Not Without Action
by CaliforniaKat

Summary

Having learned that there is a spell that could break the bond between her and Eric, Sookie is gung ho to do it; however, in this version of events, Amelia proves herself a true friend by making sure that Sookie has thought things through fully—with a little help from a certain Viking vampire. (Begins in the middle of Deadlocked; E/S story; OOC Amelia; original story idea from ericluver)

Notes

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"Action may not always bring happiness; but there is no happiness without action."—Benjamin Disraeli

Chapter 01: Trying

MAY 29, 2006

AMELIA POV

I was determined to try to be a better friend to the best friend I'd ever had: Sookie Stackhouse.

Sookie had always stood by me—in a way that I couldn't really say the same anymore.

Much to my shame.

Now that I was dealing with my grief over Tray's death, rather than just being angry at Sookie, I'd realized just how much of a bad friend I'd been to her—as opposed to the good friend she'd been to me from the start.

Knowing me very little, she'd offered me a home when I wanted to escape the whole clusterfuck of the "his Bob-cat time," as Bob and I now laughingly called that incident.

Heck, Sookie had even accepted Octavia into her home, following Hurricane Katrina.

In addition, she had helped me to find work—vouching for me in a place of business that meant the world for her, even after she'd "heard" how "flighty" I could be.

Moreover, Sookie had also always accepted me, never judging me for my "witchy" ways.

And never complaining when I used all of the counter space in the kitchen to concoct a potion or to experiment.

Even when they were smelly!

On many, many nights, she had listened to me for hours and hours at a time—in stereo, given the fact that she could hear my thoughts and my voice.

And, though I'd always been willing to listen to her too, I knew—looking back—that we'd had a lot more conversations about me than we'd had about her, especially about my relationships. I also realized that I'd rarely encouraged her regarding her own relationships—especially in regards to Eric. And I knew, now, that wasn't fair.

Maybe I'd been jealous that she'd been the one to finally land the Viking, who'd been well-known even in New Orleans. Or maybe I'd just been a self-centered twat—as Pam might say.

In addition to indulging my long soliloquies about Pam and/or Tray, Sookie had never judged me for my real or petty complaints about my father—even though she didn't have any parents left.

More importantly, she always had encouraging words to say to me—even when I was in the wrong. She had a way of being on my side, despite my faults.

Indeed, I now clearly recognized that I hadn't been the "best" friend to her that I had once claimed
to be, but I was determined to try harder.

I just hoped that she'd be able to forgive me because—during the time since Tray had died protecting Sookie—I'd been a fucking mess. And I'd hardly "tried" at all.

I hadn't tried—at least not at first—to think about him. To mourn for him.

I hadn't tried to control the thoughts with which I'd blamed Sookie for her own kidnapping and torture.

I hadn't tried to acknowledge what even Tray had told me once: that he would consider it an honorable death to perish when he was protecting another.

I hadn't tried to help Sookie through the guilt of four deaths that weighed on her like a tons of bricks—but that truly didn't actually belong on her hands.

I hadn't offered Sookie a shoulder to cry on when I'd heard her crying for Clancy, Tray, Claudine, and Claudine's unborn child.

I hadn't tried not to hate her.

And—worst of all—I hadn't welcomed her when she'd tried to comfort me, and Sookie had taken that as the worst rejection—the worst indictment—of all.

My only excuse was that I had been grieving.

My only recourse was to try to do better from now on.

"What are you thinking about?" Bob asked me.

Bob had reentered my life unexpectedly a little more than a month before—on the three month anniversary of Tray's death. I'd sat crying over beignets and chicory coffee when he'd seen me.

Coincidentally, our places of business were just three blocks away, and I'd been at a café almost exactly in between them.

I didn't even like chicory. But it had been Tray's favorite treat.

Not unexpectedly, Bob had been bitter after "his Bob-cat time," but—showing immense forgiveness—he'd sat with me as I'd drunk cup after cup of a coffee that I didn't like and spewed my feelings about Tray and Sookie and everything about my time in Bon Temps.

"Ames? Are you okay?" he asked.

I turned to look at him. Bob had a strong profile and dimples that were noticeable even when he wasn't smiling. And I'd come to love him—for the first time—during the past weeks.

I worried that our "thing" was a rebound experience, but I didn't feel any less love for Tray because of Bob. In fact, I felt more love for Tray—and more love in general.

And I took that as a positive sign.

Bob had matured after his time as a "Bob-cat." And his bitterness had evaporated quickly as he told me about what he could remember of that time. Sunning himself. Lounging around all day. Being spoiled with can after can of tuna.
Licking his balls.

The wistful smile he got on his face when reporting that last item never failed to amuse me.

I'd also been upfront with Bob—telling him about pretty much everything which had happened while I'd been staying in Bon Temps.

It turned out that—even as a cat—he'd taken in some of those "serious" things too.

In between the ball licking sessions.

Unsurprisingly, it turned out that a part of him missed being a cat.

But he insisted that wasn't just because of his limberness.

In fact, he listed tummy rubs and sprawling as his favorite activities.

Whatever! I knew that he missed the ball licking the most.

Needless to say, we were taking things slowly in our relationship for several reasons. But I was happy with him and with where we seemed headed.

"I'm thinking about Sookie," I said, finally answering his question. "I'm worried about her."

Bob glanced over at me. "I can't say I blame you." He reached over to capture my hand, which I gladly gave up to him. I would never tell Bob this, but—since he'd been a cat—his grip felt warmer and more comforting than before.

I closed my eyed and leaned against the passenger-side window.

I knew that my leaving back in March had caused Sookie a lot of pain. But I just couldn't stay in Bon Temps. I just couldn't control my thoughts back then.

And—honestly—without Tray there to make a future with, I felt as if the time was right for me to return to New Orleans.

And I'd not regretted that decision—for myself.

But who had I left behind?

Sookie.

She'd been so immersed in grief and guilt that she'd accepted Claude as a roommate, even though he had always been an asshole to her. And then she'd taken in Dermot, who'd been a "bad guy" until recently.

But they were family, and Sookie couldn't deny family.

Of course, for Sookie, no "family" relationship had ever stood the test of time or her "nature." I'm sure that she had a stopwatch on Claude and Dermot too.

Her parents.

Gran.

Niall.
Jason—to a great extent.

Me.

We'd all left her life by violence or choice.

And she was left behind—to grieve and to wait for the next person to go.

Thus, it had been with acceptance and inevitability that she'd seen me off from Bon Temps two months before.

In typical Sookie fashion, she'd promised that my room would be waiting for me—even though we both knew that I wouldn't be moving back in.

I realized now that Sookie had likely been waiting for the other shoe to drop when it came to our friendship all along—anticipating the inevitable mechanism which would cause me to leave her life.

Just like everyone else—except for her ex-beaus (or hopeful ones in the case of Sam Merlotte), who seemed to haunt her like the fucking plague—anyone she counted as family eventually exited her life.

Examining everything I knew about Sookie, I realized that expecting the worst was the logical—even the healthy—thing for her to do.

I suppose that—as long as she expected people to leave her—it wouldn't hurt so much when they did. I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Don't punish yourself," Bob said perceptively.

"I have been a bad friend," I sighed.

"No—you haven't been."

I looked at him skeptically. "Yes. I have. I just left her."

"You'd lost the person you thought you were going to marry," he said compassionately. How he managed that—despite our growing feelings for one another—was beyond me.

"Sookie had been brutalized," I whispered. "But that wasn't the worst of it. I could tell that she would have gladly allowed those sadistic fairies to keep having their way with her if she could have only saved Tray and Claudine and her child—or even Clancy."

Bob squeezed my hand even more, though the pressure didn't hurt. It just reminded me that I was still alive.

I took a deep breath. "Sookie blamed herself for Claudine's death so much that she took in Claude, and I've told you all about him."

"Asshole," Bob said in support, showing me that he was listening.

One great thing about Bob: he always listened.

I sighed. "And now Dermot's living with Sookie too." I sighed loudly. "By this point in time, I had thought that she would be with Eric—really with him—full-time."
"Why do you say that?" Bob asked.

"Before Neave and Lochlan got to her, Eric and Sookie were fumbling—but, at least, they were fumbling toward each other. Sookie seemed to always doubt whether she'd be enough for Eric, and he . . . ." I paused.

"He what?" Bob asked.

"Eric always seemed to doubt that he'd be enough for her," I sighed. "I swear to God that 99 percent of the time those two communicated like two mimes who were across the country from each other!"

"And the other 1 percent?" Bob asked.

"They communicated like soul mates," I sighed. "That's why they stay together—I think."

"It sounds like they might be better apart then," Bob ventured.

I shrugged. "Maybe. But I thought—before the fairies took her—that they were finally working their shit out. But maybe that was just wishful thinking on my part. After all, I think it's been a thousand years since Eric has tried to be in a romantic relationship. To say he's rusty would be an understatement. And—as for Sookie—well she's been so indoctrinated to hate what she is that she cannot trust a man who loves her wholeheartedly."

"You think that Eric loves her?" Bob asked. "You think vampires can love?"

"If you'd have asked me that before I saw Eric and Sookie together, I would have said 'no.' Hell," I admitted, "I wasn't even sure that he loved her until the last time I saw him."

"When was that?" Bob asked.

"My last night in Bon Temps—back in early March. I'd gone to Tray's grave to say goodbye. Eric was there. He'd dug a small hole near Tray's headstone, and he was burying something."

Bob looked at me with curiosity. "What?"

"He'd brought what he called a 'grave gift' for Tray. I think it was a Viking tradition to inter people with gifts for the afterlife. He apologized that it had taken a while to have the gift made."

"What was it?" Bob asked.

"Unsurprisingly, it was a weapon. Actually, it was like a leather glove with a small dagger at the end of each finger. It looked like something out of a Wolverine movie," I relayed.

"Why'd Eric choose that?"

I wiped a tear away. "He had said that Tray had broken a hand in his final battle, so he was bringing the gift in case Tray needed claws in his afterlife. He explained that it was the least he could do, given the protection Tray had given to his beloved."

"That's pretty fucking heavy," Bob said, squeezing my hand again.

"Yeah. I know," I sighed. "I think that—until that moment—I thought of Eric as some creature who didn't have feelings. At least—not real ones. But—then again—I got most of my information about Eric from Sookie, and she was always questioning whether or not he could love."
"Do you know where Eric and Sookie stand now?" Bob asked.

I shook my head. "Not really. I've gotten only hints from Sookie on the few occasions that we've spoken on the phone. Eric's maker showed up and confused matters even more than before. But Appius is gone now, killed by a fairy who had intended to kill Sookie. And—now—I think that Sookie feels guilty for Appius's death, too."

"What death doesn't she feel guilty for?" Bob asked.

It was a rhetorical question, but I spoke the obvious answer nonetheless.

"None of them," I whispered.
Bob and I arrived at the old farmhouse on Hummingbird Lane well after sunset. In retrospect, maybe that wasn't the best of ideas.

Sookie ran down the porch steps to greet us. I recognized her "crazy" smile as soon as I saw it.

After all, it was her most common smile.

She showed a lot of teeth.

But the smile never reached her eyes.

"I really am happy to see y'all," Sookie told me, likely having heard my thought. "It's just that I had a bit of a rough day," she added almost brightly.

"A bit," Eric intoned, stepping forward from the shadows of the porch. "Sandra Pelt tried to kill her. She learned that another friend of hers will be having a child, and her feelings about having children are ambivalent at best. She has no interest in becoming a vampire," he added before nodding to first me and then Bob. "Pam will be happy that you seem to be in good health," he said to me before looking at Sookie. "I will leave you to those you care for," he said in monotone before taking off into the air.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

Sookie bit her lower lip. "Sorry about that. He was just surprised that I still don't want to ever be a vampire," she said with false flippancy. "He's a little upset, but—uh—he'll get over it."

I frowned, but said nothing. I doubted that Eric would "get over it." Sookie was his bonded—after all. Eric would obviously want to turn her, and—even though I believed that Sookie had every right to choose not to become a vampire—I doubted she'd understood the significance of the offer or had given it the consideration it deserved. Honestly, I couldn't blame the vampire for being upset. But—then again—Eric probably hadn't done a good job explaining things to her. The two were hopeless when it came to communication!

Bob and I shared a looked.

"Um—are you tired?" Sookie asked us. "I have your room ready. And I made a casserole this morning in case you're hungry. It's that one you like—with the sour cream. And there's that kind of tea you like—um—in the fridge." She shuffled from foot to foot nervously. "Anyway," she said, gesturing toward the house, "you know to make yourselves welcome—right?"

"Sure, Sook," I assured, moving forward to hug her. I concentrated upon thinking about how much I loved her and how much I'd missed her.

She looked at me gratefully when she broke our embrace. "Thanks, Ames," she said, as she subtly brushed away a tear.

I pretended to ignore the tear and patted her hand. "Bob and I are tired, so we're gonna turn in—"
okay?"

She nodded and gave me a little smile. It was small, but sincere. "Sure," she said. "Um—there are extra towels in the bathroom. Oh—and I picked up some of that lotion you always liked. It's—uh—by the bed."

Clearly, I wasn't the only one trying.

Speaking of trying, I tried to keep my thoughts to myself as Bob and I went to my old room. I knew that Sookie hadn't let either of her fairy kin—neither of whom seemed to be home—use my room. She'd told me that Claude and Dermot had taken over Octavia's old room, which almost certainly negated any possibility that Eric felt welcome to stay over—since the cubby was in there. I doubted seriously that the Viking vampire would allow himself to die for the day in such a vulnerable position.

Of course, as far as I knew, Sookie had never invited Eric to stay over anyway.

I sighed, wondering again at the state of their relationship.

Sookie and I no longer had heart-to-heart conversations—something I hoped to remedy soon—but she had said a few telling things on the phone.

They basically consisted of the following:

"Yes—Eric and I are together, but we're both really busy, so we don't get to spend much time together."

"He's still dealing with the death of his maker—I think."

"I've been trying to stick close to home most days so that Dermot and Claude will feel welcome."

And, most telling of all:

"I just don't know if what I feel for him is real—with the bond and all."

In truth, I felt bad for Sookie. And, though Bob and I were at the house to work on the wards, I knew that Sookie would also ask me about the bond between Eric and her. Months before, she'd requested that I look into whether it could be broken by magic.

And I'd found a way.

But I wasn't so sure that finding it had been a good thing.

I liked to think that both Bob and I had matured a lot since the first time we tried a relationship before "his Bob-cat time." We certainly got along better than we had before.

And—though he didn't make my heart lunge into my throat every time I saw him like Tray had—I did smile each time he entered a room. I was beginning to realize just how many kinds of love there could be. And I was starting to understand that it was the uniqueness of each one that truly made it beautiful.

Still—I sighed with frustration as I looked over at my sleeping boyfriend.

A very tiny part of me wanted to put a pillow over his mouth. Of course, with the power of his snores, he'd likely blow it off within seconds.
I tried covering my ears with my pillow.

But it did nothing to muffle the "muffler" of Bob's snoring.

I really thought about kicking him, but he'd driven all the way from New Orleans, giving me the opportunity to nap a bit.

Finally, I gave up and tried to read. But I was too tired to take in the words. Sadly, I wasn't tired enough to be able to sleep through the Mongolian throat singing happening in the other half of the bed.

Still, I couldn't help but to look at Bob fondly.

Indeed, the only thing I really didn't like regarding Bob was the fact that he snored.

Oh—and he was forgetful, so he'd forgotten the potion I'd made for him to eliminate the "issue."

What I loved about him, however, was that he was willing to trust me enough to drink the potion in the first place—given the whole "Bob-cat" incident.

Yep—that trust most definitely trumped his snoring. But I still made a mental note to go to the store to pick up the ingredients needed to make some more of the potion the next day, even as I decided to take my chances on the couch, hoping that the fairies weren't camped out in the living room.

I quietly made my way to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I wished that I could say that I was surprised to see that Bill was in the yard speaking with Sookie. Though I couldn't make out their words, Bill looked as full of longing—and as full of shit—as always, and Sookie seemed to be eating up his every word.

I sighed. It was one thing to want to stay friends with your first love; however, to me, it was another thing to stay friends with him if he'd initially been sent to seduce you. I would have actually been willing to give Bill some slack if he'd told Sookie about his mission back when he'd supposedly realized that he loved her. But he hadn't. Eric had needed to force Bill to confess. Plus, there was the whole Lorena/Jackson episode. From what Sookie had told me, the trunk "incident" was bad. And from what I'd inferred, it had included a viscous bite and a rape—though Sookie had never used that word to describe it. And she'd also corrected me when I'd "thought" the word. She'd explained that "Bill couldn't help himself."

Maybe I was just an unforgiving type of person, but I figured that a lot of rapists tried to tell themselves the same fucking thing!

Therefore, I wasn't buying Bill's excuse—even if it was true.

To complicate matters, I knew that Sookie still felt guilty about Bill's silver poisoning—which he'd gotten because he'd been protecting her when Eric couldn't come, a fact which I would bet Bill reminded Sookie of as much as possible. But Bill looked well enough now—despite his constipated-looking expression.

I gasped with concern as another vampire stepped out of the shadows. She was beautiful and she was looking at Bill with a hurt expression. Just as I was getting ready to call the police, the vampiress straightened her body in a dignified manner and walked away.

Bill looked even more forlorn, and clearly Sookie was in comforting mode.
It was clear to me that Bill still wanted Sookie and was trying to weasel his way back into her heart. The thought made me nauseated.

Thus, it was like an answer to a prayer when the phone rang. I thought about scuttling back into the hallway so that I could pretend that I was only just coming into the kitchen, but then I laughed at myself.

Telepath in the house.

Instead, I answered the phone as Sookie came in through the kitchen door, Bill on her heels.

"Hello?" I greeted.

"Uh—hey. Is this Amelia?" a familiar-sounding masculine voice asked.

"Yeah," I responded.

"Um—Bud Dearborn here. Can I speak with Sookie please?"

"Sure," I said before holding out the phone for Sookie.

I didn't bother greeting Bill as Sookie greeted Bud.

"Hey Bud. What's up?" she asked.

She listened to what Bud was saying for about a minute, her expression ranging from curiosity to fear to resignation.

"Thanks for lettin' me know, Bud," she said before hanging up.

"Don't worry, Sookie," Bill said comfortingly, touching her shoulder gently. "As long as she's out there, I'll be happy to watch the house—at night."

"Thanks Bill," Sookie said gratefully to the knight in shining armor wannabe.

"What's up, Sook?" I asked.

"Bud said that Sandra Pelt escaped from the jail, so I'm extra glad you and Bob are here to make the wards stronger." She sighed tiredly. "Oh well—another day, another person tryin' to kill you—right?" She looked at me apologetically. "If you and Bob wanna get a motel room or somethin' while you're in town, I'll understand."

I moved to hug her. "We're fine here," I assured.

"Well—I will take my leave," Bill said in his annoyingly formal way. "Do not worry, Sookie," he added, trying to add warmth to his tone.

He failed.

"Thanks, Bill," Sookie smiled.

As soon as he was gone, Sookie looked at me apologetically. "Sorry if our voices woke you up."

"Bob's snoring did that," I chuckled. "I was just getting ready to take up residence on the couch when I saw you and Bill outside. Is everything okay there?"

She sighed. "Well—the good news is that Bill's better, fully healed from the silver poisoning,
"Was that her in the yard just now?" I asked. "Sorry I was spying, but I was worried."

"It's okay. And—yeah—that was her. She's always loved Bill and was hoping that being together again would encourage him to feel the same way—especially now that their maker is no longer around to mess with them. But," she sighed again, "Bill doesn't love her. In fact, he told me that he still loves me." She shook her head. "Not that I know what to do with that information."

"It seems a little unfair of him to come over just to unload that information on you," I said cautiously.

"Maybe. But I think he senses that Eric and I are having some issues."

"Issues?" I asked as Sookie got herself a glass of water. We both sat down at the table.

"Yeah," she said once she was settled. "Eric's been acting weird with Pam lately. Pam wants to turn her girlfriend Miriam into a vampire because Miriam has leukemia. But Victor has refused to give her permission. So she's gotta short trigger. And—also—I think Eric's hiding something from me. Something big," she added. "And then he's been stressed about the Sandra Pelt thing and about the Victor thing. And he's pissed off about my hair, too."

"Really?" I asked. "I was gonna tell you that I liked your new haircut. I can't believe that Eric wouldn't!"

"Oh—it's not that," Sookie said. "He's angry about the reason why I had to get it. A Molotov cocktail was thrown into Merlotte's the other day. Sandra Pelt was behind that—and a couple of other attacks against me. Anyway, part of my hair burned, and Eric showed up since he felt my anxiety through the stupid bond," she said with frustration.

I frowned. Clearly, Sookie was still not a fan of her and Eric's blood connection.

"But," she sighed, "Eric was nice enough to have Pam arrange for her hairdresser to come fix my hair in the middle of the night."

"That was nice of him," I said.

"Yeah—until he and Pam got into a huge fight in the kitchen," she said warily. "That's when the hairdresser, Immanuel—who happens to be Miriam's brother—told me about Pam not having permission to turn Miriam." Sookie threw up her hands in an expression of frustration. "Victor's really causing a lot of stress between Pam and Eric. And—like I said—it's difficult to be around Eric these days. He's so hot-blooded these days—not that he could ever be hot-blooded," she added with a rueful chuckle.

"I'm sure Eric's frustrated because he can't give Pam what she wants," I offered. "And he's worried about Victor encroaching on Area 5. And he's worried about you." I paused and bit my lip. "Aren't you gonna call him? And tell him about Sandra?"

"No," Sookie said after taking only a second to consider the suggestion. "He'd just have Bill keep an eye on things, and that's already happening anyway. Plus, Bill will tell him, I'd imagine. He probably already has. I figure that Eric has ordered Bill to tell him about what's going on with me," she added with some bitterness in her tone.

"Well—you and Eric have never been the best at sharing," I said gently. "Maybe if you tried? Even if he has heard about what's going on with Sandra, I'm sure he'd appreciate hearing it from you."
Sookie shook her head and got up to refill both of our water glasses.

"No. I don't want to bother him, Ames. I figure he's got more important things to worry about. And Bill's out there now. And tomorrow, you and Bob will strengthen the wards. So everything will be fine."

I nodded my head, even though I truly wondered if things would be.

She sat back down. "So—tell me about Bob and you. How's that going—besides the snoring?"

It was obvious she was changing the topic, and I let her.

In fact, I tried to make her laugh as I told her about Bob's recollections of being a cat—including the nirvana of "ball-licking."
Chapter 03: Back in Chains

ERIC POV

My phone buzzed, rattling against my desk.

"Bill," I answered, after looking at the caller ID.

"Eric," he greeted sourly.

The asshole.

"Is all well?" I asked, quickly checking my bond with Sookie. She seemed calm enough—though a little sad. Of course, she seemed sad most of the time these days.

No matter what I tried to do, I couldn't find a way to make her consistently smile.

I closed my eyes. I'm sure that losing my cool earlier—after she'd reiterated with even more distaste than usual that she would never want to become a vampire—hadn't helped the situation.

Of course, Victor's antics didn't help either. And then there was the thing with Sandra Pelt, though she was—at least—in police custody now.

Even without that one danger gone, however, I still worried about my bonded's safety—every minute that I was awake.

After my maker had been killed, I'd wanted to invite Sookie to live with me again. I wanted very much to establish a permanent and nightly relationship with the woman I loved, but now that her fairy kin had moved in with her, I knew that Sookie would be unwilling to leave them for the foreseeable future.

And then there was the situation with Freyda, a clusterfuck I wanted to keep from Sookie if I could. After all, I wanted to give her smiles, not cause her even more tears.

I just hoped that Cataliades could get me out of the contract. Ironically, the key was Sookie. Our bond had been completed before Appius signed the damnable contract with Freyda—thus showing that Sookie had the "earlier" claim on me. However, Sookie and my pledging had occurred after the contract had been signed, which muddied the waters. Plus, the fact that Sookie was "officially" a human made her claim "lesser" in the eyes of vampires. Cataliades suggested that Sookie come out as a fairy officially, but too many people already knew about her lineage in my opinion, so I wanted to avoid that.

I was drawn out of my thoughts when Bill finally answered my question. Clearly "Captain Dramatic Pause" was in rare form that night—though Bill was generally fond of his pauses—especially when he had information to lord over me.

"I wanted to let you know that I'm guarding Sookie's home tonight," Bill said, sounding very pleased with himself.

"What is going on?" I asked, trying to keep my tone calm.

"Sandra Pelt," he announced before pausing dramatically. "She has escaped from the jail here. And
—as you are aware—she's already orchestrated several attacks on Sookie," he informed.

The arm of my chair cracked because of the pressure of my grasp.

"In fact," Bill went on, "I was over at Sookie's when Bud Dearborn called to inform her of Sandra's escape. But that was about twenty minutes ago." He paused again. "So I'm sure that Sookie has called to inform you of the situation herself. I just wanted save you a call and assure you that I am in place already."

The fucker was gloating.

"Thank you, Bill," I said, hating the fact that my voice momentarily betrayed my tension and frustration.

I'm sure that Bill knew damned well that Sookie hadn't told me about Sandra. She never told me about such matters! Hell—if I'd not felt Sookie's anxiety during the attacks upon her which had happened at night, I likely wouldn't even know about Sandra Pelt's continued obsession with my bonded at all.

"Oh—and one other thing," Bill said.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Judith, my sister, is leaving."

"I thought you two were in a relationship now," I responded evenly.

"Unfortunately, I cannot love Judith as she deserves. As you are aware, my heart belongs elsewhere," he said.

How could I fucking forget?

"Make sure that Ms. Pelt gets nowhere near my bonded," I said before hanging up.

The cracked arm of the chair broke off in my hand, and I threw my computer across the room.

Pam entered a moment later. She looked tired and angry, and I knew she had her own stresses.

"Let me guess?" she said snarkily. "Something concerning Sookie?"

"Please arrange for a new computer," I said instead of responding to her snide remark/question.

"Of course, master," she returned flatly. "Because cleaning up after your tantrums is much more important than spending time with my dying girlfriend."

"Then go, Pam," I said tiredly. "I never said you needed to come in tonight anyway. Given our lessening business as of late, why don't you just take off as much time as you need?"

With only a final glare in my direction, Pam left the room—as if I'd just ordered her away from Miriam instead of offering her what she'd wanted.

I sighed and pressed my fingers against my temples in order to create the momentary headache I needed to go along with my mood.

Honestly, it was probably best if Pam and I didn't see each other for a while anyway. Given the stresses we were both facing and the fact that she was very angry at me for not somehow magically
forcing Victor to let her turn Miriam (as if I were a fucking witch!), we'd been—quite literally at times—at each other's throats. Plus, she was pissed off that I was keeping Sookie in the dark about Freyda.

I sighed and texted my new day man Mustapha to replace the computer in my office. And then I rose from my chair and went out into the club. I sighed when I saw that there were almost more employees there than customers.

I looked at Jock, the bartender I'd hired after Alexei killed Felicia. Of course, I knew that he—just like his predecessor—was a spy.

But, ironically enough, I'd always found that spies made very good employees. They were efficient and 90% innocuous so that they wouldn't be suspected of anything at all—let alone spying. The key was to let them find out some "secrets" without letting them learn the most important ones.

Though the number of visitors to Fangtasia had certainly shrunk, Jock was currently the number one draw. He was handsome, and he projected a good combination of charm and mysteriousness.

Overall, I didn't mind him too much—at least, not for a spy—though he did have an annoying habit or two. For example, Jock was the kind of vampire who took up smoking after he'd been turned—a practice I found ridiculous. However, Jock clearly thought that smoking made him look "cooler"—and, inarguably, so did some of the fangbangers.

Pathetic.

In addition, I knew that Jock's real name was Jeffrey. Of course, I'd changed my name a time or two—or thirty-two times to be precise—since I'd become a vampire, but Jock had changed his name after the Great Revelation.

