going to rile de Castro and Russell.”

“The more riled they are, the better for us,” Eric stated. “Let them stew with a bunch of
unanswered questions. Meanwhile, Sookie and I will remain here—and safe—until Rhodes.”

“I’m already doing some preliminary work at the Pyramid of Gizeh, where the summit is being
held. The security system is thought to be pretty tight there, but guess who just got hired as a
maid?”

“You?” Eric deadpanned.

Brady chuckled. “Nope. But I’d make a good maid—don’t you think. I could get one of those
French maid outfits and everything.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Eric chuckled. “So—if not you—who is now working there?”

“Actually, Mom.”

Eric smiled. “You mean the woman who taught you everything you know?”

“Yes. That’s the one.”

“Is she well?”

“Yes—still in remission and no traces of cancer at her last three check-ups. She’s as fit as ever
again. And—you know her—she’s hoping for a good battle.”

“Yes, she always did enjoy the fray.” Eric paused. “Keep me informed. And—oh yeah—we’re
gonna need another car,” he added.

“I’ve already got one for you—a Ford C-Max Hybrid. I figured Russell and his minions would be
looking out for Priuses similar to the one you had. Your enclosure will be more cramped, but it gets
good mileage—just like the Prius.”

“That’s fine.”

They were silent for a moment.
“Hey, Eric? Be careful. It was a close call today,” Brady said more quietly.

“Yes—I know,” Eric responded as he reentered the bedroom and gazed at his beloved. “I almost lost everything,” he added in an emotion-filled voice before hanging up.

He quickly changed into lounge pants and got into the small bed carefully so that he wouldn’t wake up Sookie. She was lying exactly as he’d left her, save for one hand, which was stretched out as if looking for him. He put that hand against his heart.

“How many times and in how many ways will I fall in love with you, Sookie Stackhouse?” he asked into the quiet room, right before the sunrise took him to his sleep.
Epilogue: The Path

“I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.”—Mother Teresa

“My lady,” Klymene and Leonie said in unison as they bowed before the Ancient Pythoness.

The deceptively weak-looking vampiress nodded in greeting. She looked blind too, but her sight was unmatched—at least in her way.

“You have completed your tasks?” she asked.

“Yes. The Weres of the North will join with Eric and his mate,” Klymene responded. “The Were leader is strong and tactical; they will make good allies for my child’s child.”

“And the Bears of the South?” Pythia asked.

“They are with the Viking as well,” Leonie responded.

Pythia nodded with satisfaction. “Edgington’s Weres are strong, and he will add to that strength by giving them more vampire blood.” She paused and looked as if she were trying to see somewhere very far away with her cloudy orbs. “It is unclear whether Northman’s two-natured allies will counteract Edgington’s Weres. That outcome is not set, but we have done what we can for the Viking and his mate—when it comes to this.”

“They were in peril earlier,” Leonie informed. “Claude and I aided them.”

“But Edgington still believes the girl is dead—correct?” Pythia asked. “That is essential if the Viking is to have a chance of success. It must be the weak one—Compton—who first learns that she is alive. And that must not happen until Rhodes. It is to be the first domino to fall.”

“Sookie is still thought to be dead by our enemies, my lady,” Leonie confirmed. “May I tell my great-granddaughter what you said about Compton?”

“Not yet. Not until the rest of her and the Viking’s plan is in place. And—even then—she must be told without the Norseman knowing,” Pythia said. “Moreover, she must be the one to seek out Compton.”

“Because Eric wouldn’t let her risk herself,” Leonie mused.

“That is why he is not to know,” Pythia smirked.

“That is likely for the best, given his stubborn nature,” Klymene observed.

“Has he finally accepted that Sookie is his true mate?” Pythia asked with some amusement in her tone.

“Yes—and more,” Leonie confirmed.

“More?” Klymene asked her friend.
“Yes. He has accepted his love for her. The Fae bond will now begin to thrive as it couldn’t before. And that will help my great-granddaughter’s progress. Her light is potentially quite strong, but she currently has difficulty maintaining it—except when it comes to healing her mate. And she is not a natural at teleportation,” the fairy informed. “Sookie is an unselfish creature by nature, so her part of the bond has worked to strengthen him. Now that he has accepted his feelings, he will begin to strengthen her in turn.”

“Indeed, I am glad that my ‘grandson’ has finally come to his senses,” Klymene said affectionately.