Pathetic.

"Close the bar at 2:00 a.m.," I told Jock. "Pam will be out for a few nights; she's taking a long overdue vacation," I added.

"Oh? Where to?" he asked congenially.

"Actually, I think that humans would call it a 'stay-cation.'"

He winked at two gushing women at the end of the bar for whom he was currently mixing cocktails. "Sometimes the best vacations can be in one's own bed," he said suggestively.

The women giggled.

I rolled my eyes.

"So are you taking off for the night?" he asked me, reminding me of his true purpose for being at Fangtasia.

I gestured around the room. "Not much to do here. I might go check out the competition." Of course, I had no intention of going to the Vampire's Kiss again. Victor's club might have been drawing in most of my fucking customers, but that didn't mean I intended to patronize it a second time. However, I was fine with Jock telling Victor that I might show up.

Plus, I had my own spy in Victor's "inner circle," which was how I knew about Jock in the first place. It's also how I knew that Victor was in Area 1 that night—for a welcome fucking change!
I was just about to leave through the back door of the club when Victor proved that he could be annoying even from across the state, however. I steeled myself before answering my phone.

"Victor," I greeted.

"Northman," he returned, his voice slippery with scorn. "I have a message from the king. He was disheartened to see that Fangtasia's profits were down last month, though he appreciates that you offset the loss to Area 5's tribute by contributing personal funds. I am sorry, old chap. I do hope that the competition from my little club isn't causing problems for yours."

"Healthy competition is always welcome," I said evenly.

"Well—I just wanted to make sure," he said flippantly. "I won't take up any more of your valuable time. I'm sure you have a throne to sit on or something."

I could hear him chuckling as he hung up.

Ignoring the fact that I'd driven to Fangtasia, I took to the air and moved toward Bon Temps. But I stopped when I was about ten miles away. Any closer and I knew that Sookie would feel me in the bond more keenly. And she would be angry at me for meddling or for spying on her or for bothering her domestic bliss or for waking her up or for any number of things.

In truth, I'd come to know the grove of trees that I'd landed among quite well. Many a night since the fairies had tormented Sookie, I'd visited them so that I could be closer to my bonded—so that I could get to her quickly if I felt her distress.

In addition to the newest situation with the Pelt family, I was always wary that Victor would attack me where I was most vulnerable.

"Sookie," I whispered, identifying that vulnerability for the benefit of the cluster of trees.

I sat down heavily near a familiar old oak tree that was creaking in the stiff breeze.

"I feel old tonight too," I said to the majestic creature.

I pulled out my phone and set it next to me, waiting for a call or text from my bonded.

But the phone stayed silent.

Finally, as dawn approached, I dug a hole, and then I got into the ground.

I tried to tell myself that things would get better after the Victor situation was dealt with.

I tried to tell myself that I'd be able to get out of the contract with Freyda.

I tried to tell myself that my bonded loved me more than she hated our bond.

But some things were just getting harder and harder to believe.

I sighed against the dirt I'd used to cover my body, though I was careful not to take any of it into my mouth.

In just a few days, it would be a month since Appius had died.

It had been a wonderful sensation to realize that I'd been freed of my maker at long last.
Yes—the part of me who had eventually appreciated the fact that he'd given me a second life had mourned him a little. But the largest part of me remembered the other things that I'd been "compelled" to learn to appreciate. And that part was simply grateful to Sookie and to the one who had killed Appius.

Even after I'd been sent away by Appius—all those years ago—I'd never really felt free of him. How could I? He'd never truly released me from his power.

But—despite that—the years had moved on, and I'd established my own life.

Eventually, I'd made Karin, whom I'd tried to love as best as I could, though she eventually came to resent me in some ways. I'd allowed her to leave my side on the very night that she'd first asked to do so. And I told her that she could come to me any time after her three hundredth year as a vampire; I assured her that I'd be willing to release her then—without question—since 300 was traditionally thought to be the acceptable age to release one's child according to vampire custom.

Not that I'd ever enjoyed that privilege.

Remembering my own three-hundredth birthday, I coiled my body into the earth like a babe in the womb and had to concentrate not to allow blood to spill from my eyes.

That day had been an especially cruel one for me—thanks to my maker.

But I shook those memories away.

Though older than 300 now, Karin had yet to seek me out to release her. I honestly didn't know whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Either it meant that Karin trusted me not to misuse her, or it meant that she didn't want to see me at all.

I could tell that my first child was still among the undead, of course. Each night, I checked our bond, though I was careful to do no more than that. She'd asked for her privacy before she'd left my side. And I had vowed to respect her request.

With Pam, I'd tried to be a "more fun" parent. I'd catered to her personality—even spoiling her at times. Yes, certainly, I'd indulged her.

Of course, now that I could not give Pam what she needed the most—permanent access to her own beloved—she resented me.

Still, I envied Pam. Miriam wanted to be her child. I knew now that Sookie continued to think of being a vampire as a curse that was worse than even her telepathy.

Or our bond.

I sighed. Clearly, Sookie thought that—as her maker—I would likely control her even more than she thought the bond was already controlling her.

I supposed I couldn't blame her for being wary.

After all, my own "freedom" from my maker had been extremely short-lived. And it had also been an illusion.

Even after my maker had flaked to ash, I was captive to so many things.
For example, I was at the mercy Victor's whims. I shook my head in the loose soil. The ironic thing was that I really could have worked well with de Castro, even if he were a tad bit more hands-on than Sophie-Anne. And I still wanted to be loyal to him. It was in my nature to honor the vows I made, and—when I'd committed to give my fealty to de Castro—I'd truly committed.

I'd hoped for mutual respect with Felipe—just as long as I served him well.

However, Victor had taken an interest in my bonded—the extent of which Sookie had no idea about.

If she did, she would have been scared shitless, given the fact that Victor made Andre look like a harmless boy scout.

I sometimes wondered what might have happened if Sookie had been forced to bond with Andre. As she so often liked to tell me, our bond made her feel things she wouldn't have felt otherwise.

I let out another sigh. Maybe she was right. Maybe any and all affection she had for me was an illusion—just as my freedom had been. Maybe I was wrong about the fact that her fairy nature made her resistant to any influence I might wield. Maybe all of my own hopes for her love had somehow made her believe that she cared for me.

Bonded to Andre, she might have run to him in Rhodes. After all, I could think of no other reason than our bond for her coming to me—unless she'd confused me with "her" Eric that day.

I sighed again. Andre almost always shared a resting place with his maker. If Sookie had focused on him, Andre and Sophie-Anne might have made it out of the Pyramid of Gizeh with only minor injuries—just as Pam and I had.

Quinn could have staked me in such a scenario.

And, despite her desire to obtain Sookie's talent, I knew that Sophie-Anne would have held Andre somewhat in check when it came to the telepath. I sincerely doubt that my old queen would have allowed Sookie to be used sexually by Andre—though I imagined that Andre would have tried to sway her will in that direction. Things would have been difficult for Sookie, but wouldn't she have been better off?

With a strong Sophie-Anne still queen, de Castro wouldn't have attacked.

There would be no Victor in the equation.

My maker would not have been a danger to her.

The fairies—including Niall—would have stayed away from her.

No Neave.

No Lochlan.

No torture.

No guilt over Claudine and her child.

No guilt over Tray.

Or even Clancy.
Wouldn't Sookie be better off?

"Of course she would," I heard Appius's voice in my head.

Yes. My maker had found a way to haunt me. He'd sold me to the Queen of Oklahoma for a hundred years. I was to be her consort—nothing more than muscle and an able cock.

And the hardest part was that I knew that—if I couldn't stop it from happening—Sookie would blame me. I knew that she wouldn't understand that I was bound by my maker's signature—just as much as I would have been bound by a maker's command.

Oh—I suppose I could have run. But what would become of Sookie if I did? For I knew damned well she wouldn't come with me!

No! She would stay in her damned house and in her damned town—where most people thought of her as a pariah—until the bitter end!

And if I did run, I would be a fugitive from the laws of my kind. Thus, I would never find true refuge—at least not anywhere that had any kind of organized vampire population. Sookie was so indoctrinated by the American idea that one could choose his or her fate that she just wouldn't understand that my maker had tried his damnedest to make that impossible for me.

Indeed, I now knew very well that all freedom was mere artifice. And believing in that illusion just meant that the pain of captivity would be that much worse when it came again.

To keep dirt from my mouth, I forced myself not to laugh ruefully.

The night my maker had died, I'd drunk too much fairy blood to trust myself with my bonded, though I'd mustered my control enough so that I could kiss her forehead and call her "dearest" before I'd jetted into the night sky to fly off my "fairy blood high." I'd found myself doing corkscrews in celebration. And, later, I'd found myself floating in the clouds, dreaming of what might be.

Since I'd thought myself free.

All of my dreams had included Sookie by my side—truly by it.

Living in a home we shared—even if I had to move to hers.

Perhaps, we might even adopt children. I'd seen the child, Hunter, in my bonded's home. He was her cousin's child, and Sookie seemed to enjoy caring for him. I was aware that she didn't want to bring a telepathic child into the world, but there had always been displaced children in the world. The villagers of my time would take in the orphans of their family and friends. Hell—I even served as a father to my brother's children after he'd been killed.

Up in the misty clouds, I had visualized asking Sookie to marry me according to the human tradition, a ceremony she would recognize so much more than our pledging.

I'd even begun to design a ring in my imagination—the perfect ring. It couldn't be too ostentatious, or Sookie would deny it on principal. Thus, I'd thought of something relatively small—without a showy diamond in the middle. As I flew on, I looked down toward the earth; the fields of soybeans below me were deep green, and I began to picture a bright emerald in Sookie's ring.

Yes—I'd thought—I would find the perfect time to ask her to be my bride. I would bend onto one knee—in the way Sookie would recognize as "traditional." I would ask her to be my wife. And I
would present her with the perfect ring.

And she would say, "yes."

It had been a nice dream.

However, eventually, I'd had to come back down to earth.

And—the very next night—I'd received two letters: one from Victor informing me "out of
courtesy" that he'd be opening a new club in my area and the other from the Queen of Oklahoma,
containing the first draft of our "marriage negotiations," along with a copy of the contract she'd
signed with Appius.

Yes—I'd fallen back to earth in chains almost as soon as I'd enjoyed the illusion that they were off
of me.
Chapter 04: Rearview Mirror

SOOKIE POV

I'd worked just half a shift and then had slipped out the back door of Merlotte's. Sam had lent me his truck so that I would be less recognizable to Sandra Pelt or any cronies she had working for her.

Still—I'd looked into the rear view mirror about a thousand times on the way to Red Ditch to make sure I wasn't being followed. And I'd kept my shields down too.

The last thing I wanted to do was lead danger in Hunter's direction!

Remy had asked me to come down to Red Ditch for Hunter's "kindergarten introduction." After learning what one of those was, I was sad that such a thing hadn't existed when I started school. Of course, there'd been only two kindergarten teachers in Bon Temps anyway, so I suppose it wouldn't have mattered much in my case.

But there were five in Red Ditch. Remy, Hunter, and I would get to meet all of them, and we would have some choice in who would be Hunter's first teacher.

As I glanced into the rearview mirror again, I couldn't help but to wonder what happened if no kids/parents chose a particular teacher.

I shuddered, thinking of all the times I'd not been chosen by others.

PE classes in school came to the forefront of my mind.

It never failed that I'd be the last one picked, whether we were playing dodgeball, basketball, volleyball, kickball, or tetherball.

I bit my lower lip. Other times I'd not been "picked" had been more subtle. For example, I'd never gotten an invitation for a slumber party or a pool party.

And the one time that Gran had really "tried" to have a party for me—when I turned ten years old —only Jason and Tara had come, though Gran had made sure that all of my classmates had invitations.

She'd even called all the parents of the kids in my grade to remind them.

Given Gran's popularity in town, almost all of them had said that their children would be there— unless something came up at the last minute.

I'd tried warning Gran not to cook too much food.

Not to make too big of a cake.

Needless to say, many leftovers had to be frozen.

"These will make good lunches for you and Jason," Gran had said as I'd helped her to wrap up and store portion after portion of my favorite dishes.

They became less favored by me after that day—because I'd had to hear Gran's disappointment in
not giving me a "good party."

I'd tried to keep smiling so that she wouldn't feel so bad. In fact, it was that day that I found out that smiling could make one's mouth hurt.

Thankfully, Gran never tried throwing me another big party after that.

I shuddered and then said a long prayer to God that Hunter would never have to face such an event. I already knew that he was better off than I'd been at his age, however. He had a dad who cared about him. And, even at five years old, he'd learned how to construct basic shields. And I knew that they'd get stronger with practice.

Most importantly, he knew that he wasn't all alone in the world, and his parent was willing to talk to him about his telepathy.

Plus, he knew not to speak out the thoughts of others when he could help it.

I sighed. There would be no doctors' trips to try to "fix" Hunter. There would be no parents wondering why he was broken and abnormal. There would be no uncle victimizing his mind.

I nodded. Indeed—Hunter would do so much better than I had. And—if he started having trouble—I hoped that Remy would contact me.

I looked into the rearview mirror again and stretched out my telepathy as far as it could go. No one—including Sandra Pelt—was following me.

I breathed out a sigh of relief.

THREE HOURS LATER

Both Hunter and I had "heard" the teacher who would most likely be trouble for him. Though not a Fellowship of the Sun member "officially," she didn't necessarily shy away from the beliefs of the radical group either.

For example, she kept a stake in her desk—just in case.

And—as for the two-natured? Well—she thought that they were worse than vampires. I didn't want to imagine what she'd do if Hunter "slipped up" around her.

Of course, Remy had listened to both Hunter and my misgivings about that teacher. And then he'd signed Hunter up to be in the class of the teacher he got the best vibes from, Mrs. Carter.

Mrs. Carter's bangs were still trapped in the 1980's, but I agreed that she was the nicest of the teachers. And she had a Were son-in-law. Plus, she was a bit hard of hearing.

All-in-all, she was perfect for Hunter.

Remy and I had taken Hunter to the Dairy Queen after the meetings, and I'd treated both of them to Blizzards. Erin, Remy's girlfriend, happened to stop by as well, and we all sat together companionably for a while before it was time for Hunter to go home and take his nap.

I was happy to give Erin and Remy a few minutes alone as Hunter and I went out to Remy's truck.

"You should be my mommy," Hunter said suddenly.

"What?" I asked, having been taken totally by surprise.
"Daddy likes Erin and all, but he really thinks you'd be the best mommy for me," the little boy said as he danced after a butterfly.

I took a deep breath. "But, Hunter, I'm your aunt."

"No you aren't," he said matter-of-factly. "Daddy said you were mama's cousin, so you are my second cousin. Or first cousin once behooved."

"Removed," I corrected.

"Yep—that's it," Hunter smiled as he skipped to the truck. "Anyways, Daddy thinks you'd be a good mommy if you didn't have vampire friends." He shrugged. "But I like vampires. I like how their heads don't say anything."

"Me too," I sighed as I leaned heavily against Remy's truck.

"Will you be my mommy?" Hunter asked. "Please?"

I leaned over to hug him. "I'm sorry, but I can't, baby," I answered.

"Why not?" he frowned.

"I don't love your daddy," I responded. "And mommies and daddies should love each other."

"But—don't you love me?" Hunter asked. "I'd like for you to be my mommy!"

I was tongue-tied, but was saved from answering when Remy came out of the Dairy Queen.

Remy smiled at me. "Hey, Sook, wanna come back with Hunter and me to the house for a bit? You can put Hunter down for his nap if you want."

I felt myself nodding. I loved spending time with Hunter. Plus, I felt that I needed to nip any ideas that Remy might have of him and me getting together in the bud.

Hunter was beautiful.

His hair was dark blond and unruly. I slid my fingers through it.

And I let myself wonder for a moment: what would it be like to have a child—this child? Someone to love with everything in me. Someone who didn't judge me because he was like me.

I imagined having other children too.

I sighed and placed my fingers over my belly.

Being a mother was something I'd always had such mixed feelings about. I suppose that a lot of women felt the desire to have kids—an instinctual urge to be a mother.

I was one of those women.

But—then again—I had long worried about bringing a child into the world. What if he or she shared my curse? Could I protect my child from a world full of thoughts?

I knew what the answer to that question was: "No."

And then there was the more fundamental question. Of the "living" men I'd been around, only Sam
—whom I viewed as only a friend—had ever entertained the notion of having kids with me. On the contrary. Most had cringed at the idea of having a kid with a "crazy" person!

Plus—of the three physical relationships I'd had—only one could have resulted in a child, and having a kid with Quinn just didn't seem palatable, given what I now knew about him.

After Eric's amnesia, I'd had a recurring dream of having children with him—little blond-haired, blue-eyed babies dancing around in the sunlight.

But that dream had ended up being a torment—a repeated piece of torture, reminding me of what could never be.

Sometimes my dream even took me back in time, giving me an Eric with a warm hand for me to hold as we proudly watched our children.

Other times, I watched the children alone in my dreams—but I never did so peacefully.

No. I was often frantically searching for a video camera so that I could record them running in the sun and playing in the light so that their father could see them that way.

But I could never find a camera. And—almost always—some kind of danger would come as I searched for it.

Often that danger looked like Neave and Lochlan.

After having those dreams—those nightmares—I would always wake up feeling like a failure as a mother, even though I was almost certain that I'd never be one.

I pushed those thoughts away and just enjoyed the moment with Hunter before rising to my feet and facing the inevitable discussion with Remy. Truth be told, I had more than one thing to talk about with him.

After a lot more time than I'd thought it would take, Hadley's estate had finally been released to me, and I didn't feel right taking any of it—not when Remy and Hunter might need it.

"You prefer your tea non-sweet—right?" Remy asked me as I found him in the kitchen.

"Yeah. Thanks. A glass of tea would be nice."

I read from his head that he'd made a pitcher of unsweetened tea especially for me. And it wasn't just out of simple hospitality. He was trying to impress me.

Fuck!

"I—um—I'm sorry you had to see me with Erin earlier," he started. "We're not serious."

"No—it's good that you have someone," I said firmly. "She's nice."

Remy sighed. "Yes. But she doesn't understand Hunter. Sookie, do you think that . . . ."

He paused, so I jumped in so that he would be waylaid from any "romance" he might be planning.

"You know," I said, "Hadley had some money when she died. It turned out to be quite a bit, and she made me the person in charge of her will. Um—do you and Hunter need anything?"

"You mean financially?" Remy asked with a frown.
I nodded. "Yeah. Like I said, there's quite a bit, and I also inherited some money from another relative recently, so I don't need what Hadley left."

"No," Remy said defensively. "Hunter and I are doing just fine."

"But if you wanted anything . . . ," I offered.

Remy stood up as if I'd insulted him. "We're good. I thank you for coming out and reading Hunter's potentials teachers, but it's probably best if you get home before dark."

I will admit to feeling a little sucker-punched as I stood up, but I read mostly stubborn pride from Remy's thoughts. He didn't want to think of himself as needing anything from anyone.

In truth, that impulse sounded pretty familiar.

I stood and smiled at him. "Well—thanks so much for the tea. And I won't mention Hadley's money again," I assured. "But—uh—just so you know, I'm plannin' to put it all into a trust in Hunter's name. Maybe for college?" I suggested.

"Hunter will always have what he needs from me," Remy said mulishly.

I sighed. Obviously, all I had to do to make Remy uninterested in me was to offer him money. Good to know.

"Well," I said with a smile, "then it'll be mad money for him one day. Or—uh—he can donate it to charity." I took a breath. "I know that he'll have all he needs from you."

Remy relaxed a little. "I didn't mean to seem ungrateful."

"And you didn't," I replied hurriedly. "Not at all."

In the next moment, Remy was across the room and kissing me—with tongue.

I stood motionless for a moment in shock as his thoughts bombarded me.

He thought I looked a little like Hadley.

He liked my tits.

He figured I would be a good mom for Hunter.

He hoped that I could be convinced to get out of my vampire phase.

In truth, it wasn't the nature of his thoughts that gave me pause.

It was the pain of them "attacking" me all at once.

I pushed at his chest.

"I need to go," I panted as I hurried toward the door.

"Sookie, I . . . ." Remy stopped midsentence and took a deep breath.

"You are trying to do right by Hunter. I know," I assured. "But I'm not single, Remy," I added.

"You're with that vampire," he frowned. "Surely you don't think that will last—do you?"
Remy's words made me cringe, but I still tried to smile through them—channeling my inner Gran or my inner Scarlet O'Hara or my inner bull-shitter. "Well—be that as it may, I'm a one-man kind of girl. But—uh—I'll always be here for Hunter," I assured.

"You could be his mother," Remy said decisively.

Or incisively.

I couldn't quite remember which word was appropriate for describing the figurative knife I had in my gut.

My word of the day calendar was great, but sometimes I didn't remember things perfectly.

"Surely you don't think that being with a vampire is better than being Hunter's mom—do you?" Remy asked with challenge.

I took another step away from him. "Call me if you need anything—for Hunter," I said before practically running out of the house.

In my haste, I tripped and skinned my knee as I tried to pull myself into Sam's truck. But I managed to get into the vehicle only moments later.

I watched Remy get smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror as I drove away.
Chapter 05: Not Putting it Off

SOOKIE POV, CONTINUED

I pushed down on the accelerator and tried to process what had just happened.

Not only had Remy made a move on me, but also Hunter seemed to support the idea of a relationship between me and his dad.

But Remy?

And me?

I shivered.

Nope—I couldn't see that happening.

Even for Hunter, I wasn't willing to marry a man I didn't love—especially not a human man—whose thoughts had literally "hurt" me when he'd kissed me.

Plus, maybe it made me selfish, but—in the end—I just didn't think that it was my job to become the wife that Hadley had failed to be.

I took a deep breath, calming myself down in the process. Had I somehow sent Remy mixed signals—or any signals which would have encouraged that kiss? I honestly couldn't think of any.

I'd certainly not picked up on any overly romantic thoughts from his head regarding me. I took another deep breath. Likely, Remy's advance was based upon his desire to give his son the best life possible, and I suppose he couldn't be blamed for that.

But he could be blamed for some of the things he'd said—things that seemed glaringly manipulative and hurtful. Thinking back, I wished I'd given Remy a piece of my mind, instead of running away.

But—then again—I always ran, according to Eric.

I pulled over to the side of the road and contemplated turning around. Eric had commented before that my default impulse was always to try to escape or to put off dealing with the difficult things.

And, honestly, I knew he had a point.

Taking a deep breath, I took my phone out of my purse and dialed Remy's number.

"Sookie?" Remy answered.

"Yeah. Listen—we need to talk. And I think that we should do it in person, but I also don't want Hunter to be able to read either of our thoughts. Do you think you can get a sitter and meet me?"

Remy sighed. "The woman next door will usually watch Hunter for short periods of time when I need to run an errand or something."

"I'll wait on the line while you check with her," I said firmly.
Clearly, Remy was on his cellphone because I was able to follow the sounds of doors opening and closing and footsteps, followed by the knocking on a door. I heard Remy ask his neighbor if she could sit with Hunter for a little while. And then I heard her agree.

A few seconds later, Remy was back on the line. "Okay, Sookie," he sighed. "Where do you want to meet?"

Being about ten minutes from Red Ditch, I thought back to the businesses I'd passed. One—about five minutes away—had looked a little like Merlotte's.

"There's a bar and grill along the highway—about five minutes from town," I said. "Can we meet there?"

"Okay," he agreed.

I turned the truck around, determined to deal with this issue before Hunter could absorb any more ideas about his dad and me getting together. I didn't want for him to get his hopes up—only to have them dashed.

I was nervous as I walked into the bar and grill. I'd never been good at confrontations.

I saw Remy sitting in a booth and went over to join him. Moments later, a waitress came by and delivered a pitcher of tea, which Remy had obviously ordered. After pouring two glasses, she asked if she could get us anything to eat.

Apologetically, I told her that we'd be having only the tea—but that we wouldn't keep the table for long. Luckily, the place wasn't very busy yet, so the waitress wouldn't be missing out on tips from higher-spending customers.

She nodded and left us to tend to another table.

"Look, Sookie," Remy started, "I'm sorry that I just—uh—kissed you like that. But 'you and me','" he said as he motioned between us, "is something I've been thinking about for a while. I think it really would be best for Hunter."

I sighed and shook my head. "No, Remy. It wouldn't. And it wouldn't be best for either of us either. Hunter would hear from our heads that we weren't really in love with each other and that we were only together for him. And if one of us had regrets—and I guarantee that would happen—he'd eventually blame himself if we were unhappy."

Remy looked down at his tea. "I didn't think about that."

"Have you been telling Hunter that us getting together is a real possibility?" I asked.

He sighed. "Not really."

"What do you mean—'not really'?"

"Hunter heard me thinking about you, and he asked about it. I told him that I was going to ask you out," Remy responded sheepishly. "And listen—that stuff about Hunter blaming himself if things went wrong with us might not even happen. Right? I mean—it's possible that we could really get along if we dated. I like you, Sookie," he said firmly. "You seem like a good and kind person. And I'm attracted to you. Isn't that how a lot of strong relationships start? I really would like to give us a try—for both Hunter and for us, too."
I shook my head. "But neither one of us is single. I don't know what your relationship with Erin is like, but I'm with Eric."

Even if my vampire boyfriend was being secretive and even if I had doubts about the bond, I was committed to Eric. Plus, even if Eric and I weren't "serious"—which I thought we were (and I hoped Eric thought so too)—I couldn't imagine dating two guys at once. I just wasn't built that way.

"Erin and I aren't monogamous," Remy offered. "And—um—it seems like your relationship with your vampire won't last," he added with a shrug.

"Why do you say that?" I asked him.

"Um—well—you've told me that you aren't willing to be turned—right?"

I frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well," Remy said, "I just figured that if he wanted to turn you in order to have a permanent thing—and you didn't want that—he would eventually move on because you aren't willing to commit in that way. And—uh—the fact that you don't want to stay with him—uh . . . ." He paused. "Sorry, but I just assumed it meant that you weren't that serious."

I shook my head. "You're wrong. Yeah—Eric has told me that he wants me to become a vampire, but he's going to follow my wishes on the issue. And—as for what we have—uh—I don't know how long it'll last, but I'm fully committed to Eric."

"Are you?" Remy questioned. "I mean—I don't know a lot about your life—but it doesn't seem like you spend much time with Eric. And I know you aren't living with him. From what I can see, it just seems like you two have sort of a casual thing—like Erin and me. Sorry if I'm wrong, Sookie. Honestly, I wouldn't have tried anything if I had thought that what you had with the vampire was serious."

He chuckled nervously. "I don't have a death wish!" he added.

My frown deepened. Was Remy right? Did I come off as not being serious about Eric? I decided to think about that issue during the drive home.

"I love Eric," I told Remy. "But even if I didn't, you need to know that things couldn't work out between us. Because of my," I paused, "ability, being with a human would be too difficult."

We were silent for a while as Remy thought about what I'd said. I hoped that he would accept my reason and give up any hopes that he had about us. I didn't want to have to add that—even though I thought he was a nice guy and a good father—I just wasn't attracted to him in a romantic way. And I was almost positive that that fact wouldn't change, even if I became single again.

Remy frowned, and I "heard" from his thoughts that he was on the verge of accepting that he and I would never be a couple.

I breathed a sigh of relief as his shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I get it," he murmured, swirling his sweating glass in his hands. "I just—well—being with you would have been perfect in a lot of ways. Hunter would have a mother who accepted him. And I really do—uh, did—think we could be compatible."

"I'm sorry, Remy," I said. "I really am. But being with any human just wouldn't work out for me."
"Do you think it'll be the same for Hunter?" he asked with concern.

"Unless he becomes a lot better at shielding than I am or unless his telepathy is weaker somehow, then—yeah," I sighed. "I think Hunter will have trouble having a human mate. Were and other two-natured people will likely be easier for him to be around, but even their thoughts slip through. And thoughts can be hurtful—even from people who want to love you," I added glumly.

"Is that why you're with a vampire?" Remy asked me.

"It's one reason," I said honestly.

"Well—I can't compete with that," he sighed.

No—he couldn't.

I took a deep breath. "Remy, you need to talk to Hunter. He needs to understand that I love him and that I'll help him with his telepathy in any way that I can, but I'm not going to be his mother." I chuckled. "I know I'm not his aunt, but that's honestly how I look at myself when it comes to him. I really want to stay that."

Remy looked about as anxious at the prospect of talking to his son as he would be to get a root canal.

"I'll do it tonight," he sighed. "I'll make sure he understands."

"Thank you. Listen, Remy, I really do want us to get along without the awkward feelings that I bet you're feeling just as much as I am right now."

He chuckled. "Yeah. Me too."

I noticed that the tables were beginning to fill up in the restaurant, and I took out my wallet.

"I got it," Remy said, quickly taking out his own wallet and pulling a five dollar bill out of it.

I slid out of the booth. "Call me the next time you want me to keep Hunter," I smiled.

"Okay. Look, Sookie—I really am sorry I made you uncomfortable earlier," he said embarrassedly.

"I know," I responded.

I didn't offer him a hug as he left, even though I normally would have. I just didn't want to have to face another thought-barrage in that moment.

After going to the ladies' room, I hurried back to Sam's truck. Overall, I was relieved that I'd gone back to speak with Remy about what had happened, despite the fact that I'd just experienced about the most awkward half hour of my life.

As I restarted the almost ninety-minute drive home, I thought about some of what Remy had said regarding Eric and me.

I didn't mean to project the idea that I wasn't committed to the Viking. However, at the same time, I had to admit that I sometimes wondered how much Eric was actually committed to me. Though I now saw him more regularly, there were still weeklong stretches when I wouldn't see him—or even hear from him, though he always made sure that at least Pam called me nowadays.

I knew that a lot of those stretches of time were because of his work or my work; plus, vampire
politics—especially when Victor was involved—were a murky business.

The truth of the matter was that—although I loved Eric and although I believed that he loved me—I'd reconciled myself to the fact that he would never be able to put me first.

I sighed. Maybe the fact that I didn't want to be turned would eventually lead Eric to break things off with me—as Remy had speculated.

And—undoubtedly—things would become more complicated for us once I began to noticeably age. A part of me wondered if I would reconsider being turned when that time came. Honestly, I just wouldn't know until then.

As the countryside passed quickly by, I speculated about how quickly my life would seem to pass by for an immortal like Eric. I tried to imagine myself as an old woman looking at his still-young face. Somehow, I couldn't quite picture him sticking with me for that long. Eventually, I wouldn't be able to be a viable sexual partner for him. And—as I got older—I wouldn't be able to provide him with blood either.

And what of the bond?

Eric had said that it was permanent, so he might be trapped with me until I died. Eric had told me before that he was being faithful to me, and I believed him. But I couldn't help but to wonder if the bond was partly responsible for his faithfulness.

Did it make fidelity easier for him? Or did it make being with someone else harder?

I knew that I would have a difficult time being with someone else if I could feel Eric's sadness, displeasure, or jealousy through the bond. I also knew that feeling his affection or lust for someone else would hurt like hell!

Unlike me, Eric seemed to "like" our bond, but I wondered if that would hold true in a few decades.

My musings had to be put on hold, however, as I arrived back at Merlotte's. I could tell the bar and grill was busy, so I slipped in the back and left a quick thankyou note for Sam—along with some gas money and his keys—and then hurriedly left again, taking my car this time.

Again, I looked in my rearview mirror and kept my shields down as I left Merlotte's. I breathed out a sigh of relief when there was no sign of Sandra Pelt.

I just hoped that Amelia and Bob had managed to strengthen the wards around my house.

A few minutes later, I parked behind the old farmhouse just as the sun was nearing the tops of the trees to the west.

I could see Amelia and Bob in the kitchen. They were smiling; no they were laughing.

I smiled sadly as I thought about the sweet domestic moment I would soon be interrupting.

I closed my eyes and thought of how sad Amelia had been following Tray's death. I said a prayer of thanksgiving that she'd found Bob again. Some people might have seen Amelia's jumping into another relationship after she'd lost Tray as being a sign that she'd not truly loved the Were, but I knew better.

She'd viewed Tray as her soul mate. I could "hear" from her thoughts that she loved Bob too—
though in a different way. Still, he was good for her. They were good for each other from what I
could tell and "hear."

Bob had clearly gotten over the "cat incident." And he obviously cared for Amelia a great deal.
There was a level of comfort and ease between them.

I finished up my prayer by asking God to keep them both safe and happy.

I listened carefully for other minds in the area before I got out of my car. Neither of my fairy
roommates were home, which didn't surprise me. They spent most of their evenings at Hooligan's,
using the "in case vampires come over" excuse.

Given that most of the vampires in my life looked at them as if they were tasty steaks, I couldn't
really blame them.

Happily, there were no threats in the area either, so I hurried in to find Amelia and Bob cooking
dinner. I couldn't help but to smile. The fairies in my life were family by blood, but Amelia had
always felt like "real" family, and it was so nice to have her home—even if it was just for a day or
two more.
Chapter 06: Inevitability

AMELIA POV

Sookie told Bob and me about her day in Red Ditch, even as we finished the dinner we'd been making.

I wasn't actually too surprised that Remy had tried something with her. But I was surprised—and glad—to hear that she'd gone back to set things straight with him.

Generally, Sookie avoided dealing with problems like the plague! I just wished that she'd chosen to deal with her issues with Eric, instead of those which had sprung up with Remy.

Baby steps.

As we ate, Bob and I told her about the new wards, and then Sookie asked tons of questions about us, obviously happy to be catching up on our lives.

I felt guilty then, recognizing even more than before that I hadn't been a good friend to Sookie for a while—probably even before Tray died. I'd been very self-focused back then—even though I'd known that Sookie was struggling over her relationship with Eric and their bond. And—of course—Bill and Quinn had been hovering around the edges back then too, just enough to lay small claims upon Sookie's feelings, even though she had made it clear that she was pursuing something with Eric.

Talk about never leaving well enough alone!

I figured that Bill was skulking around outside even then—using the excuse of "guarding" Sookie to stay as close as possible to her. And I wouldn't put it past Quinn to randomly pop out of the woodwork either.

"So—uh—how's the witch stuff going?" Sookie asked Bob and me. I'd zoned out a bit since Sookie had been asking Bob about his "day job" as a hairdresser. He'd been telling her about the new shop he worked at.

"We're working together on that," Bob said with a grin, even as he reached out to take my hand. I gladly thread my fingers with his.

I explained to Sookie that Bob was now working part-time at the Genuine Magic Shop owned by my coven. I also told her about my own promotion—both at the store and in the coven.

I could tell that she was genuinely happy for me, though she knew that my success in New Orleans would mean that I wouldn't be coming back to Bon Temps to live. After a couple of seconds though, Sookie seemed to take that knowledge in stride—just as she did with most of her disappointments.

Given the topic of the magic shop, I wasn't surprised when Sookie asked if I'd learned anything about breaking blood bonds between vampires and humans.

I sighed, knowing that there was no way I would be able to keep the things I'd learned from her now. I'm sure my thoughts were screaming about the information—even then.
Stupid, uncontrollable thoughts.

"I learned quite a bit about bonds," I admitted, squeezing Bob's hand for support, "including how to break them."

"Really?" Sookie asked looking suddenly excited—and hopeful. "There's a way to get rid of it? There's a way to know that my feelings are really mine? Can we do it now?"

"Are you sure you want to?" I asked.

"Yes!" she said with even more conviction, as she literally bounced in her seat.

"Sookie, how much do you know about bonds?" I asked cautiously. "How much has Eric told you?"

She sighed heavily. "Honestly, not a lot. Whenever I bring up the fact that the bond is controlling how I feel, he sort of shuts down about it. And, whenever he tries to talk about it, I sort of shut down about it," she added a little guiltily.

"Sookie, breaking a blood bond is a major decision," Bob said. "There are consequences—potentially both physical and political."

"To Eric? It could hurt him?" she asked with concern.

"Well—not during the bond breaking itself, but he would certainly feel the loss of you," Bob explained.

"And you'd feel the loss of him," I added.

Sookie frowned. "I can't imagine that that'd be any worse than not knowing what I feel."

"At least call Eric about this," I said firmly. "Talk it over with him before you do anything rash—okay?"

She sighed heavily. "I'd rather just do it. If I know Eric, he will try to talk me out of it, and what if he succeeded? I'd be in the same boat I'm in now—wondering if anything I feel is genuine." She threw up her hands in frustration. "I honestly don't even know what I actually feel anymore! I get this amazing, warm feeling whenever Eric comes near me—even if I'm having a horrible day. How can I know that any of my feelings are real—since I know that one's not?"

I felt myself getting frustrated with my friend, mostly because she was trying to make me an accomplice to what I felt was a very rash decision on her part.

However, I took a breath and tried to put myself in her shoes for a moment.

"You can feel Eric's emotions—right?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yeah. That's part of the bond."

"And you say that you feel different when you see Eric?" I asked.

"Yeah. Especially right at first. I feel better, calmer somehow," she sighed. "I know Eric's just trying to make me feel better—pushing all these feelings at me—but it ends up feeling fake."

"Sook, what if what you feel when you first see him is actually what he feels when he sees you?" I asked. "What if he's not trying to influence you at all? What if he's just letting you know that you
make him feel better and calmer?"

She looked a little stunned at that thought—but then doubtful.

"I guess that's the point," she said sadly. "I can't even tell my own emotions from his anymore. So—what if all my doubts are actually his? It's not like either of us chose to bond. Andre forced us to do it."

"But you've told me that Eric likes the bond," I reminded.

She shrugged. "But will he continue to like it once I'm old and gray? Plus, wouldn't it be better for the both of us if we were sure about our feelings for one another?"

"You aren't sure of whether you love him?" I asked her.

She looked down and shook her head. "No. I think I love him. I want to love him. I thought I loved Bill once, too, but now I wonder if his blood influenced that. And it's so confusing with Eric since I fell in love with him when he had amnesia. And—yes—that was before we bonded, but not before I had his blood. And then—by the time we got together again—we had bonded."

She closed her eyes, squeezing them tightly shut.

"Please, Ames," she said. "I need to break the bond. I have to know what I feel; otherwise, I'll never trust Eric—not enough. And I'll never trust myself either."

"Okay," I said, "Bob and I will do it—but on one condition."

She opened her eyes and nodded excitedly. "Okay. Anything!"

I took a deep breath, even as I thought about all the times I could have been a better friend to Sookie. I was determined, however. Tonight I would be that better friend, even if Sookie hated me for it.

"Tonight we're going to Fangtasia, and I want your word that you will talk to Eric about bonds—that you'll speak with him about your relationship for," I paused, "one hour—at least. And that you'll ask all the questions you have—especially the scary ones. And that you'll honestly answer all the questions he has—even the scary ones."

Sookie paled considerably as she listened to my request. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat—as if my words had put ants into her pants. Literally.

"But—uh—Eric probably isn't even at Fangtasia tonight," she whimpered.

"The where doesn't matter," I said, rolling my eyes.

"But he's probably busy," she said again, "with the—uh—Victor mess."

"Call him," I ordered, unwaveringly.

She frowned. "This is ridiculous. Even if he was there, he wouldn't agree to what you're suggesting."

"Dial, Sookie!" I pressed.

Biting her bottom lip in a way that looked uncomfortable, she took her phone from her purse and dialed.
ERIC POV

I took my place on my throne, though, nowadays, doing so was more of a habit than anything else. I never chose a human to feed upon and/or fuck anymore. I would never disrespect my bonded in such a way—whether or not she realized that I'd vowed to be faithful to her in all ways.

Of course, my maker had taken even that vow away from me.

I tried to push that thought aside.

No one needed to know about the night when Appius decided that he "wanted to relive a few good times with me," especially not Sookie. Nobody needed to know that—although I'd tried to fight him off and was hurt badly in the process—Appius did not take "no" for an answer. He never had.

Sookie also didn't need to know that my vow of fidelity in peril once again—if I was forced to become Freyda's consort.

I tried to brush that thought away too as I looked at the sparse clientele in my once-thriving club.

Hell! Even if I had still been selecting among fangbangers, the pickings were slim tonight—thanks to Victor's new club, Vampire's Kiss. I looked around Fangtasia. Opening my club had been a good idea—once upon a time. And I'd made a lot of money from the venture, but I was heavily contemplating just giving my share of the business to Pam. She could do with it as she wanted then, implementing whatever ideas that popped into her head. Or she could sell the club and move on.

I sighed again.

Given my own uncertain future in regards to Oklahoma, it seemed wise to see to Pam's security—either way. Plus, I doubted very much that she'd want to have anything to do with me after Miriam died.

I frowned, anticipating that—if Pam decided to leave my side—I would have to give her the same speech I'd given Karin many years before. I'd have to explain that—though I wouldn't yet free her—I also wouldn't use my maker's call upon her again unless she was in peril. I would also tell her that 300 was the "magic number" when it came to setting vampire children free, and I would promise to do so for her without question if she ever came to me following that "birthday."

Of course, I wouldn't explain how I'd learned about that tradition myself—or how Appius had used it to toy with my hopes. No. That was a story I'd told no one. And it was the reason why I should have known that my maker would find a way to keep ultimate control over my life—even after his final death.

I worked hard to school my expression as I felt my despair. I imagined marriage contracts lined up for millennia—one right after the next, transferring me from monarch to monarch like the "basest of whores," as Appius had once enjoyed labeling me.

I was brought out of my thoughts by my phone ringing. I quickly zipped to my office to answer it, as I recognized the sound of the ringtone as the one I'd chosen for my bonded.

"Sookie," I said, wondering what my tone of voice must have sounded like to her. Could she tell that I was thankful—though worried—that she'd called?

"Hi," she said somewhat meekly.

"It is nice to hear from you, lover," I said, trying to muffle both my concern and my earlier despair.
Had she somehow felt that—from so far away?

Is that why she was calling?

"Eric—uh—Amelia's in town, and we thought we'd come to Fangtasia for a while. Are you there?"

"Yes."

"Oh," she said, sounding a little disappointed. "We wouldn't want to bother you."

"Your presence is always welcome," I responded.

"Tell him we'll be there in about an hour," a feminine voice I recognized as Amelia's said from the background.

"Did you get that?" Sookie asked nervously.

"Yes. I'll be happy to see you, Sookie," I said softly.

"Uh—sure. Me too," she stammered before telling me goodbye and hanging up.

I accessed the bond.

She felt anything but happy.

NINETY MINUTES LATER

Since I knew that Sookie was coming, I had beefed up security by calling in a number of vampires whose loyalty I didn't question. However, they weren't in the club; that would draw too much attention, and Jock would unquestionably report any extra vampire presence to Victor.

Plus, I knew that Victor had a "secret" camera trained on Fangtasia's exterior. However, all of my loyal vampires knew how to avoid its range.

As the ninety-second minute had come and gone since Sookie's call, I wondered if she'd changed her mind, even though I could feel her getting closer in the bond. However, I knew enough about my bonded by now to recognize that she might have talked Amelia into checking out another Shreveport club—maybe even Vampire's Kiss.

Or maybe they'd visit Herveaux's pack.

Or a witches' coven.

Or the botanical gardens, which had begun staying open at night.

Or maybe the Super Walmart which had opened a mile up the road would catch Sookie's fancy.

I certainly felt no anticipation coming from Sookie; on the contrary, she was a ball of nerves.

I sipped my TrueBlood, marveling at the fact that I'd finally gotten used to the taste.

When had that happened?

Just as I was about to go up to the roof so that I could have a better vantage point, I felt Sookie nearing to within a mile of me.

My whole body relaxed at the presence of my bonded. The few days since I'd been near her had
been too long. Of course, I'd not told Sookie that it physically hurt me to be apart from her. She would see such information as another defect of the bond, after all. And our bond was already suspect enough in her mind.

For a moment, I let myself enjoy her proximity, the joy of my own spirit insuppressible. I knew that—with within moments—I would face her suspicions and her fear that I was somehow controlling her emotions with my own, however. So I tried to limit my reaction.

Calm.

Control.

These were the things Sookie reacted against with the least forcefulness. Indeed, it was my joy that she seemed to push against the most.

I collected a breath just to mark the moment as she walked into the club. She was wearing one of her sundresses—orange with blue flowers.

Pam would have remarked that orange was such a "difficult" color if she'd been there. But she wasn't there, and it didn't look "difficult" on my bonded anyway. Sookie looked as lovely as ever.

As always, I took a mental snapshot of her and locked it into my mind, where it would be with me until I met my final death.

Amelia had her arm interlocked with Sookie's as if she'd needed to usher her inside. The witch was wearing a jet black dress, and a somewhat dopey-looking human male followed them.

I inhaled and smirked as a recognized the scent.

Bob. The cat.

It didn't escape my notice that Amelia seemed to be the leader of the little group. With difficulty, I kept my seat on the throne rather than jetting to my bonded.

Not surprisingly, Sookie seemed as reluctant to see me as I was eager to be with her. And she headed toward the bar as soon as Amelia let her go. I noticed that Bob followed Sookie, even as Amelia stalked up to me.

"Can we talk for a minute?" she asked.

I looked at Sookie.

She was studiously avoiding my gaze. Her emotions were all over the place. But mostly she was scared.

"She's afraid," I hissed.

"Yes. Very." Amelia said. "And for a long time." She looked at me pleadingly. "Help me stop that—will you?"

"I would have her smile—all the time," I found myself saying. "I curse all her fears."

"Is there somewhere that we could speak privately?" she emphasized.

I nodded and then led Amelia back into my office. It was soundproof and had been warded. It was the only certain sanctuary in the club from Victor's spy.
"There is a ward here," Amelia commented.

I nodded in confirmation.

"It is a good spell," the witch observed, "but I could make it better."

"How?" I asked.

"What one thing do you care about the most in this room?" she asked.

I frowned. "Why?"

"The privacy spell in here is efficient, but it lacks heart," she returned. "For spells to be virtually unstoppable, I've learned that they need heart."

I contemplated whether or not to let Amelia Broadway perform any magic in my presence. After all, she'd once turned a man into a cat! However, her eyes seemed wiser since I'd seen her last, and the smell of magic emanating from her was much more pronounced—and mature.

Thus, I opened my desk drawer, lifted the false bottom out of it, and then pulled out a picture.

"I care for this," I said as I slid the picture toward the witch.

The image had been captured from security footage; it pictured Pam and Sookie speaking at the bar. Both looked happy. In fact, they were both laughing.

I'd done a screen capture and I'd had the image printed.

I gazed at it often.

The witch looked at me knowingly and then said some Latin words over the picture before sliding it back to me.

"You can put it back," she said. "And—as long as it is in the room—the ward will hold more tightly."

I nodded and placed the photograph where it had been after glancing at the smiles of my child and my bonded for a moment.

"Your soul is hurting," Amelia said.

"Yes," I admitted.

"Sookie has no idea that you are suffering from bond sickness—does she?"

I stood up and turned my back to her. "You will not tell her," I said insistently. "She has too much to bear already."

"And what about your burdens?" she asked.

"I am a vampire," I said simply. "Burdens are required, accepted, and dealt with."

Amelia sighed deeply. "You are as stubborn as she is when it comes to hiding feelings."

I chuckled at that statement. "My stubbornness is nothing compared to Sookie's." I shrugged. "Maybe it is for the best that she refuses to entertain the notion of becoming a vampire. Can you
imagine the level of stubbornness she might achieve if she had a thousand years to perfect it?"

"Horrifying," she smirked.

"Well," I shrugged, "we'll never know."

She sighed. "She wants me to break your bond, and I have a spell that will do it."

I sat down heavily in my chair.

"Well—then—that's it," I sighed.

For once it wasn't difficult to keep my feelings out of the bond. I felt the sledgehammer of inevitability, and—thankfully—it brought numbness with it.
A Good Start

Chapter 07: A Good Start

ERIC POV, CONTINUED

Unfortunately, I could see all of the inevitable dominoes falling.

According to Cataliades, my best and only defense against Freyda's claim upon me was the argument that I was already bonded and pledged to another supernatural.

The demon lawyer wasn't sure the strategy would work, given the fact that Sookie didn't act as if we were bonded or pledged, but he assured me that he would continue to be my advocate as long as Sookie continued to be my wife.

I couldn't help but to wonder how Cataliades would view my pledge with Sookie—if it didn't have the power of blood to back it up.

Likely, he would discount it as quickly as de Castro and Victor would.

I closed my eyes. "My human mother tried to teach me to never want more than I could have," I said in a whisper, not necessarily talking to the witch. "But I was a poor student then, just as I am now."

Yes. The dominoes would fall.

And—worst of all—I would soon be without our bond: the only thing I could use to assure myself that Sookie wasn't being brutalized by another pair of fairies.

Or Wereas.

Or vampires.

Of course, I would soon be powerless to do anything to come to her aid even if she were in trouble anyway.

I'd be even more powerless than I'd been when Victor wrapped me in silver to keep me from going to Sookie when Neave and Lochlan had her.

Indeed, without the bond, my case against Freyda would likely be overturned immediately. And I would soon be the property of the Queen of Oklahoma for a century.

Immediately, my mind kicked into action—working through steps that might keep Sookie safe through such a scenario.

"I thought you would be angrier to hear that Sookie planned to do away with the bond," Amelia said cautiously, interrupting my scheming.

In truth, I'd forgotten that she was in the room.

"Angry?" I asked, my voice sounding detached even to my own ears. "No—I'm grateful that you've warned me. Otherwise, I would have thought she'd died."

The witch sighed. "That is one of the many things Sookie has no idea about regarding the bond."
Why don't you tell her about it?"

I frowned. "But the more she knows, the more she hates the bond."

"That ship's about to sail anyway," Amelia said. "But—I've gotten Sookie to agree to something. And I hope that you will agree to it, too."

"She agreed? To what?" I asked suspiciously.

Witches always made me suspicious.

"A conversation—with you. At least an hour of honest speaking. Any question she asks, you answer. Any question you ask, she answers. No matter what. Honestly."

"Sookie would never agree to that," I frowned.

"She already has," Amelia said. "That's the price she is willing to pay for me and Bob to break the bond tomorrow."

"And what will I get? For agreeing to this conversation?" I asked bitterly.

"A chance?" Amelia offered. "I think you and Sookie are a lot alike; both of you assume too much about each other. Maybe—if you were both completely open and honest with one another?" She stopped for a moment. "Who knows what could happen?"

"There are things I cannot tell her," I said.

"No. There are things you choose not to say," the witch said with clear frustration. "What? Are you more loyal to de Castro and Victor than you are to Sookie? I can't imagine any political secrets that you'd need to keep from Sookie at this point."

I frowned at the presumptuous witch. "There are other things—personal things."

She scoffed. "Well—if you aren't willing to open up about personal things with Sookie and to have a real relationship with her, then maybe she's right that the bond between you needs to be broken right away!"

I felt my fangs snapping into place.

"No!" I yelled out. In that moment, I wanted to kill the witch for threatening the bond, but I stayed my hand.

"There's the anger I expected," Amelia said with a smirk. She shrugged. "You and Sookie are both so worried that you're about to be rejected that you're afraid to fight for each other."

"Do you know what will happen if she breaks the bond?" I asked her.

"Some things—I can only guess," she answered soberly. "The point is that Sookie doesn't know. However, you could tell her."

"If I told you about all the potential fall-out for your friend, you wouldn't be so anxious to work your spell," I said sullenly.

"I'm not anxious to do it," she sighed with exasperation. "That's why I dragged Sookie here tonight."
"Don't do the spell!" I ordered—begged.

"I don't want to, but—if after tonight—Sookie still wants it, I will do it," Amelia said stubbornly.

I growled.

"Sookie wants the bond gone because she thinks it's causing her feelings for you," Amelia said.

"I know," I seethed. "I have told her that it could not do that, but she doesn't trust me."

"She doesn't trust anyone not to leave her or to use her," the witch returned sadly. "And she knows that you are hiding something from her—something big," she added warningly.

"How?" I asked.

"Because—despite all of her naiveté when it comes to being in a relationship—she loves you enough to notice when you are troubled about something," she said, her eyebrow raising knowingly. "Or maybe she's picking up a huge dosage of your unease through the bond. Either way, she doesn't know what's going on, and you should be the one to tell her."

"But I want to protect her," I whispered.

"You can't do that by hiding from her," Amelia said sagely.

"But what if she keeps hiding from me?" I asked—in a moment of vulnerability I wished immediately that the witch hadn't seen.

"An hour, Eric," Amelia said compassionately. "You have an hour to help Sookie to trust in you. You have an hour to help her to understand about the bond and about whatever else is troubling you. She's agreed to be completely honest and open. And I'm going to tell her that you have done the same."

"But I haven't agreed to that," I frowned.

"I'm taking the fact that you haven't killed me—despite the fact that I'm the one who knows how to break the bond—as your tacit agreement," she grinned.

"I still could—kill you, you know," I warned as she shut the door behind her.

She was cackling.

Damned witches!

SOOKIE POV

"He's agreed," Amelia said as she parked herself onto the barstool next to the one I was sitting on.

I frowned. Why was the thought of having a long conversation with Eric so daunting?

Oh—yeah. It was that I was worried about what would likely happen at the end of that conversation—worried that Eric would finally realize that I wasn't worth the effort.

Or worried—maybe—to find out something about Eric which would make me want to end our relationship.

Reluctantly, I put down the liquid courage I'd been drinking and slipped off of the barstool.
"It'll be okay," Amelia said encouragingly. "And if you still want the spell, we'll do it tomorrow."

I nodded.

"We'll be here when you're done," Bob added supportively. I was actually starting to like him.

"Thanks," I said before turning to walk away. When I was halfway across the dancefloor, Amelia's screeching voice stopped me.

And the volume of her thoughts only added to it.

"Oh—and no sex!" the bitch—I mean witch—yelled loudly. "I know how you and Eric are about having monkey sex in order to avoid dealing with your shit!"

"Amelia," I hissed as I turned beet-red.

There weren't many people in the club, but they were all looking at me in that moment.

My so-called friend just shrugged. "Don't lie and tell me you weren't considering it," she said just as loudly.

I glared at her. Okay—maybe I had been thinking about using sex in order to avoid the talking part. But that was no reason for Amelia to yell out her suspicions—in public!

She could have just "thought" them at me!

I turned around again, and—with all the dignity I could muster (which wasn't a lot in that moment)—I strode toward Eric's office.

I hated that I became calmer and more and more happy as I neared the vampire.

"Could you stop doing that?!!" I asked with an exasperated sigh as I entered the office and slammed the door behind me.

"Stop doing what?" he asked with a frown.

"Stop trying to calm me down, trying to make me happy!" I said with frustration. "I just want to feel how I actually feel! I don't need you trying to control that."

Eric shook his head. "I'm not pushing my emotions onto you, Sookie."

"Yes. You. Are!" I returned harshly. "I'm not dumb. I can feel it!"

"You are dumb sometimes!" he growled.

I glared at him. "Don't call me stupid!"

"I wouldn't if you'd just think for a minute, goddammit! The bond allows you to feel my emotions. And—fucking fool that I am—I found myself comforted and happy that I was about to see you!"

He paused. "You. Felt. That!"

We glared at each other for a moment.

"Despite the fucking fact that Amelia told me that you aren't really here by choice and the fact that I can feel that you don't want to be here!" he continued, raking his hands through his hair. He looked tired—old—in that moment. "Maybe I'm the stupid one to feel so glad that you are here,"
he added wearily.

"That's what I felt? You weren't trying to affect my emotions?" I asked, astonishedly—ashamedly.

"No," he said sarcastically. "I'd like for you to be glad to see me on your own for a fucking change!"

"I am glad to see you," I sighed in defeat, even as I slumped into a chair. "I just don't enjoy feeling like I'm being coerced into talking with you."