“I had a vision last night,” the Ancient Pythoness informed, in the eerie tone she always spoke with as she recounted the knowledge she’d learned from her preternatural sight.

“Can we know of it, my lady?” Klymene asked.

Pythia nodded. “The lovers, Sookie and Eric, will soon choose to bond in the vampire way to complement their Fae bond. And they will also wish to link their lives by pledging. It is important that the right people are with them as they do this,” she said. “And it is essential that Sookie makes the cluviel dor her minphial to her mate—though she must not learn of its magic.”

“Her minphial?” Leonie asked with surprise. “A Fae bride gift?”

“Yes—because she cannot yet bind her life to Eric’s through a human marriage, she will ask you to help them to marry in the fairy way.”

“Eric will accept the Obradin—the Fae ceremony of marriage?” Klymene asked with surprise.

“Yes. The pledging will further bind them in his mind, and the Obradin will further bind them in hers. Your child’s child will want that for her. The two rites will be complements—just like their bonds.”

“And Eric and Sookie themselves,” Leonie said.

“You must go to her and teach her the rites,” Pythia said to Leonie. “And then you will return to her on the day of the ceremonies. Eric’s Were friend, Brady, should be there as well. You two will stay during the day to make sure that all is secure after the ceremonies occur.” She turned her glassy gaze to Klymene. “Your mate should attend as well. The Norseman will find him a useful sounding board.”

Klymene nodded. “I will go to Duncan after I leave you, my lady. And I will make sure he is in attendance.”

Pythia looked back at Leonie. “It must be Sookie’s idea to give the cluviel dor to her mate, for it must be a simple gift of love in her eyes—not an object that could be used to save her life.”

“So it is certain then? Eric will have to use it—to save her?” Leonie asked with trepidation.

“He will need to try,” Pythia responded. “However, Sookie’s outcome is uncertain. In fact, much is uncertain, but in all of my visions, there will be a moment when she sacrifices her life to save his. If the bonds that connect them are strong enough, he will survive long enough without her to use the cluviel dor to give her life again. It is a paradox—you see? The stronger the bonds, the more her death will hurt him, and the more he hurts, the stronger will be his love. Only then would the cluviel dor grant his wish.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” Klymene asked with concern.
“If it does not, then he will die soon after she does,” Pythia said.

A tear slipped from Klymene’s eye, and Leonie reached out to take her friend’s hand. “Do not despair,” the fairy whispered.

“I have already lost Godric—my beloved child,” Klymene whispered.

Leonie squeezed Klymene’s hand, offering the comfort she could. “I know. But have hope; Sookie and Eric’s love is strong.”

Klymene nodded her thanks.

Pythia sighed. “Sometimes love does conquer hate. But sometimes hate outlasts its opposite. However, the Viking could have never defeated Edgington if his motivation was vengeance. His enemy is capable of much more than he when it comes to hate, for Eric has a good soul. Moreover, he was born a child of light.”

“A fairy?” Klymene asked. “Godric suspected he was more when taking Eric’s blood before turning him, but my child was not certain.”

“Yes,” Pythia confirmed. “Eric is part Fae, just as his mate is part Fae. That is how the Fae bond was able to root. His mother was the grandchild of Ione. Both of the lovers were born one-eighth fairy.

“So Eric is my kin—my blood?” Leonie asked incredulously.

Pythia nodded. “Eric and Sookie’s souls have—it seems—traveled a very twisty but interconnected path to each other. Perhaps, they were always fated to meet and to mate.”

“Yes,” Leonie commented. “I believe that is true; they balance each other.” She looked at Klymene. “And they connect us, my sister.”

The beautiful vampiress smiled at her fairy counterpart. Both had served Pythia for a very long time. Then she looked back at her mistress, the concern returning to her lovely eyes.

“I know you are not certain of what is to come. But do you believe they will survive?” Klymene asked.

“There is hope—if their love outlasts the hatred of their enemies.”

“But do you believe it?” Klymene pushed.

“When love and hate both bring forth armies, it is usually the former that prevails. Plus,” she added almost mischievously, “I would never discount the kind of dogged stubbornness that Eric and Sookie are known to possess, especially not when it is combined.” She smirked. “Sometimes it is called foolhardy to quest for victory when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds. Sometimes it is called prideful. However, when it is for love, there is another name for it.”

“What is that?” Klymene asked.

“Victory.”

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