"Then we won't talk," he said.

"Amelia said no sex," I muttered—immediately blushing when I realized I'd vocalized my thought.

Eric chuckled. "This room is soundproof. We can do what we want." He paused. "But I don't like the idea of your resenting me if we speak about things you don't wish to speak about."

"What about you? Do you want to talk about," I paused, "us?"

He sighed. It was an odd sound to accept coming from a vampire, especially from Eric—but I'd heard it more and more from him lately.

"If I can convince you to stay bonded with me, I will do whatever it takes," he responded evenly. "Even talk."

"What if I convince you that getting rid of the bond would be the best for the both of us?" I asked.

"You won't," he returned. "But based on what your witch friend told me, she's planning to help you to eliminate the bond—whether I approve or not—if you still want to do it after our talk."

Again he sighed.

"You look tired. Sad," I said with concern.

"I am—both," he admitted.

"I don't want to hurt you, Eric," I said with a sigh of my own. "I just want to know that my feelings are my own."

"They are," he said confidently.

"How do you know?" I asked. "And, more importantly, how can I know? You told me yourself that you'd never had a bond like ours. How do you even know that your feelings for me . . . ."

"My love for you," he interrupted.

I gasped. "How do you even know that love's real and not just a byproduct of the bond—or the result of the spell that had you acting so unlike yourself that I have a difficult time thinking of you and that other Eric as the same person?"

"You think I am so different from the man who stayed in your home?" he asked.

"I know it," I responded.

Again, he sighed. "You are wrong, Sookie. That other Eric—'your' Eric, as I've heard you call him—is a part of me. He just had no memories or experiences to make him guarded. He had no fears
beyond the immediate troubles he'd found himself in—until he loved you, that is. In fact, the only fear that truly threatened to gut him was losing you." He looked down at his hands. "He and I share that fear."

"Eric," I said with a frown. "You won't lose me."

"I will lose you," he returned. "Even if everything I'm currently planning for—hoping for—comes to fruition, it is just a matter of time."

"I'm sorry I don't want to be a vampire," I said.

"So am I."

ERIC POV

The more Sookie and I spoke, the more I saw the wisdom of the witch. Open, honest communication wasn't something that either Sookie or I had ever excelled at. But it seemed to be our only hope at the moment.

"Will you do this with me?" I asked Sookie after we'd been silent for a few moments following her reiteration that she didn't want to become a vampire.

"Do what?" she asked, deflecting.

I smirked. "How about you ask a question first. I'll answer. Then it'll be my turn to ask something. And we can trade off for an hour. Or—if we don't have a question and just want to say something—that could be a turn, too."

She shifted uncomfortably and bit her lower lip.

"Promise me something, and then I'll agree?" she asked.

I nodded. "Anything in my power to promise—I will."

"Don't hate me if I decide that I need to break the bond," she whispered.

"I might get angry, but hating you is one thing that I could never do, min kära," I responded softly, "so that is an easy promise to make."

She took a deep breath. "Okay. We'll trade off questions."

I took out my phone and set my alarm. "For an hour," I said. "And I will tell you everything, even if it's hard," I promised.

I reached across the desk for her hand. She extended hers to join mine. I was grateful for that.

She squeezed my hand, probably looking for comfort. I squeezed hers back, making sure I was careful with the pressure of my gasp.

She was so fucking fragile—yet so much stronger than she thought she was.

I felt her determination, and I pushed my own into the bond as well.

She smiled and nodded at me as she recognized the sensation coming from the bond—from me.
It was a good start.
Chapter 08: Digging Deeper

SOOKIE POV

A lot of questions spilled over into my conscious thoughts—questions about blood and bonds. But I found myself wanting to ask Eric a different kind of question first.

Maybe I was stalling. Or maybe I was trying to cut to the heart of the matter.

"Why do you love me?" I asked.

His lips turned upward. "An hour wouldn't be enough to adequately explain all my reasons."

I rolled my eyes. "Summarize," I ordered.

He contemplated for a moment. "From the first, I liked that you challenged me, though I have—since then—sometimes resented that you seem to challenge only me at times." He shrugged. "What I feel for you—what I've always felt—is as complicated as anything I've ever known, even when I was a human. From the first night that I saw you—dressed so inappropriately for visiting a vampire bar—you pulled at each and every feeling I'd tried to withhold for a thousand years. And I was powerless against your tugging. I could list your attributes: your beauty, your bravery, your loyalty, your cleverness, your ethics. Your smile," he added with a soft smile of his own. "Have you ever heard of a Persian poet named Rumi?"

I shook my head. "No."

"He was an Islamic scholar. After making me, Appius decided we would travel to the Middle East where I would be," he paused, "better appreciated for the differences in my looks and height." His expression clouded for a moment as he thought about Appius, but he went on. "The Persian Empire was vast, and the vampire courts there were difficult places to be, but, eventually, I gained enough freedom to explore the human world around me. Persia was vibrant with color and scholarship, and I was eager to learn."

He smiled, his face taking on a look of pleasure and nostalgia—almost innocence. "I especially remember the music—instruments the likes of which I'd never heard or imagined. I met Rumi in what humans now call Afghanistan, which was—then—a part of the Persian Empire. He was well-known even during his lifetime and told me the most profound thing I've ever heard about love."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Rumi said, 'However much I might try to expound or explain Love, when I come to Love itself, I am ashamed of my explanations. Love alone can explain the mysteries of love and lovers.'"

Eric shrugged. "At least, that's the best translation I can offer."

"But what does it mean?" I asked with a frown.

"It means that I could never answer your question well enough," Eric said, squeezing my hand. "No words would be adequate no matter what language I chose to speak in," he added softly.

I bit my lower lip, never expecting such a heart-felt explanation from him. And I felt love literally
engulfing me like a warm hug.

"Are those your feelings?" I asked him.

"It's not your turn to ask a question," he whispered. "But, yes," he offered nonetheless. "You are feeling my emotions spilling over."

With my free hand I wiped away an errant tear. "Your turn," I whispered.

"Why didn't you call me last night? To tell me about Sandra Pelt?" he asked. Immediately, I tensed.

"Please," he urged. "Please tell me why it had to be Bill Compton who informed me. Please tell me why I had to experience him gloating over the fact that he clearly had more knowledge about my —" he paused, "about you—than I did."

I felt immediately defensive. "Isn't he your spy when it comes to me anyway?"

"Only when you don't tell me things—like the fact that Ms. Pelt broke out of jail," he challenged.

"Well—I don't appreciate your using Bill like that," I said sullenly.

"And I despise the fact that—whenever he does offer me information—he implies that you find me inadequate!" Eric balked, ripping his hand from mine. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to stomach the fact that you trust Bill Compton more than me? Even after all he's done to you?"

"But I don't trust him more than you!" I denied, shaking my head.

"Oh? Then why not call me last night? Why not tell me that you were potentially in danger?"

"When am I not in danger?" I asked wryly.

"Never!" he said with frustration. "And that's why I need to know about everything that threatens you!"

"Why? So that you can micromanage my life and put a bunch of restrictions on me?" I asked with fury.

"No!" he yelled, though his anger was immediately spent and his shoulders slumped as if in defeat. "I just want to protect you. I don't want you to be harmed as you were before. I never want to fail you again!" he said passionately. "But how can I do anything to make sure you are safe when you won't let me in?"

I sighed, but didn't know how to respond.

"So, again," he asked, "why didn't you tell me about Sandra Pelt?"

I shut my eyes tightly and took several deep breaths, forcing myself not to answer with questions of my own or accusations. "Several reasons," I whispered.

"Tell me—please. Is it because you have more faith in Bill—after I failed you with the fairies? Do you love him more than you love me?"

"No!" I exclaimed, opening my eyes and grasping for his hand again. "Why would you think those things?"
"Bill," Eric said softly. "Every time he calls to tell me something that I wish you would have told me, his very tone implies that you prefer him."

He looked vulnerable in that moment, and my heart lurched as if it were trying to beat for him.

"What am I to think if you do not tell me of such dangers in your life? Even if you do not see yourself as my wife—am I not your," he paused, "boyfriend? Am I not a part of your life too?"

"Yes," I said, suddenly feeling ashamed of myself. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you would look at the situation that way. I didn't want to worry you. I was tired last night and didn't want you to . . . ." I stopped midsentence.

"What, Sookie? You didn't want me to do what?"

"Come rushing over and make me feel better," I sighed with resignation. "Plus, I figured you'd have more important things to do."

"More important? What could be more important than protecting you?" he asked incredulously.

"It wouldn't be the first time I wasn't your first priority," I muttered before I could stop myself. I immediately felt his pain at my words, and then I felt nothing as he seemed to shut off his feelings from the bond.

Again, he pulled his hand from mine. However, this time, he stood up and turned around so that his back was facing me.

His body was literally shaking, and I heard his fangs click down.

"Ask your next question, Sookie," he said. "Or go."

ERIC POV

"Eric, I didn't mean to imply that you've . . . ." Sookie's sentence stalled in the awkward air between us.

"That I have failed you before," I returned. "But I have—failed you. And you clearly believe that this failure is because you are not my main priority."

"Am I?" she asked stiffly. "Am I your main priority?"

"Is that your question?" I asked.

"Yes," she spit out. "It is!"

I moved over to the other side of the room and sat on the couch, forcing Sookie to turn around in her chair if she wanted to look at me.

"When I wake up every night, you are the first thing I think of. But you are right. I have failed you. When I felt your fear and then your pain when the fairies kidnapped and brutalized you, I fought against the silver that Victor had chained me to the wall with. But I was too weak to free myself." I paused as I recalled the urgency of Sookie's "pull" on me that horrible night. "I will always remember how you looked in Ludwig's hospital bed—so broken, yet still alive. I was so grateful and so proud that you were still you."

"Eric," she whispered as a tear fell down her cheek.
"And then my maker came," I went on, "and I knew that—any minute—Appius could order me to hurt you. And I was afraid. He ordered that I try to help Alexei—and that I make that help my top priority." I closed my eyes tightly. "So—you are right in your charges concerning me. You have not always been my highest priority—though I have always tried to make you such. I simply haven't had the choice at times."

We were silent for a moment.

"What's your next question?" she asked.

"Why does the idea of living with me fill you with so much distaste?" I asked.

She frowned, and I could feel her defensiveness rising again; however, she seemed to push back her initial impulse to fight with me—or to run.

Progress.

"I don't want people to view me as a kept woman," she said.

"But I want to keep you—to be with you every night," I said. "Aren't the words 'to have and to hold' included in contemporary human vows? That is what I want," I added.

"But we aren't married—not really," she sighed.

"I think of you as my wife," I expressed. "You are the woman I love. I want to have a life with you, but any time I hint at your living with me, you flinch—as if living with me in a home we shared would be unimaginable."

"You once said that you were asking because it was what other women had wanted from you in the past," she reminded.

"Yes. But you are the first woman I ever brought into my home—and certainly the only one I've even asked to share it with me!" I felt my frustration rising, but tried to calm myself—to see things through the filter of her experiences. "Perhaps I didn't explain myself well enough, but I wanted you with me because I desired to make sure that you were safe."

"That was another thing," she sighed. "I worried that you were asking only because of protection—not for love."

"But I wanted both things!" I said insistently. "I still want both things. I want to build a life with you because I love you. And I want to protect you!"

"Well—you could live with me," she challenged.

"Just ask," I said immediately. "I would accept—though I would have to figure out a more secure place to rest during the days with the fairies being there."

"They are my family," Sookie said confidently. "You can trust them."

"No," I responded, having to try hard not to scoff. "I don't trust them. At best, they are using you for a home and to augment their energy. But it seems clear to me that Claude has ulterior motives I've not yet ascertained. And, as for Dermot, I believe he simply wants you for his own mate. But—make no mistake—either one of them would be happy to stake me in my day-rest."

She frowned. "I don't believe that. Claude is just lonely with Claudine and Claudette gone. And
Dermot has no one but Claude and me."

I shook my head. "You are too quick to trust anyone but me, Sookie. Claude could very well blame you for Claudine's death—just as you blame yourself. You have a strong Fae spark, made stronger by vampire blood. He could simply be taking energy from you—only to later use it against you. And any supernatural—or human—has the potential for violence when he or she wants to possess someone."

"But Dermot doesn't want to possess me," she insisted.

I sighed with frustration, knowing that Sookie's fairy kin would actually have to do something directly against her before she believed me. "Let us get back on topic, shall we?" I asked, instead of pushing the issue about the fairies. "Why do you not want to share a home with me?"

"I didn't think you were serious when you asked me," she confessed. "And—also—I need to feel independent. To stand on my own two feet."

"I would never curb your independence, Sookie," I offered. "By being your full-time mate, I would encourage whatever you needed."

We were silent for a moment—clearly at a temporary impasse.

But at least she wasn't getting up to leave.

"Why didn't you tell me about the pledging thing before it happened?" she asked.

"You would have denied me. Actually—you would have likely thrown the dagger into my face—or back," I said truthfully. "And the situation had to be handled quickly. I had intel that Victor planned to go after you and claim you for Felipe on the very night that I asked you to come to Fangtasia and bring me the dagger. Our pledging made them both reassess the situation. It's slowed them down."

"You said once that you didn't want Felipe and Victor to know how much I meant to you. Why pledge with me if that were the case?" she asked.

"Because, my strategy to show indifference failed," I said simply. "I tried to manipulate them into thinking you were neither that important to me nor that potentially helpful to them. But I should have known that the damage had been done as soon as you rescued the king and me from Sigebert. Still, I figured that being 'less' of a target would be preferable to you, so I tried staying away—feigning unconcern toward you—until I knew that the plan was doomed."

She sighed. "I really wish you would tell me about this kind of thing. You act as if I can't think sometimes—as if I can't see reason! Had you kept me in the loop, I would have decided to pledge with you on my own."

"Only because it was the lesser of two evils," I said bitterly, reminding her of Rhodes.

"I don't see you as an evil!" she insisted. "Now unless you are being a secretive, high-handed, patronizing idiot!"

I sighed. "I am sorry, Sookie," I said sincerely. "Sometimes I make assumptions about what you will do—based upon the past."

"Well—you should really think about everything, Eric—not just the times when I seem to do dumb stuff," she huffed. "After all, didn't I bond with you when Andre was threatening to make me bond
with him? I didn't fight with you then because I trusted that you were acting for the best. I would have realized that you were acting in our best interests again—with the pledging—if you had given me the chance to."

"I will try to keep you in the loop from now on," I said, "if that is what you want after tonight."

SOOKIE POV

I sighed. "It is. And it's your turn—for another question."

"Speaking of the bond, why is it that you haven't asked me about it yet? About how it works?" Eric asked.

I immediately tensed.

"I'm scared of the answers," I responded honestly.

"It's really not that scary," he said with a tiny smirk. For some reason, that smirk comforted me; it made me feel less afraid.

"Okay—will you tell me about it then?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Until tonight, I thought that bonds were permanent, but your witch friend seems to have found a way to remove them." He sighed.

"Is the bond controlling my feelings?" I asked.

"Not to the extent that you fear," he responded.

"What do you mean?"

"It cannot create deeper feelings within you. However, it does allow me to try to influence your state of being."

"What do you mean?" I asked again. Maybe I was dense, but I wasn't quite seeing the difference between "feelings" and "state of being."

Eric was thoughtful for a moment. "I mean that—if you feel love for me—then it is real. If you care for me—it is real. If you are attracted to me—it is real. Anything that you are feeling when I am dead for the day is coming from you—and only you. Tell me—do you love me when the sun is up?" he asked somewhat worriedly.

"Yes. I have doubts about the bond and what it can do, but I do feel love for you," I said.

He seemed to sigh with relief. "In your own sentence is the proof you need that I cannot influence your deeper feelings. If I could, would I not be trying to dispel your doubts about the bond itself?"

I contemplated for a moment. Eric was making a good point. If, indeed, he had control over my emotions, it made sense that he would have attempted to put a stop my doubts about the bond. But I'd never felt anything like that from him.

"What did you mean by influencing my 'state of being'?" I finally asked.

"This," he said, as I felt a warm wave of comfort engulf me. "Do you still love me?"
I nodded. "Yes."

"Do you still doubt the bond as much as you did before?"

Again, I nodded in the affirmative.

The warm wave was replaced by a feeling that could only be described as "carefulness."

"I would send something like this if I wanted you to be cautious in a situation," Eric said before taking the feeling away.

After that, he sent me a myriad of feelings. There was love and hope and then worry.

"These are my current feelings," he said. "Can you separate them from your own?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"Are my feelings affecting your feelings?" he asked.

"Yes."

He looked surprised. "How?"

"The love I feel from you is making me happy. Your worry is similar to mine, so I feel less alone. And your hope is making me feel guilty," I whispered.

"Why guilty?" he asked, even as I felt his worry becoming more alive—more like anxiety.

"I feel guilty because I didn't have that kind of hope when I walked in here tonight. And that's unfair to you. I should have always had that hope for us. I'm sorry."

Immediately, Eric's anxiety disappeared and was replaced by pleasure. And I was pleased about that, too, but I could feel the difference between his pleasure and my own.

Eric went on with his explanation. "A bond is truly an equaling device between a vampire and a human. I can feel you, and you can feel me. I can—as I've shown you—send you an impulse to affect your immediate state. And—with practice—you could do the same to me. I could locate you almost anywhere, but—again—if you practiced, you could find me almost anywhere, too. The only area where there is usually inequality within a bond is that the vampire can use his or her inherent magic to block much of what can come through—at least as far as emotions are concerned. But that takes practice, and I admit that I'm not that good at blocking for sustained periods of time when I am close to you." He shrugged. "Oh course, with you, the rules are different, for you can block your emotions from me—probably even better than I can keep mine from you at this time."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Your shields. You are used to making those, and I imagine they are similar to the barriers you construct to stifle your feelings," he explained.

"Do I construct those barriers a lot?" I asked.

"When things become difficult, you tend to," he paused, "shut down."

I sighed. "I'm sorry."

"It is a defense mechanism," Eric said with understanding. "And you have experienced a lifetime of
needing that kind of thing. I do not blame you for needing it with me, too—though I hope to one
day change that. If I have the opportunity."

I stood up from my chair and joined him on the couch. I reached for his hand. "I'm sorry I
misjudged you, Eric. But it did feel as if you were trying to influence my feelings a lot of the time."

I sighed when he took my proffered hand.

"That is because our bond is strong, Sookie. And you bring out many feelings in me. You were
experiencing those, but—if you think about it—I believe that you will find that feeling my
emotions hasn't created new feelings within you, though there could have been some side effects
from my emotions."

"Side effects?" I asked.

"Yes," he sighed. "For example, feeling your uncertainty—your dislike—of the bond has made me
feel more anxious about your feelings for me. And that could have, in turn, made you more
anxious. But don't humans influence each other's feelings in such ways?"

"How do you mean?" I asked.

Suddenly I couldn't feel Eric's emotions anymore.

"I am blocking my feelings," he said.

"I know," I responded confirming the obvious.

"Sookie, I love you. I love you more than any other person I have ever met—in this time or in any
other."

I smiled through a falling tear.

"I am happier with you in my presence than I have ever been," he added.

I smiled a little wider and then wider still as he let his feelings be known to me again through our
bond; along with love, I felt intense sincerity and devotion.

"Did your happiness increase because of my words or because you felt my feelings?" he asked.

"Both," I sighed.

"Did I make you feel happier?" he asked.

"Yes and no," I said after a moment of contemplation. "I liked hearing what you said. I liked
feeling what you felt. But the happiness came from me."

Suddenly, I felt anger from him.

"What's that?" I asked pensively.

"Are you feeling angry?" he asked instead.

"No—but I'm wondering why you are!" I exclaimed.

He smirked and his anger was replaced by amusement.
"Are you amused now?" he asked.

"No! I want to know what you are up to," I huffed with frustration.

"A test," he said with satisfaction.

"What do you mean?" I asked with more frustration.

"I thought of Victor and let my anger flow for a moment, but it didn't create that emotion in you. Your reaction amused me, but you were certainly not amused."

"So—in other words, you can't affect my emotions with your own unless you say something sweet," I chuckled, squeezing his hand.

"Apparently," he grinned.

"Why so happy now?" I asked with a grin of my own.

"Because—you are finally coming to understand what a bond can do and what it cannot," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Fine."

"I have attempted to push emotions upon you only four times," he said out of the blue.

"When?" I asked.

"You tell me," he smirked.
"Given what you know now," Eric said, his smirk only growing, "I bet you can look back and distinguish between when you were simply feeling my emotions versus when you were receiving more active 'pushes' from me."

I frowned as I tried to follow his suggestion and think back.

"I came here once—after a really shitty day. I was still mad about the pledging, but I wanted for you to comfort me. I needed it," I said.

"And as your bonded—as the man who loved you—I couldn't deny you that," he said. "Yes that was one time."

I thought for another moment. "When I was holding the soda can bomb. I could feel you trying to calm me down—and I also felt something else." I frowned. "What else were you trying to send?"

Eric shook his head in frustration. "I was trying to outweigh your stubbornness with my own—so that you would hand me that fucking can!" He rolled his eyes. "You can see how well that worked."

I chuckled, but then my laughter fell flat. "Another time was when the fairies had me—wasn't it?"

He sighed and nodded. "I tried to send strength and comfort—to give you hope."

"Do you think that's what kept me alive?" I asked, even as I realized that I could answer that question myself. "It did," I said aloud. "Or—at least—it kept me from falling apart."

Eric squeezed my hand. "I am glad, min kära. Very glad to hear that."

"What was the fourth time?" I asked him after a moment of thought.

"I'm not surprised you cannot figure out that one. After all, you completely ignored the 'caution' I tried to send you."

"Sigebert," I said. "I felt your fear, and I wanted to get to you. But I also felt a sense of caution. You were trying to stop me from coming—weren't you?"

"Trying," he smirked. "But I couldn't hide my own feelings or anxiety from you, so you came anyway. Yet another example of your stubbornness."

"Another example of yours," I countered.

"Touché! And—for the record," he added, "the types of feelings you felt when you walked into my office cannot be helped. I love you too much to stifle my happiness when I see you."

I was glad to be sitting down since Eric had the ability to knock me off of my feet with a single glance—let alone with the power of the words he was saying to me.

"Eric," I whispered.
"Other than losing the mental and physical connections we share, do you have any idea what will happen to us—to you—if you break our bond?" he asked soberly.

I was momentarily startled by his question, and the room seemed to become devoid of air. "No," I whispered.

"You would be vulnerable and so would I?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Without a blood bond affirming our connection, our pledge would lose most, if not all, of its validity, for—with vampires—everything comes down to blood," he said forebodingly. "Should you break the bond, you would be signaling Victor, Felipe, and all other vampires that you were rejecting my claim on you. And—do you know what that would mean?"

"They would all try to claim me?" I asked, shivering.

"Yes. Likely, Bill would be the first to try. He would say that it was to protect you. But—since he is de Castro's spy—I cannot imagine it would take him long to advise you to cooperate more fully with the king."

"What? Bill's a spy?" I stammered. "What—uh? How do you know that?"

Eric sighed. "Oh—don't worry. Bill's the most innocuous kind of spy, or he'd be dead by now—by my hand," he said in a deadly manner. "As of yet, Bill hasn't told his master anything too damaging, so I've stayed my hand."

"What kinds of things has he told the king?" I asked, still shivering.

Eric gripped my hand a little tighter.

"He's passed along information about you—and us—to Felipe. For example, the king knows that we are not living with one another. And guess who called me half an hour before you arrived, questioning why I'd not told him about Sandra Pelt?"

My mouth fell open. "Felipe?" I managed.

"Yes," Eric returned. "And—unless the incompetent Bon Temps Keystone Cops have the King of Nevada, Louisiana, and Arkansas on speed dial—I can only speculate that Bill was behind the information. Such incidents have added up enough for me to suspect Bill of other slips of the tongue, too." Eric scoffed. "Of course, I'm certain that he has justified—to himself—that such information-sharing is 'in your best interests,'" he added bitterly. "And it isn't as if he isn't an equal opportunity sycophant. After all, he gave Sophie-Anne reports about you—right until the very end."

"He did?" I asked.

Eric nodded. "Bill is young, but he's managed to make himself important to both of the monarchs he's served. And he is in the information business—as you know. But Bill will find himself in trouble he cannot get out of soon enough."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"Vampires enjoy their private information being distributed even less than you do, min kära. Eventually, Bill will include information in his database that displeases a vampire who doesn't give
a fuck that de Castro has issued an order of protection over him."

"You think someone will try to kill Bill?" I asked with a gasp.

"Yes. I just wish I could be the first in line," Eric responded with a smirk.

"Eric!" I exclaimed.

He sighed. "I understand that you hate violence and killing, Sookie, but even before I was a vampire, I believed in values that you would find more," he paused, "Old Testament than New Testament." His eyebrow rose. "Bill has lied to me and gone out of his way to undermine me. However, none of this compares to the hurt he has caused you. For that alone, I would like to kill him—and to take my time doing so."

I shivered.

"Despite this desire, however, I have respected your wishes by not harming him," Eric continued. "But—if he ever brings irreparable harm onto you again, I will kill him."

"Eric, I have never wanted anyone to die because of me," I begged.

"Bill will be dying for his own actions," he scoffed. "You already carry too much fucking guilt for things that are not your fault," he added angrily.

"I believe in taking responsibility for what I've done!" I returned, my own frustration rising.

"Were you responsible for your parents' death?" Eric challenged.

"They were driving to counselling—because of me—when they died," I frowned.

"No—they were going to counselling because they were too weak to see the treasure they had in a child, and they were killed by Water Fairies who would have found a way to murder them regardless of the situation. How about your grandmother? Do you not blame yourself for her death too?"

"Gran did die because of me!" I insisted. "If I hadn't been dating Bill, she wouldn't have become a target of Rene!"

"Right," Eric said sarcastically. "And you were supposed to make your romantic choices at the whims of a serial killer?" He shook his head. "The sad thing is that you likely thought about the risks to yourself and then decided that they were worth it. No one would have ever thought that the killer would victimize your grandmother. I bet if the possibility had occurred to you—or if you'd heard it from anyone's head—then you would have immediately sacrificed your opportunity for personal happiness. And—don't even try to tell me that you don't feel guilt for those who died for you during the fairy battle."

"Well—those people were protecting me!"

"Yes! From homicidal fairies who you didn't encourage in any way!" Eric shook his head. "Hell—you probably even feel guilty about Appius."

"Well—shouldn't I?" I asked with challenge. He's dead because someone was trying to kill me.

"And good fucking riddance too!" Eric yelled out with frustration. "If you knew what he did—what he's still trying to do—you wouldn't feel the guilt you do."

"I don't think it's your turn to ask a question," he growled.

I could tell that he was the one trying to "shut down" in that moment.

"We stopped recognizing turns a while back," I said gently, and I tightened my grip on his hand when he tried to pull away from me again. "Just answer the question—please."

"Fine," he said, his voice turning cold. "Appius liked the looks of me when he stalked me as a human, so he turned me. Like I told you before, he taught me many things about being a vampire, including obedience and punishment."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

He seemed to be near-bursting.

And then he erupted in emotion and pain.

"It means that he raped me! Almost every night I was with him! Sometimes, he liked me to fight him—just so that he could punish me and beat me. Sometimes, he would order my compliance—or even my enjoyment. Do you have any idea how horrible it is to have your mind raped along with your body?" he asked coldly.

"Not like that," I whispered. "But I do know what it's like to have your mind penetrated in ways you can't control."

Eric's expression softened immediately. "I know you do, min kära." He sighed, even as his hand stopped fighting for freedom and interlaced with my own in solidarity. "I do not want to remind you of such things."

"And I don't want to remember them, but sometimes I have to—just so that I know they haven't defeated me. Please, Eric. Please! Don't hide yourself from me in the name of protecting me," I cried.

ERIC POV

"Don't hide yourself from me in the name of protecting me."

Sookie's words resonated in my mind like an echo. They filled me up and they taught me.

Still—when she'd asked me how Appius's actions could still hurt me—I found myself wanting to hide the truth from her.

Despite my promise to Sookie—and to her witch friend—to be honest.

Even when it hurt.

Clearly, Sookie felt my pause and my apprehension.

"No matter how hard it is to say, Eric, I need to hear it. Is this what you've been hiding from me?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Please. Tell me."
"Appius signed a contract for my," I paused, "services with Queen Freyda of Oklahoma."

"Contract?"

"It will make me her consort for a hundred years," I whispered.

" Consort? I've heard that word before, but I'm not sure what it means," Sookie said in a quiet voice. I could feel her apprehension growing.

"A consort is the husband or wife of a powerful person—usually a monarch. However, I would have no real power. Freyda wants me for muscle, and Appius liked the idea that he could sell me. Still," I added meaningfully.

The implications of that word—still—hung in the air like a guillotine.

"But you're already married," Sookie said, "to me!"

"Are you ready to claim me?" I asked wryly.

She sighed in return, so I didn't push my sarcasm at her. It would have only been a distraction tactic anyway.

"I am pledged," I said, "but only to a human in the eyes of most vampires. And—apparently Appius signed that contract before you and I pledged."

"Before," she whispered.

"We were bonded before the contract was signed, however," I said.

"Will that make a difference?"

"Maybe," I relayed. "But Cataliades isn't sure. There are other steps that could be taken, but I want to avoid them."

"What other steps?" she asked.

"Like I said, I want to avoid them."

"Because they involve me?"

I nodded in confirmation.

"Tell me," she ordered, reminding me of why I'd first fallen in love with her.

"My case would be strengthened if you publicly claimed your Fae heritage," I sighed. "Our bonding and pledging would both be seen as more legitimate then."

"Oh," she whispered.

"Like I said, I've been trying to keep you out of it," I added firmly.

"But shouldn't I be in it? Since I'm your wife?" she asked with some frustration.

I shook my head in confusion. "Sookie—besides our physical relationship—every signal you've ever offered me has suggested that my wife was the last thing you wanted to be," I said honestly, allowing my disappointment to come through in my voice and in the bond.
"Eric, I just . . . ." She stopped midsentence.

"You needn't worry," I said stiffly. "As I indicated, I have the demon lawyer looking into matters. He thinks that our bond might be enough, especially since we pledged soon after. And the fact that I was unaware of the contract negotiations might matter too, given my age. Such contracts are not made by," I paused, "honorable makers." I sighed. "And—if you break the bond—perhaps we could keep it a secret until after the Vampire Council rules on the issue. Or—there is always the possibility that Felipe will step in to denounce the contract—or to buy it out."

"How likely is that?" Sookie asked, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

Even though they'd not yet fallen, I still hated them.

"Not very—at least not without a steep price," I admitted.

"What price?" she asked.

"You," I said simply. "He's already told me that he will help me escape from Freyda's claim if I convince you to live in Vegas so that you are at his disposal full-time."

"But I don't want to go to Vegas," she whispered.

"I know. That is why I turned him down."

"But if you are in Oklahoma? What then? Wouldn't Felipe just take me?"

"There are things I might be able to do to work your safety into the marriage contract—if it comes to that," I said enigmatically.

"What would that cost you?" she asked.

It was a question I didn't want her to know the answer to, but I told her anyway.

"Another century of service—I would imagine. Freyda would pay Felipe a lot for that."

"And you'd do that for me? You'd give up your freedom like that?" Sookie asked horrified.

I sighed. "When are you going to learn—you stubborn, beautiful, infuriating woman? I would do anything for you!"
Her Turn to Claim

Chapter 10: Her Turn to Claim

SOOKIE POV

I was momentary speechless. Eric had just told me that he would do anything for me—including
make himself a prisoner for a century longer than his maker had intended.

I had once doubted Eric's ability to put me first; now, I understood just how wrong I'd been.

"I won't let you give up your freedom like that—not for me! You're too valuable of a vampire!
Surely, Felipe recognizes that!" I exclaimed.

Eric smirked. "I am strong. And I have some connections, but a vampire of my age is much more
common than a telepath. Of the two of us, I am the more expendable in Felipe's eyes."

"No," I whispered.

"Yes," he returned evenly. "Moreover—sadly—the one thing that makes me truly unique among
my kind is not something that any monarch would respect me for," he added sourly.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I am a thousand-year-old vampire still bound by his maker's wishes." He shook his head as if he
were being told a lie. "Do you know how many vampires I've known of who are still bound by
their makers' commands or wishes at my age?"

"How many?" I whispered.

"None. I might as well be a fucking unicorn," he scoffed, even as I felt his pain through the bond.
"By vampire custom, three-hundred is the ideal and acceptable year to set a child free. Four-
hundred if the child is unruly but has promise. And—as for the others?"

"The others?" I asked.

"Truly incorrigible vampires are killed by their makers long before the age of four hundred. Or one
of the various Vampire Councils around the globe will see to the slaying."

"But Appius never freed you," I stated.

"No. On my three-hundredth birthday, he surprised me with a visit—but only to offer me a hope
that was as false as . . . ." He stopped midsentence.

"As what?"

"I cannot find a comparison," he said stiffly.

"What did he do?" I asked nervously.

"You don't want to know," he responded.

"I want to be able to support you, Eric," I whispered. "If you can tell me what he did. If you can't,
I'll understand," I added.
Eric was silent for a moment.

"On my three-hundredth 'birthday,' Appius came to tell me about the tradition of setting children free. He told me that I had proven that I had adequate control and fortitude to prosper outside of his command. However, instead of freeing me, he raped me to remind me who I was owned by," Eric said emotionlessly, though I could feel so many emotions from him in that moment. "And at every century marker of my life after that date, I've had to wonder if he would come to me again—to commemorate the 'special occasion'—as he always called it."

"Did he?" I whimpered.

"Twice—during my six hundredth year and again during my nine hundredth," he responded in a whisper.

"Oh, Eric," I said, as tears fell down my cheeks in hot streams. "When he was here? Did he . . . ?" I couldn't complete my thought.

A large red drop fell from his eye. "I promised you faithfulness, so I fought him," the vampire responded with a small sob.

"Oh God!" I cried as I felt the weight of Eric's pain and guilt through the bond.

"I was lucky," he said evenly, despite his avalanche of feelings. "Alexei became jealous and enraged, so Appius had to stop before he was done." Another tear swept down his snowy cheek. "I did try to keep my word to you, min kära."

I found myself in his arms in the next moment, and I wept there for a while before I looked up at him. "I'm the one who's sorry, Eric. About so many things. But—please—don't think you were unfaithful because of anything Appius did to you."

"But—when Bill was with Lorena, you . . . ," he started.

I cut him off with a shake of my head. "I've grown up a lot since then. Plus, I know you didn't want that with Appius. I'm not sure about Bill—especially not when he first went to Lorena," I said. "Anyway, that doesn't matter. What matters is that Appius is gone now."

"But he is still attempting to control my life—even finding a way to continue making me a whore," he said bitterly.

"Can't you just deny the marriage claim?" I asked. "After all, Appius is dead! Can't you just say you won't do it? Don't maker's commands go away when a maker dies?"

ERIC POV

I sighed, fearing that the other shoe would soon drop. So far—though it had been difficult—the talk with Sookie had gone well. Maybe too well. Despite the challenging topics, she'd not threatened to storm out once. But I worried that—once I told her that I would have to go through with Appius's contract unless the demon got my out of it—she would blame me and run.

"Eric? Surely Appius's dying means that you don't have to obey him anymore? Right?" she asked pleadingly.

"If Cataliades is able to successfully argue that Appius had no right to sell me off in the first place, then there will be nothing to worry about," I responded, trying to infuse my voice with confidence and the bond with comfort.
She wasn't buying what I was trying to sell, however.

"What are the chances of that?" she asked.

I sighed. Her question was another one I didn't want to answer. But I did anyway. "About a twenty-five percent chance—I'd reckon. It all depends on who the vampires on the next Council are. The Council members rotate—you know. Sadly, decisions like this are often political in nature. So if a powerful monarch with conservative beliefs is appointed to the Council, others will follow his or her lead. In the end, what happens to me will be of very little consequence to them—unless they have done business with me in the past. And many vampires are wary of the 'slippery slope effect' that such a case might cause."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

I scoffed. "Could you imagine vampires of Bill's age or younger suddenly trying to 'emancipate' themselves from their makers?"

"But it's not the same," Sookie frowned. "Surely, most vampires would agree that Appius should have freed you centuries ago."

I shrugged. "Yes. But he didn't. And—in the end—it was his right to do with me what he willed since he turned me. So—unless I have a sympathetic Council—I will be ordered to complete the terms of the contract."

"But it would help you if they knew I was a supernatural!" she exclaimed.

I nodded. "If you claimed me—pretended to have chosen the bond and the pledge—then that could make a difference. But it wouldn't be a guarantee. And—like I said—I don't want more people learning about your fairy lineage."

We were silent for a moment.

"Eric, if I went ahead and broke the bond, it would be like I was putting my stamp of approval on Appius's contract—wouldn't it?" she frowned.

"You mustn't think in such ways," I sighed. "Even now, I know why you might want the bond gone. And I cannot blame you. It was forced upon you. And you likely still have doubts about it." I paused. "I should have helped you to understand the bond better—from the start."

"You tried," she sighed. "But I was afraid to hear anything about the bond. Eric, I can't stand the thought of you having to be with Freyda. Of you not being free for a century—or more." She bit her bottom lip. "Could we run?"

"We," I whispered. "We?"

She nodded and brought her hand up to my cheek. "If I ever made you think that I wasn't totally committed to you, I'm sorry. Part of why I wanted to break the bond was to know that I really loved you. And—yes—'we'."

I couldn't keep myself from kissing her—soundly.

"I love you, Sookie," I whispered as I broke the kiss so that she could breathe.

"And I love you, Eric," she returned with more fervency than she'd ever said the words before.
I could have sworn that my heart tugged as if wanting to beat.

"If the contract is upheld, I'd be hunted if I tried to escape it," I told her honestly. "There are a few places where I could probably continue my undead life for a while, but I would not subject you to them. I would have to become a recluse. I would never be free to return to vampire society." I paused. "Likely, I would be found and executed. Or I would be driven mad and eventually meet the sun. If I want to live—if I want to ever acquire the rights to my own life—I would have to fulfill the terms of my maker's contract." I paused. "I just hope that there are no other contracts floating around in the world."

Sookie frowned deeply and gripped me tighter. "Please, Eric," she begged, "what can I do to help you?"

"Don't break our bond, Sookie," I said my voice sounding raw to my ears. "But don't leave it intact because you are trying to protect me or because you pity me. Please, Sookie," I added, bearing my soul to her, "leave it intact because of this."

I opened my side of the bond to her fully, letting her feel the overwhelming nature of my love for her.

"Eric," she whispered, tentatively using the bond to push her own feelings toward me." She felt relieved. She felt worried. She felt a lot of love—for me.

"Why are you relieved?" I asked her.

"I was afraid that a talk about the bond would end up with you deciding you were better off without me—especially since I haven't agreed to become a vampire," she said as she buried herself in my arms.

Gods—she felt good there.

"Sookie?"

"Huh?" she asked.

"We're both idiots," I said bluntly.

"Huh?"

"I thought a talk about all of this would have you running," I answered.

"Maybe we should hire Amelia as a relationship counselor," she offered.

"How about a marriage counselor? Would you marry me?" I found myself asking. I should have gotten the ring I'd bought for her, but it was in my desk—too far away.

And I didn't want to break our embrace.

"But you said we're already married," she said with confusion.

I chuckled. "Yet you still sound and feel skeptical about our pledging. So—how about we have a human ceremony too."

"Would that help us with the Freyda thing?" she asked hopefully.
"I'm afraid not," I said.

"Well—why not?" she asked with frustration.

"Vampires don't recognize human/vampire marriage any more than most states do. In fact, if Freyda wins the suit for me, I would be forced to break our pledge. But she wouldn't care whatsoever if we remained married according to human custom. Of course, if I did have to go to her and you ever wanted a divorce in order to be with someone else, I would give you one," I added quickly, not wanting her to ever feel trapped as I would be.

"Break the pledge!? Divorce!? Be with someone else!?!" she demanded.

SOOKIE POV

Eric's words had hit me in the gut, and I was angry.

"What kind of man asks a girl to marry him only to offer to divorce her in the next minute?" I stormed.

"The selfish kind," Eric sighed. "And the practical kind."

I frowned as his words and resignation blew away my anger.

He was both selfish and practical. And I couldn't help but to smile a little as I realized that he was selfish when it came to wanting me. Of course, the infuriating vampire was also selflessly practical when it came to me, too. He viewed a divorce as practical if I decided I wanted it one day. He viewed the loss of another hundred years of his freedom as practical if it ensured my safety. And he viewed keeping my lineage a secret as practical for the same reason.

But I wasn't going to fucking allow his practicality to take him away from me—at least, not without a fight!

I'd hated the fact that Eric hadn't told me what I was doing when I brought him the pledging dagger. I'd hated the blood bond because I'd thought that it had caused my feelings to form.

I'd hated being powerless in the forming of both the bond and the pledge.

But none of that compared to the powerlessness that I felt at the thought of losing him.

Then—of course—there was my own hypocrisy, which I couldn't ignore! I'd been more than ready—just hours before—to make Eric powerless in the breaking of our bond!

I held him close, burying my tear-stained face into his chest.

"I owe you another shirt," I muttered.

He chuckled. "It's okay."

"And I owe you an apology for even considering breaking the bond—especially without your knowing," I whispered.

"It's okay," he repeated.

"It's not," I said, "but I love you even more for saying that."

He smirked. "So what have we accomplished here tonight—other than proving that my policy of
keeping extra shirts in my office is a good idea?"

I chuckled and smacked his arm, grateful to him for lightening the mood.

"Well—I can tell you one thing: I'm not gonna break the bond," I whispered to him. "Not ever."

He bent down to kiss my lips gently. "Thank you."

"And I'm going to call Mr. Cataliades first thing tomorrow morning," I said firmly before smirking. "It's about time I got to do some of the claiming in this relationship—after all."

He shook his head. "No. The fewer people who know that you are part fairy, the better," Eric said firmly.

"Eric, the Genie is out of the bottle about me," I sighed.

He looked down, and I felt guilt from him.

"Why do you feel guilty?' I asked him.

"It's my fault that knowledge of your telepathy is known," he whispered.

"No," I frowned, "it's not.

"No?" he asked with challenge. "Was it not I who arranged for you to work in Dallas? Rumors of your gift only grew after that. And after Jackson too."

I sighed. "Eric, Hadley was the root cause of my ability being known. And—looking back—I'm glad I helped Farrell in Dallas. And I'm glad I helped Betty Joe in Jackson." I shook my head. "I tend to blame myself for the bad things related to my telepathy. But—because of you—I've done some good things with it, too. I've saved lives—like in Rhodes."

"And I am proud of you," Eric said sincerely. "But there is still a chance to make sure that not many people learn of your Fae heritage."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "You really think that?"

"Felipe didn't know before you were kidnapped by the Fae, and I doubt he's broadcasted the knowledge since then. He's too selfish—covetous. Indeed, your Fae lineage is likely unknown beyond him and Victor. And—as things are—I couldn't protect you if it were widely known."

"What do you mean? As things are?" I asked.

He closed his eyes. "Your home has wards around it, but what about the roads leading from it to Merlotte's? The studies I've had conducted have shown that fewer than one car passes by the entrance to Hummingbird Lane each minute. In fact, the number is 0.86 cars per 60 seconds. And the police in your town hardly ever patrol the area, despite the high rate of danger which has befallen you. And you know how few cars actually turn onto your road."

"You had a study done? On traffic near my home?" I asked incredulously.

He looked concerned. "You likely think of this as highhanded, but I needed to know what I was up against." He paused. "I am sorry if you are upset."
"I'm not upset," I said, even as I realized that I would have been the day before. "What else have you had studied?" I asked.

"Merlotte's," he confessed. "Entrances, exits. The time you are in the bar—where you could be fired at with a weapon through the windows. The time you are in the storeroom. The ladies' room. The office. The parking lot. There are many variables," he frowned before closing his eyes tightly. "Sandra Pelt is too emotional and apparently too short-sighted to be efficient. Still—she has caused you some danger. I do not want to think about how difficult it would be to protect you if it was commonly known that you had Fae blood. No," he said with certainty, "I don't want to risk it."

"What if I had guards?" I found myself asking.

"You would consider allowing me to provide you with guards?" he asked with surprise.

I shrugged. "I might."

He nodded. "As we both now know too well, one such as Bubba wouldn't do. I would employ Thalia and Indira at night. Indira is both strong and social enough to accompany you into places where you might wish to go at night. As a female, she could also go into public restrooms with you—without causing an uproar. I doubt that even the shifter—uh Merlotte—would begrudge her presence. But Thalia would be the true muscle behind the scenes. And—during the day—I would have to find Weres. At least three," he said thoughtfully. "But four would be better. And I wouldn't trust anyone from the Long Tooth pack, so I'd have to pay the Weres to relocate," he said as if he were already in planning mode.

I found myself wondering whether Claude and Dermot could help with my protection, but then I began to really contemplate what Eric had said. Was Claude just using me? Was he just waiting until the right opportunity arose to punish me for Claudine's death? After all, Claude had always treated me badly—unless he wanted something from me. And was Dermot really interested in me romantically? Sam had suggested the same idea. One thing was for certain, however.

If I truly was to claim my relationship with Eric, I needed to get my priorities straight. And that meant putting him first too.

"Do you really think that Claude and Dermot are up to no good?" I asked.

"I really hope they prove trustworthy, Sookie, for your sake, but I doubt their intentions more and more," he responded. "I know what bitterness looks like, and I am almost certain that Claude has it where you are concerned. Dermot, on the other hand, looks at you with longing—as if he desires your love."

"That's so gross!" I exclaimed. "He's my uncle!"

"Fairies have different rules about familial relations," he replied. "Ask yourself this: Do they wish to know Jason as they wish to know you?"

"No," I responded.

"You were right to question Niall for not showing as equal of an interest in your brother as he did you," Eric said contemplatively. "Niall's actions helped to explain what he found to be of the most worth. It was not family, Sookie—at least not how you view family. It was your spark and your potential worth to him. However—I trusted Niall about a hundred times more than I trust the other two fairies because he actually seemed to have some affection for you.

I felt myself frowning. In fact, neither Dermot nor Claude had shown much interest in Jason at all,
though I'd made a point to have "family dinners" in hopes of changing that fact. Claude just seemed bored and impatient when Jason was around. And Dermot hardly spoke to him at all.

"Like I said," Eric continued after a moment, "I hope they prove worthy of your trust, but I will remain wary of them—as I have been of all of your fairy kin, except for Claudine. She—I found honorable."

"You distrusted Niall?" I asked him.

He nodded. "When Niall contacted me to act as a go-between, I questioned his motives. I did believe that he wanted to get to know you, but I also questioned the potential cost. Your grandfather Fintan had taken many steps to protect you, and—though he'd failed to protect your mother and father from the Water Fae—he had effectively covered up the existence of the rest of his family. But Niall was insistent, and I had but two choices."

"What were they?" I asked.

"Help him or die," Eric said evenly. "Either way, he would have approached you."

"He threatened you?" I gasped.

The vampire chuckled. "Niall eventually came to appreciate the fact that I cared for you—loved you. But it took a while." He shrugged.

Clearly, Eric had thought nothing about the fact that Niall had threatened his life. I shook my head. No wonder he doubted the benevolence of the Fae.

"Tell me how much money it would take to guard me if I kept living as I was," I said.

He frowned. "Money isn't a concern."

I scoffed. Maybe it was just the fact that my eyes seemed wider that night, but I could recognize that Eric would have to pay five or six guards more than I would ever hope to make at Merlotte's—no matter how big my tips were. And, that seemed like a big waste to me.

"You are filled with," he paused, "planning. What are you contemplating?"

"Niall and Claudine left me quite a bit of money. I was thinking about giving some of it to Sam—to help keep Merlotte's afloat," I mused.

Eric tensed. "Do you love him? Would you prefer him to me?"

"No!" I said immediately. "Where did that come from? Why would you think that?" I asked.

"You seem to prefer him—sometimes," he returned. I could feel vulnerability from him, and I found myself wanting to take that emotion away.

I sighed. "Sam's my friend and he hired me when no one else would. But I don't want to be with him romantically. You need to trust me on that—just as I have trusted you tonight," I added.

He relaxed immediately. "I do trust you."

"That's good to know," I said softly, squeezing his hand.

"So—you wish to invest in Merlotte's to help to offset the damage that Vic's Redneck Roadhouse had caused to your friend," he said calmly.
"Yes," I responded. "The truth is that I doubt that Victor would have targeted that area if it weren't for me."

"You are correct," Eric returned. "Clearly, he is trying to fuck with the both of us."

"Then we need to stop him before the damage he causes is too great."
Chapter 11: Intimate Decisions

ERIC POV

Hearing Sookie mention the need to stop Victor caused my own wheels to start turning in that direction, and we were quiet for a few moments—something that I didn't mind since my bonded would be staying my bonded and since she was currently resting quite safely in my arms.

"I'll always want to work," Sookie sighed, breaking the silence.

"I would never try to stop you," I responded.

"But you have always hated me working at Merlotte's," she accused.

"I have," I owned.

"Why? Because it is beneath your status?" she asked somewhat bitingly, though—if anything—she pushed herself more tightly into my embrace.

"No!" I responded quickly. "It is beneath yours, dammit!"

Gods! Sookie Stackhouse could rile me quicker than any other.

But, at least, neither one of us was pulling away.

"I don't need to put on airs, Eric," she said firmly, "even if I do have money in my bank account now."

"Who is telling you to do so?" I asked with frustration. "But you could do things other than being a bar maid."

"Like what? I don't have the luxury of an education or a thousand years of experience," she reminded.

"You could make your telepathy a business," I suggested. "If you did so, you could make vampires and other Supes come to you. You could take control of your gift."

"Wouldn't such a thing make me even more coveted?" she asked.

"Perhaps, but it would also build you a group of allies, customers, and contacts. Many vampires already owe you from Rhodes. Russell Edgington also has a soft spot for you. And so does Stan Davis of Texas. Trust me when I tell you that one of the reasons why Victor and Felipe haven't already tried to kidnap you is because some very powerful vampires have been very vocal in their high esteem for you."

"But what if I don't want to use my telepathy in my job?" she challenged.

"Then don't. You can do anything you want to, now, Sookie," I insisted. "Anything you like! Hell, if you like working at Merlotte's so much—if it truly satisfies you—then stay there. But, please let me have you guarded, especially if you are determined to let your fairy lineage be known!"

"Dammit, Eric! There's no 'if.' That's already been decided! We are going to do everything possible
—together—to get you out of the thing with Freyda, even if I have to stake her myself!"

Her chest was rising and falling noticeably because of the fervency of her words. The bond was thrumming with love and determination. Her eyes were daring me to contradict her.

I'd never wanted her more!

My fangs clicked down and I found myself on my knees in front of Sookie.

I was panting. She was panting.

And when I scented her sweet arousal, all bets were off. I pushed her dress up and then tore her panties off, being careful to rip with both hands so that I didn't hurt her. And then I dove in to taste her. Oftentimes, I was patient when I worked Sookie with my tongue and my fingers; I enjoyed bringing her to the edge of release again and again—until she begged and threatened and kicked and yelled. And the minx had learned to do the same with me when her mouth honored my cock with its attentions, but now was not a time when I was willing to be patient with her.

I was too highly wound! I'd gone from fearing the worst—that she was determined to destroy our bond—to hearing the best news in the world: that she was ready, willing, and able to fight for us. For me.

"Mine!" I growled as I nipped at her clit and pushed two fingers into her so that I could stroke her.

"Eric!" she yelled out as I added a third finger and vibrated my tongue quickly against her clit as only a vampire could do. She came hard and I enjoyed the taste of her release for a moment before turning my head to bite into her femoral artery.

The mixture of her blood and cum was almost enough to make me orgasm, but I held myself back as I sealed the small punctures I'd made and then lapped up the rest of her release.

Sookie was still experiencing aftershocks as I tore my shirt off and lowered my pants.

"Do not tear this dress!" she panted right before I was going to do just that.

She knew me too well.

And I fucking loved that!

Loved her!

I growled out of my need to touch Sookie's bare breasts, but—instead of tearing her garment—I took out my needs on my bonded's still-clenching pussy as I pushed my cock into her. Sookie had become used to my size over the previous months, and she moaned with passion as I began to move my hips at a hard, steady pace.

"Faster," she panted.

Abso-fucking-lutely!

I brought my hands up to fondle her breasts over her damnable dress.

I could feel her hardened nipples through both her dress and her bra.

"Fine! Tear it!" Sookie yelled out.
I grinned and ripped her pretty sundress before doing the same with her bra.

Her breasts spilled into my waiting hands, and then I bent forward to take one of her ripe nipples into my mouth.

"Don't you dare slow down," Sookie growled as she grabbed my hair and moved my head so that I would attend to her other breast.

I didn't slow down at all, and it wasn't long before her walls fluttered around my cock. And then she fell over the edge again with me following suit.

However, I was not sated.

And neither was she.

"More!" she growled as she nipped at my neck.

I obliged, lifting her into my arms and pushing her against the wall. I held my hands under her ass so that my thrusts into her supple body wouldn't knock her into the wall uncomfortably. And then I fucked her like the beast I was.

My pounding would have been too hard for most women, but Sookie was part fairy, and she kept asking—no begging—for "more" and "harder."

Despite my nature, there wasn't a bone in my body—including my hard-on—that would have hurt her, so I confirmed through the bond that she was enjoying herself and truly longing for more.

And then I gave in to her pleas.

Gladly.

Truth be known, her commands were my wishes too, which proved—for the thousandth time—that Sookie Stackhouse had been made with me in mind.

"Mine," I whispered as I emptied into her body again. I stayed inside of her—unmoving—as I brought one hand to her clit.

I stroked as she mewled.

I could tell that she was close to cumming as she wiggled in my arms.

"Yes. There!" she whimpered.

She squirmed and then orgasmed against my "mostly" spent cock—though "he" was threatening to rise again.

So that she could "ride" again.

However, I held back as she continued to quiver and shake in my arms. She was—in that moment—"mostly" human. And I was her mate, and that meant that I would put her needs above my own.

Always.

Gently, I pulled my cock from her body and lay her down on the couch before jetting into my private bathroom to warm a washcloth for her. I also grabbed one of the dresses I'd had Pam stock for Sookie in my small closet—and the requisite undergarments that I knew my bonded would
Sookie Stackhouse just wasn't a "commando kind of gal."

She was just catching her breath when I began cleaning her thighs and pussy with the rag. She sighed as she looked at me through half-closed lids.

"Amelia made me promise that we wouldn't do that," she smiled.

"Do what?" I asked with a smirk.

"Have sex instead of talking."

"We had sex after talking," I corrected.

She sat up a little and put on the bra I offered her.

It was white lace and framed her perfect breasts as if they were art. I wanted to rip it off of her immediately, but I refrained.

She was still too tired.

"Zip me up?" she asked, when she noticed that I was staring at her reverse striptease like a deer trapped in headlights.

"I'd rather not," I sighed, even as I completed her request. She waited until I was re-dressed—ogling me the whole time, I might add—before she blind-sided me.

"I want to live with you, Eric. I'm tired of being afraid of committing to you fully, and that's what I want to do—commit to you with my whole self! I accept your marriage proposal, but I don't want to wait. I want to start acting like your wife—tonight. I'm glad we're pledged, Eric—and not just because of all the political bullshit either. I'm glad because I love you!"

I was stumped for words for a moment.

"Where?" I finally asked, only able to get out the one word.

"Your house is better." She contemplated for a moment. "I'll invite Claude and Dermot to stay at the farmhouse if they want, and we'll be able to see how they react. If you're right about the fact that Claude is just using me for my mojo, then he'll complain and try to talk me into moving back. And—if Dermot really is into me," she cringed, "I think we'll be able to figure that out, too."

"Sound reasoning," I managed, still somewhat at a loss of words.

"In the meantime," she continued, "I think it's time that I prioritize us—you. Maybe putting you first was all I ever needed to do in order to trust that you would do the same for me." She shook her head. "Heck—even with the money issue—I've been inconsistent. Just today, I offered Hunter's dad some money from Hadley's estate, but his pride made him turn it down—even though I know it could make his life easier." She sighed and looked down, the bond brimming with her guilt. "I let my pride get in the way of us—again and again. And I became a hypocrite in the process."

"You became normal in the process," I corrected, taking her in my arms. "What about your job? Will you commute?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm going to quit."
"You don't have to—for me," I said.

"I'm quitting for me, though you are the one who helped me to see that I could be more, so I guess you're somewhat to blame," she added with a smirk. "I'm gonna look into college. I've been thinking about doing that anyway. I liked doing Sam's books when he was away. I liked working with the numbers and organizing things. It was," she paused, "relaxing."

"Numbers don't think back," I whispered.

"No. They don't," she confirmed.

"You know—Pam hates doing Fangtasia's books; she views it as punishment, but I hate doing them too, so I make her take care of them. You'd be doing both of us a big favor if you took them over."

She shook her head. "I'm not qualified yet."

"Pam and I could teach you the basics. I'm sure that it wouldn't take you long to learn on the job. You'd have work you enjoy, and I would be better able to protect you."

"What if we got tired of being with each other both at home and at work?"

"If we did, we could talk about it—and make changes," I suggested.

"You mean—actually have an adult conversation about something? An open and honest one?" she asked facetiously.

I chuckled for a moment before she joined me in laughter. It was nice to be able to laugh about the dysfunction of our conversations in the past.

"I'm going to have to buy Amelia a present," I shared.

"You and me both," Sookie returned. "Speaking of which, we should thank her," she added with a blush.

"Speaking of the witch, we should," I concurred with a wink.
Chapter 12: The Verdict

AMELIA POV

While Sookie and Eric had been in his office, Bob and I had been enjoying Jock's liquid concoctions. The congenial vampire was a wizard behind the bar, and—though Bob had stopped drinking alcohol after his first drink because he'd be driving me (but hopefully not Sookie) home—the "virgin" beverages that he made were almost as delicious as the fully-loaded ones I was enjoying.

I knew—because I'd tasted all of them.

I glanced at the stopwatch I'd set on my cell phone.

"What's the verdict?" Bob asked.

"They've been in there for over an hour," I said, showing him the screen of the phone which indicated that they'd been—hopefully—talking for an hour and twenty-two minutes and forty-two seconds.

To be precise.

I stopped the timer when I saw Eric come into the main bar from the back.

He didn't look pleased.

Fuck!

"Witches! Come!" he barked out. Immediately, he turned and zipped back toward his office.

Fuming, I grabbed Bob's hand and stomped my way toward the back, ignoring the concerned look on Jock's face.

Yes—I was pissed off! I'd tried to help that son of a bitch! And I wasn't going to stand for being ordered around like a dog!

When Bob and I entered Eric's office and I saw that Sookie was wearing a different dress, I growled angrily. "Sookie Stackhouse! You promised you wouldn't fuck him!"

It didn't help that Eric chuckled as if I'd told a joke, even as he closed the door behind us.

"You promised to talk too!" I yelled in Eric's direction as the vampire joined Sookie to sit on the couch. They were both "pink"-looking. Eric was obviously "pink" because he'd recently fed. Sookie's color was from a blush.

"We did discuss many things, witch," Eric said with a smirk. "And we wanted to thank you for that. But out there was not the place to do it."

"Why not?" I asked, still miffed about how Bob and I had been "summoned."

"Jock is a spy," Sookie said as she took Eric's hand.
"And we want him to think that all is not happy in the Eric/Sookie universe."

Reluctantly—grudgingly—I let my anger deflate. I was just glad that Bob and I hadn't discussed Eric and Sookie much in Jock's presence. All we'd said was that we hoped they could work things out, but beyond that, we'd kept our conversation light, given the number of vampire ears in the room. The last thing we'd wanted was to undermine Eric or to openly discuss things like breaking bonds!

I felt my frown leaving my face as I studied both Eric's and Sookie's faces. They seemed much more relaxed—much more at ease—and not just in a post-coital bliss kind of way.

"Sit down," Eric invited, gesturing for Bob and me to take the two chairs that had been set up across from the couch. I noticed Sookie's destroyed dress in the trashcan by the desk as we passed it.

"You'd think that you would have learned to operate zippers in the last thousand years," I muttered sarcastically in Eric's direction.

"Sadly—no," he winked, while Sookie flamed even redder.

"So?" I asked as soon as Bob and I had sat down.

"We talked. We're together," Sookie said with a wide smile as she leaned against Eric.

"And the bond?" I asked.

"We're not breaking it," she said.

"Why not?" I asked. If she spewed off some kind of "practical" explanation, I would likely strangle her. Yes—I figured that the bond would help her to stay safe from other vampires. However, the part of me who had lost Tray and then had found Bob again prayed that Sookie's reasoning for wanting to keep the bond would be love.

"It is," she said sincerely, as she reached out her free hand to grab mine.

She was obviously listening to my thoughts, but she clarified for the others. "It is love—and all the practical stuff too. But, mostly, it's love."

I smiled in return and squeezed her hand. "And your doubts? Your fears about the bond?"

"Eric told me that the bond can't create feelings, and I trust him," she said firmly, even as the vampire seemed to relax even more at her words. "I should have trusted him all along," she added.

"We are both guilty of mistrust, lover," Eric said gently. "But no more."

Sookie nodded and released my hand to wipe away a tear that was falling down her cheek. "Anyway," she said as if trying to hurdle over past pains, "Eric and I are going to keep working on our communication skills—but thanks to you, we've had a good start."

"I'm glad, Sook," I said sincerely as Bob took my hand. I could tell that my boyfriend was glad for Sookie—and glad that my little scheme to force my friend and her vampire to talk had actually worked. And I loved Bob all the more for that pride.

"So—what now?" I asked.

"Well—for one—I'm going to move in with Eric," Sookie announced proudly. "And—for another
—I'm going to come out as a fairy and claim Eric as mine," she practically growled.

She looked as fierce as I'd ever seen her. She looked like the fairy she'd been trying to deny that she was.

And Eric looked ready to ruin another dress.

"Should we go?" Bob asked nervously, sensing the charge in the room just as I had.

"No," Sookie said quickly, as she placed a hand on Eric's arm to signal him to calm down. We're working on a plan to deal with Victor Madden," she announced. "And we need your help."

"Our help?" I asked.

"If you're willing to give it," Sookie said.

"If it helps to rid the world of that smug bastard, Victor Madden, then I'm in," I promised.

"I'm with you," Bob volunteered from next to me.

I turned to smile at my boyfriend. I really did love him.

"If we kill Victor directly, then Felipe will kill me and take Sookie," Eric said gravely.

Surprisingly, Sookie's smile looked like one of Eric's in that moment: feral. Indeed, it seemed as if she were finally ready to embrace her fairy heritage in more ways than one.

"That's why he needs to die while saving my life," Sookie said.

PAM POV

I cradled Miriam's body to my own as carefully as I could.

The chemotherapy she'd been enduring might as well have been called "poison-therapy." I knew that it was the best humans had to offer her, and my studies had also told me that it worked for many people. However, that didn't change the fact that the "treatment" was a crapshoot.

The question was: Could the cancer be eliminated before the body was too poisoned to survive the cure?

I hated the very premise of the treatment! The torture involved!

And I hated the fact that cancer was one of the few ailments that vampire blood would make worse. In fact, if I fed Miriam my blood, it would only feed the rogue cells inside of her.

Unless I drained almost all of her blood first.

Unless I made her my child—something I'd been forbidden from doing by Victor fucking Madden!

And by Eric.

I scoffed quietly so that I wouldn't wake up my beloved. She moaned in my arms. I'd spent my "vacation" from Fangtasia with her—trying to ease the suffering that her cancer and its treatment had caused her.

I'd felt fucking powerless!
Holding her hair as she vomited into her toilet.

Holding her hair and a bucket when she couldn't make it to the toilet to vomit the paltry amount of food and water she'd been able to take in.

Crackers and sips.

Not having the energy to cry, Miriam had whimpered herself to a fitful sleep. She'd spent her restless slumber taking turns between hugging my body to her to—hoping to quell her fever—and pushing me away because any contact caused her pain at times.

I was at a loss.

And I was fucking pissed!

Still—I could understand Victor's motivation for stopping me from turning my lover. After all, he was a spiteful bastard who had no concept about affection or love—and he wanted to further punish my maker by denying me. But what I couldn't understand was my maker's reasoning for not just killing the asshole right away.

I knew that he planned to, after all!

But Eric was determined to "wait" for the "right opportunity!"

The right time.

As if Miriam had any fucking time to wait for my maker to put a fucking plan together!

A stake. An asshole.

An asshole on a stake.

How fucking hard could a "plan" be?!

My phone vibrated from the nightstand where I'd placed it earlier, but I didn't want to disturb Miriam's "rest" in order to reach for it, so I let the call go to voice mail.

A minute later, my phone rang again. This time, I felt a small pull from my maker, letting me know that it was him calling.

Fucking bastard!

I knew Eric would keep up the calls until I answered, so—as carefully as I could—I moved so that I could reach my phone. Miriam groaned in my arms; thus, my bitterness was at an all-time high as I answered.

"What?" I spat.

"Do it. But do not take her to ground in Louisiana. I'd suggest the safe house in Texas. Given Miriam's current state, you'll need to go to ground with her and stay with her in order to ensure a positive outcome."

"You're giving me permission?" I asked in a whisper. A whimper.

"Yes. I am hereby lifting my command that you not turn Miriam. Turn her, Pam. Turn your beloved."
"But Victor?" I asked, even as I felt my maker's command lift from my body like a blanket being tossed aside. "Why Texas?"

"By the time you rise with your new child, Victor will either be dead or the rest of your allies in Area 5—including me—will be no more. If you cannot feel me when you rise, then I want you to lay low for a while. As soon as your child has enough control, go to Karin," my maker said. "And be secret about it."

"Why her?" I asked. All I knew about Karin was that she was my sire's first "made" child. I had never even spoken to her—let alone seen her. In fact, about Karin, I knew only the name of the place where my maker had told me she was staying: a small city in Columbia.

"I'm taking steps to ensure that my children won't be implicated in my actions," he said enigmatically. "Thus, I do not think that retaliation would be made against you or Karin, but the possibility exists. If troubles come, you two will be stronger together."

"What steps are you taking?" I asked.

"Do not be in Louisiana tomorrow night," he emphasized. "And—if I die—you are to make sure that Karin has half of the money I left behind. You know how to access the offshore accounts. She doesn't."

"Eric? Master?" I asked, feeling dread rise within me once more. "I will help you kill Victor."

"No," he said firmly. "Think, Pamela. If you were lost, then Miriam would be too."

"I could turn her and then help," I tried.

"And risk leaving her as a newborn without a maker?" he asked.

"Master?!" I whispered, half question, half plea.

"No, Pam. Leave Area 5 and turn your beloved. Go right now—within the half hour." He paused and seemed to sigh. "I want you to have a happy life, and—one it's possible—I'll call you back here."

"Wait! What do you mean?" I asked loud enough to cause Miriam to stir.

"The steps I am taking to keep you from being implicated will also make it difficult for me to allow you return to Area 5 for a while, even if all goes well," he said.

"You're going to claim that I defied you. But how?" I asked. "Victor was there when you gave me the command not to turn Miriam. He was the one who ordered you to do it!"

"There is a plan. That's all you need to know, Pam. That—and that I am sorry for making you wait to have your own heart's desire," he sighed. "Goodbye," he said before hanging up. When I tried to call back, his voice mail picked up.

"What's wrong?" Miriam asked groggily.

I forced my worries about Eric to the back of my mind.

"Are you ready to become my child?" I asked my beloved instead.

"Can we?" she asked hopefully. She was, of course, aware of my maker's previous command.
"We can," I returned.
Chapter 13: Pets

JOCK POV

I wasn't afraid to admit—at least to myself—that I was confused by the events of the night. With that in mind, I was hoping to get more information before I made my nightly report to Victor.

After all, the Louisiana regent wasn't exactly known for being forgiving when he was disappointed.

The fact was that I was frightened of Victor. Of course, I was frightened of Eric Northman too. And, once the fighting broke out between them—and, let's face it, a fight of some kind was inevitable—I didn't want to be anywhere near the action.

I shook my head a little. I'd never wanted to be a fucking spy! But my maker had owed Victor a favor.

And I was that favor—for as long as Victor found use for me.

Two fangbangers at the end of the bar caught my attention, and—since they were tolerable looking and smelling—I hurried over to them and then set about charming them. It was all too easy to convince them to join me for a "private drink" after the bar closed for the night.

At least there was that to look forward to—though I knew I'd have to phone in my report to Victor before I "played."

As I looked toward the back of the club, I wondered what was going on in Eric's office. Unfortunately, the Viking swept his private office for surveillance equipment every night—not that I could go into that space without him knowing that I'd been there and giving my "true work" away.

As I listened to the gossip among the fangbangers, I went over the details of the night in my mind—mentally constructing my report for Victor.

The evening had started out normally enough. Given the fact that Pam was on some kind of extended "leave" because of the dissention between herself and Eric, I'd been charged with opening Fangtasia. Eventually, Eric had made his way to the bar, but—as was his custom—he'd stayed in his office for a while before taking his place on his ridiculous throne.

Once there, he'd been aloof—as always—though the few fangbangers at Fangtasia had certainly tried to get his attention.

As always.

He'd received a phone call, which had seemed to brighten his mood—at least momentarily. Unfortunately, from my position behind the bar, I'd been unable to pick up the voice of the caller, though it seemed clear from the way that Eric had begun watching the door that the individual intended to come to Fangtasia.

I'd posited that the caller was Pam and that Eric was pleased because his child was prepared to "grovel" to get back into his good graces.
About ninety minutes later, however, I was proven wrong when Eric's bonded and pledged human came in with two witches. One of them was Amelia Broadway, whom I'd known about from the dossier that Victor had given me on Sookie Stackhouse. The other witch was named Bob, and he was clearly romantically involved with Amelia.

Strangely enough, Sookie had seemed quite reluctant to be at Fangtasia.

After Amelia had been granted a private meeting with Eric in his office, Sookie had bellied up to the bar and downed two stiff drinks as if she were dying of thirst. She'd called the beverages "liquid courage"—as if she needed "courage" to visit with her bonded.

During the ten minutes that Amelia was alone with Eric, Sookie must have looked at the exit of the club about a hundred times. In fact, if the male witch hadn't been sitting next to her, I was quite sure that Sookie would have bolted from Fangtasia like a scared rabbit! I tried using my well-practiced charm to get some information from her about why she seemed so nervous; unfortunately, she wasn't forthcoming.

Though she wasn't talking, Sookie's mouth did stay quite busy. If she wasn't taking a drink, she was chewing her nails nervously. Indeed, by the time Amelia returned from the office area, there seemed to be nothing left of Sookie's manicure to destroy!

And then the female witch had to practically blackmail Sookie to get her to go to Northman's office!

Yes—after that display, it was safe to say that I was quite at a loss as to what was going on!

Unfortunately, during the 83 minutes that Eric and Sookie were alone in Eric's office, the picture didn't become clearer. Neither witch was forthcoming about why they'd come to Fangtasia—no matter how much I tried to draw information out of them with my "friendly bartender" persona. Sadly, there had been no opportunity to glamour them, and witches could be tricky anyway. Even if they could be glamoured, they would often remember that they'd been taken over, or they would sense that they had "lost time."

And that fact would cause the kinds of problems I wasn't ready to deal with!

Of course, I was frustrated by my inability to draw out the information I needed! Generally, people opened up to me as if I were a fucking priest in a confessional! And that was why I was generally a good spy for Victor. But that night I was batting .000.

To make matters even more indecipherable, Eric had ordered the witches to his office—using the tone of voice that he generally reserved for only those who were about to be tortured.

Eric, Sookie, and the witches had been in the back for a while now, so I was in a holding pattern. Because of the cameras he had in place outside of the club, Victor likely already knew that Sookie was at Fangtasia, so it was only a matter of time before he contacted me for my report. And he wasn't known for his patience!

But I still had no fucking clue what the fuck was going on!

Just as I was contemplating creating a problem in the club just so that I would have an excuse to knock on Eric's office door, I heard a commotion from the back. And then a distraught-looking Sookie Stackhouse emerged into the club. She was dressed differently from before—a sure sign that the sheriff had fucked her at some point during the night. I quick inhalation confirmed that hypothesis.
Sookie's two witch friends were following closely behind the openly weeping telepath. Both Amelia and Bob looked fearful as the trio quickly crossed the dance floor. However, right before they got to the front door, Eric breezed across the room at vampire speed, causing the few patrons in Fangtasia to gasp.

The Viking blocked Sookie's path, and—from the look on his face—it seemed as if he was ready to drain her.

"You have not yet confirmed that you understand the instructions you were given, pet!" he said in a steely tone.

"We are done here!" she replied, her own voice stormy.

"Yes. We are. For now. However, if you allow the witches to break the bond, I will kill them! And your brother!" Northman seethed. "Tell me you understand, pet!"

"You made yourself perfectly clear, master!" Sookie said sarcastically.

Northman exposed his fangs, even as his bonded sank to the floor, wailing in pain. I had seen many a vampire punish a pet before, but I'd never known of Northman to do such a thing with Sookie—let alone use their blood bond to do it.

Though I'd not seen Eric and Sookie together often, rumor had it that the Viking treated his bonded with a lot of latitude.

Apparently, that rumor was incorrect.

"The pain you feel now is nothing compared to what your witches will feel if you defy me," Eric growled.

"Go to hell," Sookie gasped.

"They'll leave this plane of existence before I do!" he yelled, pointing toward the now cowering witches. "Unless you fucking do as you are told!"

"I didn't want to believe it before, but Bill is right. You are a monster," the telepath sobbed.

"Oh yes," Eric agreed unnervingly. "I am most definitely a monster."

"No wonder Pam did what she did to get away from you," Sookie whimpered.

Northman had Amelia by the neck in the next moment.

"That reminds me, witch! How long will your little potion last?" he growled.

"She can't answer! You're choking her! Killing her!" Sookie yelled out, though she was clearly still in pain too.

"Seven turns of the sun," Bob answered for his girlfriend, even as Eric practically threw Amelia toward him, sending them both into a crumple on the floor.

"If I ever see either of you in Area 5 again after tonight, I will kill you," the vampire said to the two witches.

"You bastard," Sookie whispered.
"Bastard? Do not forget that I've spared them up to this point out of generosity—as a gift to you, my bonded," he said, his tone ice cold and deadly. "But if they ever again interfere in my life or with my wishes, even your begging will not stay my hand!"

"I hate you!" Sookie cried out as Eric seemed to release her from the pain he'd been causing her through their bond.

"Hate me all you want, pet," he hissed at a low enough volume that it couldn't be heard by anyone in the room other than Sookie and the handful of vampires who were enthralled by the scene. "But you will obey me. And your betrayal will be punished. In fact, you will return here at 10:00 p.m. tomorrow night so that your punishment can be witnessed by all of the vampires in my retinue."

"But I work tomorrow night!" she said insistently.

"No. Before this night is over, you will quit your job," he said, still at a low volume. "I have indulged you in that area for long enough. But you have proven to me tonight that you deserve no such indulgences from me."

"No!" she yelled, a contrast to his own quiet voice. "I won't quit on Sam!"

"Do you want the shifter to die?" he asked grimly. "I'd be willing to make that happen if you continue to disobey." He shook his head. "I have been a fool for treating you well, but I have no tolerance for betrayals."

"But I didn't betray you!" she cried.

"Yes. You. Did," he said firmly. "And the fact that you don't recognize that simply means that I will need to shorten your leash and train you more firmly. I'd thought to avoid that, but my forbearance is done because of your behavior, Sookie."

"You don't own me!" she defied.

I could tell that he was punishing her through their bond again as she doubled over in pain.

"That is exactly what I do, Sookie. I. Own. You. And you would be well-served to remember that."

"My grandfather won't stand for this," she returned as forcefully as she could.

"You and I both know that he's out of the picture." He smiled evilly. "There is no one to keep me from you, Sookie. Nowhere to hide." He stood to his full height—a sight that was intimidating as hell. "Be here tomorrow night, or face the consequences," he barked.

With that, the vampire stormed toward me. "Find me the two least offensive humans in here. Bring them to me!" he ordered before zipping back toward his office.

I was shocked to say the least! In all my time at Fangtasia, Eric had never fed on fangbangers. I'd heard that he was experimenting with fidelity with the telepath, a piece of information which Victor had gotten much amusement from.

As Sookie and her friends limped their way out of the club, I targeted the buxom brunette and the skinny redhead at the bar to be Eric's "victims." Yes—I'd been intending to make them my meal, but Eric would already be keenly-aware that they were the best-smelling among the fangbangers. And I wasn't about to disappoint him by selecting inferior products for him—not when he was in such a murderous mood!
Indeed, giving up the tastiest morsels in the club and settling for the leftovers were small prices to pay for passing a small test of "loyalty."

Needless to say, both fangbangers at the bar had been frightened by the Viking's violent display, but the pathetic creatures hadn't tried to leave after he'd stormed off. In fact, both were excited to be chosen as Eric's "fuck-n-feeds."

Still, I glamoured them to follow me quietly.

As the humans and I approached Eric's office, I slowed us down and then stopped us so that I could overhear a call that the sheriff was making.

Generally, he closed his door when on the phone, but he'd obviously left it open since he was expecting me.

"Yes, your majesty," he said. "You heard me right. My child, Pamela Ravenscroft, is hereby banished from Area 5—under threat of death!"

I had to force myself not to gasp at that information.

Eric and Pam might have quarreled often—more like sparred as siblings did—but I'd always admired their relationship. Not many children enjoyed such enjoyable relationships with their makers!

I know I hadn't.

Eric explained the situation to the king, giving me the information that I would be sharing with Victor, too.

"The witch, Amelia Broadway, has developed a potion that temporarily hinders a maker's bond with his or her child," Eric said gruffly. "Pamela took the potion this evening—about forty minutes ago. The witch manipulated Sookie into coming here tonight so that she would know if the potion was working. Sookie was," he paused, "distracting me with sex when my connection with Pamela was muted."

There was a pause.

"Yes, your majesty. Sookie did know about the scheme—and went along with it out of misguided sympathy for my child. Regardless, Sookie will face punishment tomorrow night," he growled.

Another pause.

"I will ensure that no permanent harm comes to the telepath, Your Majesty; however, she needs to be taught her place. As you know, I've allowed her some leeway because of her service to me and other vampires, especially yourself, but she has gone too far this time."

Another pause.

"Thank you. Victor's consultation in the matter would be welcome. You may tell him that the punishment will begin at 10:00 p.m.—unless you prefer that I call him."

Another pause.

"Yes, your majesty. As I said, Sookie has an emotional attachment to my child," he said. "She considers Pamela a friend."
"Pamela has been wanting to make a child of her own; her lover has terminal cancer. Victor made clear that she was forbidden from turning Miriam, and I confirmed the regent's orders by issuing a maker's command. The witch's spell has been used to allow Pamela the freedom to escape my influence."

Another pause.

"No—I cannot feel Pamela at all. It is as if she is dead. However, in one week's time—once the potion wears off—she will feel my wrath," he growled.

The sound of that growl was the scariest thing I'd ever heard.

"With your leave, I plan to track her, Your Majesty," he said. "And then I will arrange for her punishment."

Another pause.

"The witches have been banished from Area 5. And they have been warned about interfering with any bonds in the future," he said, emphasizing the word "any."

Another pause.

"Those were my thoughts exactly, your majesty. The last thing we want is a war with witches strong enough to fuck with vampire bonds! But I will be informing Victor about them so that he can keep a close watch on them since they generally reside in Area 1. If it is decided that they should be banished from the entire state, Victor will have my support."

Another pause.

"Very well. I will send you an official report tomorrow after Sookie's punishment is done, Your Majesty."

Hearing Eric end the call, I recommenced my progress to his office with the two glamoured fangbangers in tow.

Eric's fangs clicked down immediately when he saw them.

"Release them!" he ordered.

Immediately, I did just that.

"Close the door on your way out," he said, even as he wiggled his finger at the brunette.

I bowed and left his office; then, I sent a quick text to Victor, promising him a very interesting report as soon as I was able to leave the bar and call him.

SANDRA POV

I looked around the bedroom where I was currently taking up residence. I was tired of having to hide, and I knew whom to blame for my predicament.

Sookie Stackhouse.

She'd killed my sister and had then convinced my parents that Debbie was the one to blame! But I
knew better.

Alcide Herveaux had offered up the details of what had really happened easily enough—once we were in bed.

Once he'd learned that Sookie was one of my preferred topics of discussion, he'd spilled. Of course, I'd told him that I just needed to "know about Debbie so that I could get closure."

He'd eaten it up—hook, line, and sinker.

Of course, Alcide seemed to be the kind of man who would talk openly about any topic with someone he wanted more sex with. That made him a disloyal bastard, but he was—at least—a completely predictable one.
Chapter 14: Cast the Hook

ERIC POV

I kept the fangbangers in my office for thirty-three minutes and twelve seconds—which was precisely thirty-three minutes and twelve seconds longer than I wanted to.

Thirty-three nauseating minutes.

And twelve seconds.

I kept the women glamoured to be silent. I think that a single moan from either of them would have caused their deaths.

The only comfort I had was that Sookie had insisted upon this part of the plan.

So I did the most difficult part first. I bit them.

Sookie had wanted me to take a full meal from each—so that I would be as strong as possible. Thus, I'd held my nose and taken two long drags from each of them. I hadn't bothered to heal either of their bite marks fully, though I'd not left them bleeding out either.

After that, I'd used the towel that I'd used to clean up my cum from Sookie's body to mark the fangbangers with my "essence."

Gross—to be sure.

But a necessary evil to create the proper illusion. After all, Jock was a vampire, which meant he'd be able to smell whether or not I'd touched the women.

In fact, I didn't touch them after I bit them, but the towel had.

Finally, I glamoured the two fangbangers to "work on themselves—silently" so that they would be aroused and stink of their own sex too. As they did that, I worked on paperwork and tried to pretend they weren't there. After a glamour job so that they would believe that we'd had "the best threesome ever," I was well rid of them.

I showered—thoroughly—in my private bathroom so that Jock wouldn't wonder why I didn't smell like them, and then I went back into the bar, trying to project myself as if I didn't give a shit about anything.

Or anyone.

In truth, one of the individuals I cared about was moving farther and farther away from me.

I sighed with relief, knowing that Pam would likely be in Texas very soon. Sookie, too, was moving, and I knew that she and the witches would be almost to Bon Temps by now.

I longed to be with her, but I had business to attend to before I could be.

The first thing I did was to summon Thalia to Fangtasia. Once the ancient vampiress arrived, I made a show of inviting her onto the dais and declaring her to be my second in command. She
looked about ready to kill me, but accepted the position with a nod nonetheless.

Thalia was old enough and experienced enough to know that I was up to something; however, her expression told me that the position I was forcing upon her better be temporary. I hoped that it would be.

Honestly, Thalia was a failsafe. With Pam now gone for the foreseeable future, Thalia could offer Sookie some security if something happened to me, for—of all the vampires in my area—she was the one whom Felipe would be the least likely to fuck with. Hell—I only fucked with Thalia about her "service" at Fangtasia because I knew she would tolerate it.

Since she "liked" me.

And I also knew that she would understand why I needed her now—once I told her what was going on.

After appointing Thalia, I very loudly ordered her to call all Area 5 vampires in order to inform them to be at Fangtasia at 10:00 p.m. the following night. She was nonplussed about that duty to say the least. Thus, I suggested that she delegate the chore to Jock.

It would serve that rat-bastard spy right to have to do the busy work which would very likely lead to his own demise.

Once Thalia was on the job, I left the club to get "Were help."

While flying, I went over the possibilities for the next night. Of course, I had no doubt at all that Victor would take the opportunity I would be handing him on a silver platter to "kill" me and take Sookie. I'd all but admitted to Felipe that I couldn't control my bonded. And Felipe had volunteered Victor's services a little too enthusiastically for the offer to be innocent.

And that meant that Sookie had been right: the caped king would have to go too, or we'd have to leave the state. But those aspects of the "plan" were still under consideration—to be decided later that night.

Preferably in bed.

I sighed.

I had little doubt that Felipe would order Victor to cause even more dissention between Sookie and me the next night, something Victor would love doing. Of course, there was also little doubt that Victor would try to provoke me to attack him; that's what he did every night I saw him, after all.

I sighed again, letting the noise fall away into the air as I flew through it.

Felipe might want me alive because he was in line to receive the payment for "me" from Freyda that Appius would have gotten; however, Victor clearly wanted me dead.

And the sooner the better.

The only thing he wanted more than my death was the possession of Sookie. I knew that he was willing to use force, but I also knew that manufacturing a situation wherein he could be her "hero" would please him even more.

I could imagine him already coming up with scenarios where he "had" to kill me to prevent me from "punishing" Sookie too harshly the next night—scenarios that also required him to "save" her
by giving her his blood.

Scenarios which wouldn't get him into trouble with the king.

Of course, Victor and Felipe were both under the misconception that Sookie obeyed—that she heeled—just like any other blood-bonded human. If they found out that she didn't—wouldn't—I knew that things wouldn't go well for her.

Which is why I had to survive!

Which is why I was humbling myself enough to seek "help" from Alcide fucking Herveaux.

I growled. Once upon I time, I thought that Alcide was a decent man, which was why I'd chosen him to protect Sookie in Jackson. However, I'd completely reevaluated my choice-making process after that fuck up! After all, if I'd not been at Josephine's when Sookie had been staked, I doubt the vampires would have stayed off of her for long—despite her service to Betty Joe. The wolf certainly hadn't been of any help in that situation.

Indeed, Alcide had proven himself to be a man of highly questionable honor and taste when he'd insinuated to Debbie Pelt that he and Sookie were lovers just to make the werefox more jealous. Hell! Alcide had insinuated that he and Sookie had been fucking like rabbits even after Debbie had tried to kill Sookie by using a starving vampire—Bill—as her tool.

I'd wanted to kill Alcide right then and there, but I'd been too worried about Sookie at the time, and all she'd wanted to do was to go home. So I'd taken her there.

Bill might have been the one to bite and rape Sookie in the trunk of a car—and for that I'd always wanted to kill him—but it couldn't be denied that he'd been lacking in control at the time. Oh—I still held him responsible; however, I knew that his attack of Sookie was mostly about his weakness, not his malice. I'd seen his face when Sookie lay almost drained and hurt in the worst way a woman could be. Bill had regretted what he'd down—regretted that he'd been too weak to stop himself from doing it.

The way I looked at it—Bill had been the gun.

Debbie Pelt had been the one to load it—the one to shoot it.

So I blamed them both!

And I blamed Alcide for giving Debbie even more fucking bullets after she'd already attempted murder once!

After all, Alcide would have been able to smell Debbie's scent on Sookie—just as I had. He'd come down to the garage when he heard the commotion between Bill and me when I'd pulled the trunk off the car and pulled Bill off of Sookie. So he would have been able to smell the werefox around the car too.

Yet—when Debbie had come to "visit" him that night, he'd fanned the flames of her jealousy, disregarding the fact that Sookie could "hear" him with her telepathy—disregarding the fact that she'd been raped earlier that night.

I shook my head. And then the Were had taken the werefox back into his bed!

And, even after that, he'd endangered Sookie several times, taking advantage of her in the name of "friendship." And—the way he looked at her—the way I could tell that he thought about her—
made it difficult for me to control the impulse to snap his fucking neck! He clearly lusted after my bonded, and he was just another of her so-called friends who tried to undermine her relationship with me.

At least, the "help" I needed didn't involve asking Alcide to have my or Sookie's back. I wouldn't have trusted him to do so anyway. However, I would need the area's Weres to gossip if I wanted Sandra Pelt to be drawn out into the open. In the past—under Colonel Flood—the Long Tooth pack could be counted on for discretion and efficiency. That wasn't the case at all anymore; plus, I figured that Sandra probably had friends in the pack. So they'd make sure that she got any news relevant to her.

Of course, some of the vampires in Area 5 were also gossipmongers, too, but vampires and Weres didn't exactly travel in the same circles.

I landed well-away from Herveaux's home. I'd learned long ago to scope out the area before knocking on a Were's door. After discerning no immediate danger, I approached the front door.

I knocked, and Alcide looked confused as he opened the door. "Why are you here? What did you do to the guards?"

"I bypassed them," I smirked. It really was sad how easy it had been to avoid the "security" of the packmaster. "We need to talk."

"What about?" he asked gruffly.

"Sandra Pelt," I returned, looking for his reaction.

He seemed momentarily surprised and then concerned. Interesting.

"What have you done to her?" he asked, his eyes hate-filled.

As if he had a good reason to hate me!

And not the other way around.

"It is not what I've done to her. It is what she has been trying to do to my bonded," I said.

Alcide winced at my labeling of Sookie. I wanted to both rub in my relationship with Sookie (especially given the fact that we'd truly committed to each other) and rub out the Were in front of me for continuing to demonstrate a possessive streak toward my beloved.

Sadly, now was not the time for either.

"What? What are you talking about?" Alcide asked, his confusion clearly showing. "What has Sandy done?"

Sandy? Interesting.

"Sandra Pelt is obsessed with taking revenge upon Sookie for her sister's death. And—to that end—several attempts have been made upon Sookie during the last several days. Pelt was actually apprehended following the last of them, but the incompetent police in Bon Temps allowed her to escape."

"What? That's impossible. Sandy has been going to counseling. She's been workin' out her anger issues. Or—uh—so I've heard," he amended.
"It seems that she's regressed then," I returned flatly.

"Well—what do you want me to do 'bout it?" he asked. "Provide guards for Sook?"

I hated his use of a nickname for her—hated that he had any familiarity with her.

And I happened to know that she hated the nickname.

"That would be a good start. After all, you do profess that Sookie is a friend of your pack," I said dryly.

"Well—if she would have told me about all this, I'd have helped sooner," he said defensively.

I sighed. At least I hadn't been the only one that Sookie hadn't told about the danger that she was in—not that I would have preferred her telling the Were before me.

The Were who smelled slightly of sex and Sandra Pelt.

Sandy.

Fucking mongrel.

However—on a happier note—clearly, "getting my message" to Ms. Pelt would be easier than I had thought.

"Be sure to send Sookie your most competent," I paused, "puppies. If there are any left in your pack. Is the rumor that Long Tooth suffered the defections of three families last month true?"

Herveaux snarled at my reminder of his own incompetence as a packmaster. "You know—you didn't need to come here to secure guards. You could have just called me. Or—better yet—Sookie could have. She is a friend of the pack—not you!" the oaf shouted.

"As Sheriff of Area 5, I came as a courtesy—to the Long Tooth packmaster." I gave him a shallow nod of the head. "Or—perhaps—you would like for vampires to cut all ties with your pack? Perhaps, your people will do better without all the business vampires offer?"

I enjoyed the fact that the wolf looked as if he were about to shit himself.

"What courtesy?" he growled, his jaw so tight I figured that the odds were good that it was about to snap.

"Given the ineptitude of the police, I will be taking the Sandra Pelt matter into my own hands. However, you know Sookie. She doesn't want Ms. Pelt to die because of her. Thus, I am giving your pack 24 hours to take care of the problem—internally."

"Hell no! You want Long Tooth to do your dirty work!" Alcide yelled defiantly.

I scoffed. "I don't care if you kill Ms. Pelt or banish her, but—know this: If she's seen in Area 5 after midnight tomorrow night, the dirty work that I will do upon her will be," I paused for emphasis, "profound." I let my fangs drop and smirked. "And I—for one—will be very happy to get my hands very, very dirty. I figured that you'd want her to have more humane treatment," I added sarcastically.

"I just wish that Sookie knew what a monster you are—that she could see you like this!" he glared.

"She's beginning to," I replied enigmatically.
He growled—again. The sound was beginning to get on my nerves. "I'll have guards in place at Sookie's home by morning. They'll go with her to Merlotte's and wherever else she needs to go."

"Oh—Sookie won't be going to Merlotte's anymore," I said with a sinister smile.

"What do you mean?"

"She is quitting."

"What? Why?" he asked—as if he had the right to be a part of her decision-making processes.

Gods, I wanted to kill the flea-ridden Were with my bare hands in that moment!

Instead, I continued without answering the wolf's questions. "Sookie will be safely behind the wards of her home all day tomorrow. Ensure that your guards patrol the perimeter of her property. Thalia will be arriving at 9:00 p.m. to bring Sookie to Fangtasia, but your people should follow. They will be required to take Sookie home when I signal them."

"Hey—they're not chauffeurs, and they won't be taking orders from you," Alcide growled.

I merely chuckled and took to the air, certain that the necessary message would get to "Sandy" Pelt. The woman was clearly insane, and she clearly had something of a death wish, given the fact that she was trying to harm a vampire's bonded. I knew that a woman like that wouldn't simply accept banishment with a smile and move on. No—one like "Sandy" would become desperate, and she would try to get to Sookie before the 24 hours I offered out of "charity" were spent—before I began my hunt for her.

And I'd limited Sandra's available striking points. Merlotte's would no longer be a possibility, and—if Sandra had done any reconnaissance—she would already know that Sookie's property was warded. Would Sandra be reckless enough to try to get Sookie at Fangtasia?

No.

Would she try to get to Sookie on her way home the next night?

Oh, yes!

I was counting on it.

I figured that "Sandy" would lie in wait outside of Fangtasia. Hell—knowing that Alcide's "trustworthy" people were likely as incompetent as their packmaster—"Sandy" would probably have an easy time catching them off guard. In fact, she might not even have to do anything more than seduce them to her aid.

Of course, I didn't intend for any of Alcide's people to have real control over Sookie's safety. I just needed Sandra to think they did so that she'd be "available" when I needed her.

I landed in the yard of one of my homes—a home that was known about by Felipe and Victor. I took out my phone and dialed.

"Northman," Victor said with clear amusement in his tone.

I was certain that he'd gotten his orders from Felipe already. And I was even more certain that his spy, Jock, had also contacted him.

"Victor," I greeted evenly. "I was calling to make sure that you had heard from the king."
"Yes. Felipe keeps me well-informed," he said smugly.

"Excellent," I said. "I also wanted to inform you about a renegade Were in my area who has threatened my bonded, a woman named Sandra Pelt. The Long Tooth pack has been given until midnight tomorrow night to take care of the issue, but I doubt that Ms. Pelt will be wise enough to accept her banishment. Thus, I plan to begin hunting her right after Sookie's punishment is completed tomorrow night—at the stroke of midnight. Would you care to join me?"

"I am aware of Ms. Pelt," Victor said with intrigue in his tone. "Very little occurs in my state that I'm not aware of," he added.

I didn't miss his use of the possessive pronoun, "my." It didn't take a genius to figure out the source of his information about Sandra Pelt. Either Felipe had told Victor, based upon Bill's report, or Bill had told Victor directly. It really didn't matter.

Bill was the source either way.

I waited for Victor to respond to my offer.

"I've not enjoyed a good hunt in a while," he said, his tone laced with anticipation. Likely, Victor was already planning how I could have an "accident" during the hunt.

"Very well," I said, though I didn't hang up until after he had.

I went into the house just long enough to put my phone inside. One of the younger vampires in Area 5, a self-proclaimed "tech wizard" named Molly, had ensured that none of my conversations or texts could be "spied" upon through my phone. However, she couldn't ensure that the device couldn't be used by others to keep track of my location.

So my phone was staying home. However, I grabbed a disposable phone from the cache I kept on hand. After all, I had to monitor the "bug" I'd placed on Compton's phone months before. Yes—I needed to make sure that the rat moved through the maze that was being set up for him.

As I left the house, I inhaled deeply to "look" for any potential threats. There were none, so I took to the air once again.
Chapter 15: Rats in the Maze

AMELIA POV

Sookie sighed loudly and brushed away some tears.

She'd just told Sam that she'd be unable to work for him anymore. Needless to say, he'd been upset—and loud in his protests. In fact, Bob and I had been able to hear most of his outburst as we'd prepared the potion we would need to sever Sookie's blood connection with the vampire.

Sookie had promised Sam a fuller explanation in a few days before hanging up. When the house phone rang, she ignored it.

Good girl.

Frankly, I was proud of her for not telling Sam about the "plan." He was seeing Jannalynn, whom didn't seem trustworthy at all. And I didn't see Sam as being above pillow-talk about his frustrations.

Plus, he had his own motives.

"I wish he could just trust me," Sookie said as she sank into a chair and watched what Bob and I were doing with interest.

All of us had been glad that the fairies weren't at home. Of course, Sookie had helped with that by calling Claude and telling him that Eric was angry and might try to come over that night.

Talk about a fairy repellant!

Sookie didn't want to have to explain herself to them either, and Bob and I were in a hurry. After all, it needed to look as if we were obeying Eric's "orders."

"All done!" I declared. "We just need something of his."

Sookie nodded and left the room for a minute. When she came back, she had a lock of his hair.

"Will this do?" she asked.

"It's his?" I queried in return.

She nodded. "Yeah. He said that in his human time, people exchanged locks of hair. I thought it was sweet and romantic," she explained with a shrug. "Will it work?"

"It'll work," I confirmed, even as I put the hair into a bowl. "And now I need a drop of your blood."

"Will it hurt him?" she asked.

"No. But—knowing him—he'll probably notice as soon as your tie is gone," I cautioned.

"We're counting on it," she sighed. "I know that he can only feel me when I'm close nowadays. After he was poisoned with silver, a lot of his blood got replaced. But," she said with a little growl, "I bet Bill's found an excuse to spy on me every night since he's been well enough to get out of bed. And he'll know if I leave here, and God knows who he'd tell!"
"Maybe you shouldn't break the tie with him—until after Victor's gone," I said cautiously.

She sighed. "This might be the end—of Eric and me."

"But you've committed to each other!" I said.

"Yes," she sighed. "But what if something goes wrong with the plan? Tonight might be our last chance to be together, and Eric can't come here because Claude and Dermot might come back. I won't let Bill take this night from me. Plus, we need to get him on our hook—remember?"

I nodded. "Okay, Sookie. Are you ready?"

"Will it hurt—me?" she whispered, bracing herself.

"Since it's not a full bond, you shouldn't feel much. Maybe a little pain or discomfort."

She smiled tensely. "Okay. Do it."

I motioned to Bob, and we started chanting the spell that would eliminate Bill Compton from Sookie's body for good.

As it turned out, she didn't feel any pain at all.

None.

TEN MINUTES LATER

Sookie had made sure that she would be visible through her living room window.

"I hate Eric. I just hate him!" she yelled out, signaling to me and Bob that a vampire—most likely Bill—was close enough for her telepathy to pick up on.

I nodded and moved so that I wouldn't be seen through the window. Then I called Sookie's phone.

As Sookie answered and then pretended to have a screaming match with Eric about how the new "wards" that Bob and I had supposedly just set interfered with Eric's ability to "feel" her, Bob went upstairs to retrieve our suitcases.

Finally, Sookie yelled out an invitation to Eric. And then her voice turned cold, though it was still loud enough for any "visitors" to hear.

"Well—I'm glad that worked to help you to feel me again! God forbid I have any privacy from the monster who threatened the lives of my friends!" she said before hanging up.

After that, Sookie looked at me. We both wondered if Bill would yell out from the yard—since he could no longer come to the door thanks to the stronger wards that Bob and I had actually set earlier that day. But when Bill didn't try to get our attention after a few seconds, Sookie made a show of going to the kitchen and taking the phone off the hook. Then, I pretended to escort my friend upstairs and tuck her into bed.

Ten minutes later, Bob and I left the house.

We weren't surprised at all when Bill's car was blocking us from turning off of Hummingbird Lane.

"Bill?" I asked as I got out of the car. "What are you doing?"
"I wanted to speak with Sookie, but she's not answering her phone," he said, clearly agitated.

"She turned off her cell and took the house phone off the hook. And she's gone to bed. It's been a difficult night for her," I said truthfully.

"I heard what Eric did," he growled. "And—just now—I saw her in her room from a distance. How is she? I can no longer feel her with my blood," he added cautiously.

"She's not well—thanks to Eric," I sighed, ignoring Bill's second question for the moment.

"Northman is a bastard!" Bill yelled out.

"After tonight, I wouldn't disagree," I responded.

"Why is it that I can't get as close to the house as usual?" Bill asked suspiciously. "And why can't I sense Sookie's presence anymore?" he asked again.

"Oh!" I said. "Bob and I worked a spell to strengthen the wards before we left. The barrier has been extended. If you can't feel her, then that's probably just a side effect of the spell."

He frowned. "A side effect? When will I be able to feel her again?"

"When she leaves the house, you'll be able to pick up on her. Or—uh—when you get an invitation."

"But I mean Sookie no harm. Why would your spell rescind my previous invitation?" he asked irritably. "Why would it keep me from ascertaining her safety?"

"The spell requires a clear invitation from Sookie for any Supernatural—except for Bob and me since we did the spell. So far, she's just invited in Claude and Dermot—um—since they live there."

"Eric?" Bill asked stiffly.

"Oh—yes. Well—uh—she had to invite him in," I said, trying to sound frightened.

"What?" Bill asked angrily.

"Um—she was afraid what he'd do otherwise." I shook my head. "I think he threatened to hurt Sam or Jason or you," I added. "He—uh—called right after we finished the new wards. He must have felt a disconnection from her too. After she reissued his invitation, though, Eric seemed satisfied because he could feel her again. Anyway, after that, Sookie hung up on him, and that's when she turned off her cell and took her house phone off the hook," I shared. "I'm sure that's why you couldn't get ahold of her."

Bob stepped out of the car. "I'm sure that Sookie intends to invite you in, Bill—but it's been a crazy night. Plus, she's really protective of her fairy kin."

"Yes," Bill said contemplatively. "Few vampires have received invitations to her home since they arrived. In fact, I'm one of only two."

"Well—like I said, she was really upset, especially after Eric called," I said with concern. "I'm positive she'll invite you in the next time you go over."

If he bothered to announce his presence—that is.

The skulking perv!
Bill nodded. "Yes. I suppose she will."

"Um—I know that you're closer to her than I am now since I moved back to New Orleans. Would you please try to watch over her? Eric—well—he's shown his true colors, and she'll need someone," I entreated.

For a moment, Bill looked quite smug. If anyone enjoyed a good stroke to his ego, it was him.

"Bob and I should go. If you heard what happened, then you know that we need to get out of Area 5 ASAP!" I added, glancing nervously over toward Bob, who was looking adequately nervous in the driver's seat.

"At Fangtasia, someone overheard that you now have the ability to interfere with blood bonds—that you developed the skill to help Pam," Bill said.

"Um—yeah. The spell has some similar qualities to the new wards we set. In fact, it was when we were experimenting with them that we discovered that the magic messes with bonds. I guess it interfered with your tie too—huh?"

"Yes," Bill agreed. "That makes sense. So—how does the magic work?" he asked with interest.

"Well—um—Sookie told me that fairies who share a bloodline with her—no matter how distant—could potentially track her, so we started trying to make the ward work to stop that from happening. During our testing, we learned that we can get a ward to disrupt other types of blood connections too."

Bill seemed to contemplate for a moment. "So you pushed your research further?"

"Yeah. And—uh—Sookie asked me to look into how to break her bond with Eric a while back," I added as if admitting to a big secret.

"She did?" Bill asked with interest.

"She doesn't want it—the bond," I whispered, looking around with trepidation as if Eric would fly out of the sky and skewer me.

Bill nodded indulgently—like he was placating a child. "But you found a way to disrupt bonds?"

"Yes," I responded.

"Even a child-maker bond?"

I nodded in confirmation. "Pam really wanted to turn Miriam. And it was clear that the chemotherapy wasn't working. She got desperate, and I knew I could help her because of my research," I explained.

Actually, I lied.

Potato. Po-taa-to.

"And you could interfere with the bond between Eric and Sookie too?" he asked, his voice as slippery as a snake's.

"Um—yeah," I said nervously. "It would almost be like placing a ward around her—similar to what I did with the house."
He contemplated for a moment. "So you could block their bond fully?"

I nodded as reluctant to answer. "Yeah. But—uh—actually, I could do more than just that," I whispered.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I could break Eric and Sookie's bond, but it would cause them both a lot of pain to do it. That's why Sookie went against my advice and told Eric tonight—after he felt Pam's bond with him diminish. She had expected him to understand—even be grateful—that we'd helped Pam in a way that wouldn't get him into trouble with Victor or Felipe. Uh—it was Victor who ordered Pam not to turn Miriam, after all. And you know what a douchebag Victor is!"

"Yes," Bill agreed, though somewhat reluctantly, which proved that Bill was a king-sized douchebag too—a used one!

"Anyway, Sookie thought Eric would be pleased, but he had his own reasons for not wanting Pam to turn Miriam. He thought Miriam wouldn't be a worthy vampiress because her cancer was so advanced. And Eric was pissed that Sookie helped Pam behind his back. Eventually, he calmed down a little, but things went south again—far south—when Sookie explained her reasoning for wanting to break their blood bond. She just wanted to be sure of her own feelings—sure that neither Eric nor the bond was causing her love for him."

Bill scoffed. "I can only imagine that Eric was enraged by that."

"Well—I just hope that he calms down a little before tomorrow night," I sighed. "I just wish we could ensure her safety."

"We can," Bill said almost seductively.

My stomach turned. Did he actually think he was alluring in any way?

"How can we help her?" I asked—instead of barfing.

Which was what I wanted to do.

"Come with me," he said.

BILL POV

"The services of the witches are secured," I told Victor just as soon as I'd convinced Bob and Amelia to help me save Sookie.

I didn't really trust Victor, but when he'd called me earlier that night to tell me that there might be a way to break Eric and Sookie's bond, I'd been intrigued.

And then, after he told me what had happened at Fangtasia earlier that night—the violence that had been wrought upon Sookie—I was anxious to help. If nothing else, Sookie being bonded to Felipe was preferable to her being bonded to Eric. And—according to Victor—it was quite possible that Felipe would allow me to be the one to bond with Sookie.

I closed my eyes and said a quick prayer that this would be the case. I had done all that I could to earn Sookie's forgiveness, and I knew that we would have been together again by now if it hadn't been for Eric. Once their bond was broken, I was certain that she would choose me of her own free will. Or she would see the practicality of bonding with Felipe. Plus, I held an ace up my sleeve.
Once she learned about Eric's soon-to-be marriage to Freyda, any grief she might have felt at losing Eric would be incinerated by his betrayal.

Sookie had always figured that Eric would eventually move on, and she would soon be proven right thanks to Freyda and Appius.

I'd planned to bide my time until the inevitable happened—until Eric hammered the last nail into his own coffin—but the bond-severing spell and Eric's plans to punish Sookie were motivations enough to act quickly.

"So they can actually break a blood bond?" Victor asked incredulously.

"Yes," I returned. "That is what they say. And I believe them."

"Could they do it now?" he asked.

"A strand of Eric's hair is needed," I sighed.

"Surely such a thing would be easy enough to secure in Miss Stackhouse's home," Victor said.

I sighed. "The witches already looked; they even tried a finding spell. Unfortunately, Sookie is an excellent housekeeper, and Eric rarely visits."

Victor growled. "I know how to get one. How long does the spell take?" he asked.

"About half an hour," I reported.

"Fine. Do you have the witches secure?"

"Yes. They are at my home."

"Not good enough," Victor said after a moment. "I'm texting you an address. Take them there before dawn and make sure that they have all they require for their immediate needs and for the spell. There is a coffin in the attic that you may rest in. You are to look after the witches carefully and make sure that they know not to leave during the day. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I returned.

"Good. Now—tell me about the spell," he ordered.

"It should sever the bond fully," I returned.

"And not just mute it?" he asked.

"No. Since Sookie's mostly human, the spell will completely annihilate the blood bond, but it will cause intense pain for both Sookie and Eric," I said somewhat reluctantly.

"Perfect," Victor smiled. "The hair will be delivered to you tomorrow. You will ensure that the witches conduct the spell at precisely 12:30 a.m.—unless you hear otherwise from me."

"What about Sookie?" I asked.

"I will see to it that she is placed into your care before tomorrow night is over," Victor promised. "You will likely be asked to escort her to visit Felipe."

I smiled. "Thank you, Victor. Thank you for all that you are doing for Sookie."
"She is an asset to the kingdom," my regent said, "as are you. Northman is a fool for not treating you as such."

"I am pleased to hear that you think so," I smiled.

"And I am pleased that you are finally all in with your loyalties to your king—and to me," Victor said.

"Uh—I . . .," I stammered.

"Your loyalty to Northman was admirable, but misplaced. I'm sure you appreciate—now—that Miss Stackhouse will be safer in Felipe's care—with you acting as her companion—rather than in Northman's care."

"Yes. I see that now."

"Good boy," Victor said before hanging up.

I sighed and looked at a picture of Sookie and me, which I kept in my desk drawer. It had been taken by Adele—though I'd had to coach the old woman in how to use a cellphone camera—before Sookie and I had left on our "date" to Fangtasia. Sookie had looked so innocent and pure. And I knew that going to Fangtasia was the first step in robbing her of that look. In retrospect, I wished that I'd not taken her. I should have used the fear of the serial killer to get her and Adele to come with me to New Orleans right away.

I should have done a lot of things that I'd not done when it came to Sookie, but I was determined to right the wrongs of the past.
Chapter 16: Complication

ERIC POV

I'd met many an individual with a martyr complex during the many days of my life. However, Bill Compton was one of the worst.

Actually—no. He was hands-down the worst!

Up until the moment when Victor had called Bill an hour before, the antebellum asshole had been an innocuous spy, but he'd now agreed to become an active participant in ensuring that I was parted from my bonded.

Permanently.

Unacceptable!

The only thing that might spare Bill's life was the fact that he probably really did think that I would "punish" my bonded. How little he knew me.

How little he knew Sookie.

In all honesty, I'd killed very few people out of extreme malice. Indeed, few had crossed me during my years. But Bill was an individual whom I'd fantasized about killing for a long time. And I wanted to take a long time in doing it. I could even remember the first time I'd truly wanted him dead.

It wasn't when he'd first brought Sookie to Fangtasia. No—I had been willing to win Sookie.

To earn her.

It wasn't even when I'd had to kill Longshadow while Bill had stood there with a figurative thumb up his ass as "his" human was attacked. But Bill was younger than I, and his reflexes weren't as good as mine. So his tardy response could be explained.

Not excused, but explained.

The first time I'd wanted Bill dead was when he'd not come to check on Sookie before he'd gotten his fill of the attackers at Stan's nest. It had been the look of disappointment in Sookie's eyes—the look which had told me that Bill had made her feel like an afterthought—which had made me want to slay him.

After Dallas, it seemed as if Sookie was always just waiting to be disappointed—as if she accepted the idea that she wasn't good enough to be anyone's main priority.

Yes. I hated Bill most for that disappointed look of self-doubt that Sookie had worn way too many times. I hated him for the inevitability of that look. I hated him for all the pain that Sookie had been forced to go through in order to finally overcome that look—in order to finally trust me.

Trust herself.

Of course, I, too, had disappointed Sookie.
Too often.

However, one difference between Bill and me was that I hated myself for causing Sookie to doubt herself. Oh—Bill acted as if he "hated his very being" on a daily basis, but he'd never actually admitted blame for any of his actions. He preferred to blame his "nature."

Another difference between us? I didn't want Sookie to ever suffer doubt again. Bill? I was almost positive that he would cultivate her self-doubts if he were able—so that she would remain dependent upon him.

Yes—I wanted to kill Bill, even more so when his stupidity blared like a fucking siren on a still night as it had ten minutes before.

Oh—I'd heard every fucking word of his conversation with Victor because I'd bugged his house phone, and Bill was predictable in that he always used a "land line" for "serious business." The idiot was too stupid or blind to understand that Victor wanted Sookie for his own and was using him to get to her. A tiny bit of flattery and an empty promise had been all that were required to make Bill turn on his sheriff. And his greed for Sookie had finally made him turn on her too.

Inexcusable!

I sometimes wondered why Bill even wanted Sookie—not that she wasn't worthy of being wanted by all who knew her.

But Bill had neglected her when they were together—even before he was called by Lorena. That much I'd found out from Sookie herself. Bill had reclaimed her after Dallas, but he'd become so wrapped up in his ill-advised database project that he'd made her feel inferior to it.

Yet another occasion when she'd worn "the look" I hated.

And, then, Bill had had the gall to task me with being his living "Dear John" letter once Lorena did summon him. Another reason to kill him!

The question I always found myself returning to was why Bill had seemed so anxious to get Sookie back after the Jackson incident. Honestly, I'd never arrived at a good answer for that question.

Had being with Lorena pushed him to see Sookie's superiority?

Did Bill have "mommy issues?" In other words, had the fact that Sookie killed Lorena made her the natural substitute for "mommy" in Bill's mind?

Was Bill simply a jealous asshole with an "if I can't have her, no one can" attitude?

I didn't know what truly motivated him, and—honestly—I really didn't need to know. What I did know was that I'd rather see Sookie end up with the shifter, the weretiger—or even the Were—compared to Bill. And that was saying a lot!

Of course, Sookie would end up with none of them. She was mine, and I intended for things to stay that way.

I waited until I'd confirmed that Bill was long-gone from Bon Temps before I called Sookie—though not by phone. I nudged her through our fully functioning blood bond. I'd been worried that it would be damaged when Sookie's blood tie with Bill was destroyed, but I needn't have been. It was stronger than ever since Bill's blood was no longer interfering with my own.
I'd never known how much of a hindrance it had been until it was gone.

Leave it to Bill to be an annoying asshole in all ways possible!

I flew around my bonded's home a few times—just to make sure that we were truly alone. But I didn't go to the house. Instead, I "nudged" Sookie again and concealed myself behind the tree-line.

My beloved walked out of her home with a small bag slung over her shoulder. She didn't say a word as she came toward me, her eyes shining brightly with confidence and love.

There was no self-doubt—no indication that she felt as if she was anything but my first priority. No indication that I was anything but hers.

When she was a few feet from me, she threw me her bag and then stepped into my embrace. I lifted us into the air.

And we flew together.

Skin.

Warm and tan.

Soft.

Slightly salty from perspiration.

My fingers could spend forever mapping it. Celebrating it.

Worshipping it.

Humans couldn't tell, but vampires could discern the subtle changes to human skin. Humans "shed"—for a lack of a better word—but more skin always came.

Yes—unlike vampire skin, human skin changed.

Even since I'd made love to Sookie in my office earlier that night, my bonded's body had altered—subtly, but surely.

My fingers drew over—learned—those beautiful evolutions to Sookie as she caught her breath. I'd brought her to my safest safe house, the one where I intended for us to spend the majority of our time if we stayed in Area 5. The security system was state of the art—thanks to Molly.

I'd redesigned all the light-tight areas with Sookie's comfort in mind. And I'd designed other facets of the home to offer her a day-time sanctuary too. Sookie was not the kind of woman to do nothing. Thus, I'd outfitted the property with a pool so that she could enjoy the sun. She also had a suite of rooms that would be light-filled during the day. If she ever wished to take a nap while sunlight streamed through her windows, she'd be able to do so. The suite also included a sitting room/office for her—one already filled with books and a computer so that she could actually take those online classes she'd talked about.

I'd even had my new day-man, Mustapha Khan, deliver some college brochures to the office for Sookie to peruse when she was ready. He'd also stocked the kitchen.

Already, he was proving a better asset than Bobby.
I'd given Sookie a tour before she'd asked to see "our" room. There we'd made love.

Several times.

"Tell me we're gonna be okay," she whispered once she'd calmed down from her physical exertions.

"I don't know," I said honestly. "But I think so."

"Good enough," she sighed, wrapping her body closer to mine.

"Have you decided?" I asked after a moment.

She shook her head. "No. I can't. I don't want to accidently make a choice that will make you unhappy."

"Losing you would make me unhappy," I whispered as I kissed her hair.

"Tell me again?" she asked.

"Three choices," I whispered.

"Go," she said.

"Choice one: After Victor dies, Felipe will come to Louisiana. I kill him and take Louisiana back"

"Won't you be punished? For killing your king?" she asked.

I pondered for a moment. "I could be. But some might see my killing Felipe as my effort to reestablish Sophie-Anne's monarchy. The Vampire Council is just as likely to support me as to behead me," I added.

"So your fate comes down to the flip of a coin," she sighed.

"Yes. But—in my favor will be Felipe's lack of judgment."

"Because he let you stay a sheriff and didn't kill you?" she asked, gripping my body.

"Yes. Exactly that," I whispered, bending down to kiss her forehead.

"Choice two?" she prompted.

"We go to Russell. We swear fealty to him. We try to convince him to take out Felipe after Madden is gone."

"But Russell might not want the hassle. And—even if he's okay with taking over Louisiana—he might not wanna deal with Nevada and Arkansas," Sookie said.

"Likely, he'd give at least Nevada to the Vampire Council to deal with," I said.

"Would he be a better king? Better than Felipe?" she asked.

I'd come to "like" Russell, but Sookie asked a good question.

And I wasn't certain of the answer.

"He might be a better king—where we are concerned," I responded measuredly. "In truth, Russell
is not as progressive as Felipe. But he also likes you because of the Betty Joe incident. He respects
you because of Rhodes. And I know that he was amused that I assumed an alter ego to enter his
state to look out for you when Lorena had Bill."

"Amused?" she asked.

"Yeah—well, once he learned that I was Leif, he did ask that I perform his marriage ceremony," I
responded.

"You're right. Weird," she commented. "Would he leave us alone if he was our king?"

"No," I said honestly. "He'd have tasks for you, but I don't think they'd be unreasonable. I know he
wouldn't force you to be with him sexually or covet you as Victor does. But I'd have to allow you to
work for him whenever he desired." I stroked her back with my fingertips. "And he'd likely farm
you out to King Bartlett too."

"Would Russell try to kill you? So that he could bond with me?" she asked with trepidation.

"Russell is older—crueler that many vampires in some ways," I answered after a few moments of
contemplation. "I doubt he'd have much patience if you asked him to turn over the humans who
betrayed him to the human authorities. But—at the same time—the 'old school' notions of honor
that he holds would likely stand us in good stead. He would give me the chance to serve him. And
—as long as I was loyal—he would be a fair king to me. And—by extension—to you. And—
almost certainly—he would honor our bond."

"Almost certainly?" she whimpered.

"Yes. Almost."

"Choice three?" she asked after expelling a long breath.

"Freyda. I will offer a counter-proposal to the contract she made with Appius. Mostly, she wants
me to protect her state. I will agree to do that, to offer her fealty, and to train Oklahoma's vampires
for two hundred years."

"A hundred more years than you're already down for," Sookie whispered.

"Yes—but, the time isn't so much to me. It would be like being a sheriff in a lot of ways, and that, I
could do for a long time. Hell—Freyda might even want me to function as one of her sheriffs. But I
won't marry her. I won't give myself to any other as long as you are alive. Or undead—if becoming
a vampire is eventually your choice," I added. "You would come with me to Oklahoma and be
protected by her, or the contract would become null and I would kill her."

"Yes—but why would Freyda agree to any of that? She obviously wants you too. And I'm sure
she'd just see me as an impediment."

"Well," I chuckled, "Freyda will soon learn that a fairy is claiming me. And she likely won't want
that mess. If she fears that the whole contract could become null, she might take what she can get."

"But we'd have to leave Louisiana," she frowned.

"Yes," I responded.

"And Felipe might come after us in Oklahoma too—for betraying him. Or he might hurt the people
I love here."
"Yes," I sighed. "And the fear of his retaliation might prevent Freyda from dealing with us."

"So Felipe needs to go," she whispered.

"Yes—I think so."

"You don't want to be a king."

"Hmm. I never did before," I commented.

"And now?" she asked.

"It might be better if I am one," I said honestly.

"Because of the complications that I have brought into your life?" she asked.

"Yes," I said honestly. "You are a complication, Sookie." I squeezed her body as hard as I dared without bruising her skin when she tried to pull away a little.

"Shhh," I comforted. "You are complicated, but I love complicated. And this is me picking you—putting you first. I didn't—couldn't—do that correctly before. I was unsure after the witch cursed me. And then I was stubborn—stupid for staying away. And then I was trying to protect you from Felipe."

She whimpered in my arms.

"But you picked me earlier tonight. You were the brave one first, and I will never be able to thank you adequately enough for that. And you're going to claim me as your own—officially. And I never thought you'd do that; I never thought you wanted me that way. But you did; you do. So—yes—you are a complication. But you are the best complication of my existence. I love you! And I am willing to become a king to keep you safe—just as long as you will stand by my side as my queen."

"Eric," she whimpered.

I petted her hair to soothe her. "But it's okay if being a queen is not what you want. The Russell scenario would keep me as a sheriff. The Freyda scenario would make me something like a hired consultant."

She sighed. "People will always come after you because of me."

"Not always," I shushed her.

"I've been living a 'normal life' on borrowed time," she said with surety.

"Yes. You have been," I confirmed. "And I wanted you to keep that. But—if you are with me . . . ."

I felt my voice trailing off like water propelled over a tall waterfall.

It just disappeared from sight and became lost in all the other drops.

And—for a moment—I was unsure.

But my bonded could read my mind—even if she couldn't "read my mind."

"I'm yours. And I will be yours," she whispered. "We already went over that."
There was a moment of silence—obviously a moment too long for Sookie, given the fact that she hit my chest as hard as she could.

"Right!" she demanded.

"Right," I chuckled in agreement.

"Good," she said as she settled her cheek back against my chest.

This time, she seemed to welcome the silence that fell between us, and I didn't begrudge her it. She was considering our choices, and none of them were ideal.

"I like Russell, but I think he'd be better as a neighbor," she whispered.

"Okay."

"I don't want to live under Freyda's rule. I don't think we'd be safe," she continued.

"Okay."

"Can you take just Louisiana? Can you give over Arkansas and Nevada to the Vampire Council?"

"I can if they don't kill me. And doing so might go a long way to proving that my motive for killing Felipe wasn't ambition—that I was trying to avenge my queen."

"Sophie-Anne," she sighed. "I miss her."

"She wasn't really the queen I was referring to," I whispered with a kiss to Sookie's temple.

"Promise me that you won't tell anyone else that," she chuckled worriedly. "I don't want you to get into more trouble than you're about to be in—once you kill Felipe."

I chuckled. "I won't tell anyone else that you are the only queen in my heart—I promise."

Again, there was a period of silence between us as we both reconciled ourselves to what was to come.

Victor would have to die first.

And then Felipe.

And then I'd have to face down the Vampire Council.

And then—if I was lucky—I'd become king.

Meanwhile, I'd have to convince Sookie to accept the contingency plan I was beginning to form in my head for her in case something went wrong.

"I won't have to wear a tiara all the time—will I?" she cringed, breaking me from my thoughts.

I laughed loudly. "No."

"There might be another option," she whispered before moving away from me and pulling an object from her bag.

It was green and lit the room with its magic.
"A cluviel dor," she said as she handled the item gently. "I found it the other day. I wasn't sure what it was, but—earlier—I showed it to Amelia. And—tonight—while I was waiting for you, I called Desmond Cataliades."

"A wish," I said in a whisper. "You get a wish."

"I could wish that we'd always be happy and together. I could wish it right now," she said.

"But that wouldn't mean we wouldn't have to work for it," I said with a chuckle.

"I know. But we would be happy and together," she insisted.

"Good things—to be sure. But what about the others in your life?" I asked. "What if you needed this magic to protect them?"

She frowned. "You'll help me—to protect them. Right?"

"Of course," I assured. "But a cluviel dor is a strange thing. If you ask for 'always,' that might involve that you get turned by another vampire. And what if it only 'hears' the happy part? Or the forever part?"

She frowned. "I don't know."

"Maybe you should save it—for when we really need it," I said, staring at the magical object—wanting to touch it, but denying the impulse.

"What if I wait so long that it becomes too late?" she asked reasonably. "I could ask it to help you successfully become the king. Or I could ask it to make it possible that you never have to become king. I could ask it to ensure that our plan works."

I chuckled again. "Which plan? Which part of the plan? There will always be a plan, Sookie. That's just how life is—new foes, new allies, new plans. Yes—I might have more variables with you in my life, but I've faced challenges before. Without them—without complications—life wouldn't have been worth living for so long."

She gasped and let the sheet around her drop—not that I was complaining about the wonderful sight I'd just been afforded.

"I know what to wish for, Eric. I know what to wish!"

As she spoke those words, the object lit up in her hands, and then it dulled and became useless.

"What did you do?" I asked her.
Chapter 17: Lie like a Dog

SOOKIE POV

What had I done?

The notion of a wish—what I thought might be the perfect wish—had jetted into my brain faster than any thought ever had. But I hadn't actually wished it—had I?

The light that had lit up the room seemed to "disagree" with that denial, however.

"I didn't say anything!" I said. "Not aloud!" I added insistently.

"I don't think it mattered," Eric smirked, though his eyes also showed some concern.

"Oh, God!" I yelled out, still gripping the spent cluviel dor.

"So?" he asked. "What did you wish for?"

"How do you know I wished for anything? That the cluviel dor thing even worked?" I asked defensively.

He shook his head and chuckled. "Can you still feel its magic? It was glowing before, and now it isn't."

I stuck out my tongue at him. "I know, but still! I didn't say anything!"

Quicker than lightning, Eric pulled me to him and made good use of the tongue I'd shown to him. Only when I was gasping for air did he end our kiss.

"So?" he asked again. "What was the wish?"

"I just thought," I panted as I tried to catch my breath, "that if I could be yours—stay yours—then everything would be okay."

"That is what you wished for?" he asked incredulously.

"Um—yeah," I stammered. "I mean—um—I didn't intend to actually wish it until I'd run it by you, but yeah."

His mouth was open—catching flies as Gran would have called it. The expression was disconcerting on Eric Northman—to say the least.

"You trusted me—to have you? To have you?" he repeated.

"Well—uh—yes. Of course."

In the next moment, I was on my back and the fairy charm was on the floor somewhere. No matter.

"You are mine. You will always be mine," he growled, immediately inflaming my body. It was funny how he was able to do that with a mere sound. But it was also welcome.

"But what about my wish? What do you think it means? Are you mad I used up the cluviel dor
thingy?” I rattled off, even as my breath rattled because of his attentions.

Eric stopped kissing me for a moment and looked at me with a smile that stopped my heart. "You want to be mine. You wished to stay mine," he whispered. "And that wish can only help us."

"You aren't mad?" I whimpered.

"Do I feel mad?" he asked as he rubbed his gracious plenty against my thigh.

"No," I gulped. "But . . . ."

"Sookie," he said, pressing a finger over my mouth, "it's time to shut up now and be mine."

I nodded. I could do that.

Eric's hands and mouth were suddenly all over my body. Breasts were seen to. My lady parts were seen to.

And when I was quivering with anticipation, expectation, and impatience, he finally entered me.

And he filled me.

Yes—I was his.

And his I would always stay—come what may.

THE NEXT DAY, 9:03 A.M.

SANDRA PELT POV

"I'm going. I swear it," I assured Alcide, who was looking at me with his sad, "puppy dog" eyes.

"Promise me that you won't come back to Louisiana—unless I call you and tell you that it's okay," he beseeched.

"I swear," I said with false sincerity, even as I threw him his crumpled jeans. In truth, I appreciated the information that Alcide had given to me—and the fuck—but I was ready to be done with him. I had better things to do. "So—out of curiosity—who's guarding Sookie?" I asked.

He growled at me.

"Come on!" I chuckled. "You really believed Northman? Believed that I would disregard all of my therapy and go after a vampire's bonded, pledged mate?" I emphasized, knowing just how much Alcide hated the thought of the telepath belonging to anyone—but him. Plus, I enjoyed twisting the knife through Alcide's weak psyche. After all, he'd strung my sister along for the sake of that backwater waitress. So—in my estimation—he deserved to suffer a bit.

"Northman is threatening your life," Alcide practically whined.

"I know. And that's why I'm going to leave until things can get straightened out. I mean—I have no doubt that Sookie Stackhouse found some new enemies that are threatening her. But I'm not her enemy. Once the real culprit is found, things can go back to normal."

"Northman said you'd been arrested—that you'd escaped from the Bon Temps police station," Alcide frowned.
I sighed. "Yes. That's true. But being arrested and being guilty are two different things. It seems that Sookie thinks I'm behind various things going wrong in her life. But I'm not. My bet is that the real culprit is Victor Madden—but whatever." I rolled my eyes. "I'm sure that the Viking will eventually figure things out."

"So you really didn't—uh—threaten Sookie?" he asked.

"Of course not," I assured.

"Why do you want to know who's guarding her then?" he asked.

"Because I wanna say goodbye to some people," I returned accusingly—as if his question had offended me.

"Um—okay. I guess that makes sense."

I smiled and moved to embrace him. "Hey, listen, Alc, I just wanna see Jannalynn before I go. And maybe a few of the other women who welcomed me into the pack—despite what Debbie did. I," I paused and drummed up a tear, "owe them. And I'll miss them—and you—so much."

He exhaled as he gripped me in a hug. "I'll miss you too, Sandy."

I smiled up at him. "And that's why you're gonna make sure that Sookie Stackhouse is protected by the best people you have. And you're gonna work this out with Northman. That way," I said, rising onto my tiptoes so that I could give him a peck, "I can come back soon."

"I will fix this," he assured.

"I know," I whispered, kissing along his jawline. "I really want to make sure I get to tell Jannalynn goodbye though," I added, biting down on his flesh a little.

He groaned. "I'm sorry. But she's one of Sookie's guards," Alcide said regretfully. "Since she's with Sam and knows Sook, I figured it'd be for the best."

"It is," I said, patting his chest comfortably even as I smiled to myself. "And it's okay. Will you tell her I said goodbye? That I hope to come home soon?"

"Yeah."

"And how about you? Have you told me goodbye yet?" I asked suggestively.

Predictably, Alcide growled as he picked me up and put me back onto the bed. Given the look in his eyes, he'd be "done" quickly. And that was good for me. I had shit to do.

10:00 A.M.

SOOKIE POV

"We can get you out of here," Claude said firmly. "There are people who want you—um—who want to protect you."

There was something in my fairy cousin's eyes that made me suspect that I didn't want to know who those people were. I was just angry at myself for not seeing his "shiftiness" before.

Maybe it was because I was literally surrounded by "shifty" people (no pun intended).
"We could go to Faerie," Dermot said. "Or Kazakhstan."

"Kazakhstan?" I asked incredulously.

"I've got a friend there," Dermot smiled. "We could be together there," he added.

Um—yuck.

It seemed Eric was right about Uncle Dermot too.

"Faerie wouldn't be safe for Sookie," Claude frowned. "But there's someone I know in New Orleans who could help us."

"I'm safe as long as I'm within the wards," I told them, not wanting to let on that I was also perfectly safe with Eric. Supe gossip—being what it was—had ensured that both of the fairies living with me had heard an exaggerated version of what had happened at Fangtasia. And—once they'd finally come home after sunrise (since they were—thanks to me—afraid of Eric attacking them during the night)—they'd hesitated only a few hours before they woke me up and made sure that I heard all about that gossip.

As if I hadn't supposedly experienced it firsthand.

Apparently, Eric had struck me—several times.

Apparently, he'd bitten me—in public—several times.

Apparently, Bob had needed to be rushed to a hospital!

Of course, even though there wasn't a bruise on my body that wasn't a "good one," the fairies were quick to believe every bad thing said against Eric.

I didn't know if that was more my fault for not being a better mate to Eric up to this point or their fault for wanting to believe all bad things about Eric.

I suppose that their reasoning didn't matter. What mattered were the subtle things that I was noticing for the first time.

Claude was watching me like a hawk—not out of care, but like a predator. And—when I made a point to make a subtle mention of Claudine, which was something I'd avoided doing around him up to that point out of respect—he'd looked at me with pure venom.

The look had lasted only a second. But since I'd been looking for it, I'd been able to recognize if for what it was.

Hate. Claude clearly hated me.

As for Dermot? Well—he, too, had been watching me closely.

Specifically my breasts.

It seemed that all men—whether human, Were, shifter, vampire, or fairy— appreciated a good rack.

But I didn't think that a relative should "look"—even if fairies had different notions about "family relations" than humans did!

In addition to noticing these things about the fairies in my home, I picked up on something else too.
It was as if they were "missing" something. They seemed "twitchy"—for lack of a better word.

It didn't take me long to guess what they were missing. I went to the bathroom and texted Mr. Cataliades on the disposable phone Eric had given to me.

"The cluviel dor—could it attract fairies?" I typed.

Soon after, the demon lawyer texted me back a single word: "yes."

"I need to claim my fairyness and Eric," I typed as a follow-up. "ASAP."

He sent: "I'm coming. Diantha too."

I couldn't say that I was sorry about that.

After I'd sent and received my texts, I decided to take a nap.

That turned out to be a mistake.

3:57 P.M.

I woke up to warmth—too much warmth.

Way. Too. Much!

And there was an arm slung over my hip.

Wrong! That arm felt wrong!

"Alcide!" I yelled as soon as the mind in bed with me told me who the body belonged to. The Were woke up almost simultaneously.

"Why are you here?" I yelled as I squinted my eyes in order to avoid seeing Alcide in his tighty-whities.

I'm sorry, but a man as muscular as Alcide needed to go with boxer-briefs. Moreover, white undies didn't flatter any man who didn't have a laundry-doer who understood the nuances of bleach.

"Sookie," Alcide said with a sleepy, amorous grin. "I realized something today."

"What's that?" I yelled, even as I jetted from my own bed, thankful to see that I was still dressed in the flannel sleep-pants and T-shirt I'd put on after Eric had brought me home at the end of our wonderful night together.

I'd never thanked God so much for my drafty house!

"I love you," Alcide enthused. "But I've been settlin' for others," he frowned. "I've been tryin' to make things work with other two-natured women, but we've never given our relationship a good try. Now's the time. When I heard about all that Eric did to you last night, I just knew it! Now's our time!"

"No! It's not, Alcide! Who let you in here?!" I demanded. "The wards. They were supposed to keep Supes out."

"Claude invited me in," Alcide said, his grin still sleepy-looking. "I came to check on the guards I put in place for you, Sook—guards to protect you—and Claude and I started talkin'. We agreed that
"You and me would be good together. Claude is your kin, and he approves of me," the Were said proudly.

"What about my approval?" I asked him angrily.

"We've always just had bad timing," he said insistently.

"Yes. And that hasn't changed," I muttered.

"Sook?" he asked.

"Go, Alcide! You and I aren't happening!"

"But, Northman—you finally know how bad he is. What a monster he is."

"Yes. I know," I said truthfully. "But that doesn't give you or my cousin the right to decide that I need another man the day after my confrontation with Eric at Fangtasia."

"But I could protect you from him," Alcide insisted. "I will protect you."

"No. You won't. And you couldn't," I returned.

"Oh—is that what all this is about?" he asked, his amorous grin back in place. When he reached a paw toward me, I backed away a few steps. "You're worried about me? You don't have to be. I can deal with Northman. And Claude agreed to help."

"Did he?" I practically growled.

"Yes. And once Eric's out of the way, we'll be able to build a life together," Alcide said fervently.

"You really believe that?" I asked with disbelief.

"Yes."

I felt my anger rising. "And you felt that the best way to start that life would be for you to sneak into my bedroom and crawl into bed with me—unasked?"

"Geez, Sook! It's not like I was gonna force anything. I came up to see you, and you were asleep. You looked so peaceful that I didn't wanna wake you, and I was tired too, so I just climbed in."

"Really? And I suppose you just wanted to get comfortable," I glared, gesturing toward his almost naked body.

"Well—yeah. And—uh—it's not like you haven't seen me naked before. So I didn't think it would be a big deal," he shrugged.

"It is a big deal," I shook my head. "Even if I were interested in a relationship with you or your protection from Eric—which I'm not, by the way—you don't crawl into someone's bed uninvited!"

"It was just a nap!" he said, sounding a little angry.

He was angry?! How f-in rich!

"Don't tell me you didn't want more to happen!" I raged back, dipping into his thoughts.

"I didn't!"
I'd exchanged blood with Eric the night before, so it was easier to decipher the gnarl of Alcide's thoughts. What I heard there disgusted me, but I was able to keep up my angry façade rather than vomiting where I stood.

Apparently, Alcide had had his revelation that he needed a "good girl" to marry—a non-Were—only after he'd screwed Sandra Pelt six ways from Sunday!

That very morning!

"How flattering," I muttered sarcastically.

Alcide also figured that I was "ripe for the picking" because of what had happened at Fangtasia. He figured that it'd be easy to get me to "come to my senses" about "blood-suckers" now that Eric had "mistreated" me.

Oh—and he was glad that Eric had "roughed me up" since that was what I likely needed to "see sense."

Oh—and he had been hoping for wake up sex with me!

"Sook?" Alcide asked, finally looking a little ashamed.

Way too little. Way too late.

Somehow, I kept the rising bile in my throat at bay. "Alcide, why don't you get dressed, and you and I can talk downstairs," I said, trying to muster and indulgent smile.

I hurried into my bathroom and locked the door before I sat down on the toilet seat. I closed my eyes tightly.

"Sook?"

My name was accompanied by a gentle rap on the bathroom door.

"I—uh—kinda need to go," Alcide said.

I rolled my eyes.

"So do I! You can use the bathroom in the hall," I yelled out. "I'm kind of busy in here!"

"Um—okay," he stammered. I heard his feet dragging as he left. I just hoped that he took his pants with him!

Because of Claude and Alcide, I was in quite the quandary—and I was not a little bitter about that.

I was a lot bitter!

On the one hand, I needed to pretend as if I was devastated by the violence Eric had "subjected" me to the night before.

On the other hand, I wasn't about to give Alcide false hope—especially since his thoughts told me that he was unsure about whether or not Sandra had really done anything wrong.

That kind of man? Well—I wasn't about to spend any of my hopes on him! Even false ones!

In his defense, however, Alcide was glad that "Sandy" was leaving town. Being with her made him
feel guilty about Debbie. I scoffed. How Debbie could still even matter to Alcide was beyond me!
He figured that being with me would make him feel less guilty about Debbie; perhaps I should
remind him that I killed the bitch!
And that's when it hit me: I was no longer hung up on feeling guilty about the Debbies of the
world. Or the Lorenas. Or the Bills. Or the Alcides—for that matter!

Debbie had been a homicidal bitch. She'd tried to kill me by vampire in Jackson.

She'd tried again during the witch war.

She'd lain in wait for me in my own home—because she was a jealous twat!

Lorena had also been a homicidal bitch. She had tortured her own child. She'd tried to kill me.

I wasn't sorry that either one of them was dead.

I had no reason to be sorry!

I smiled at my revelation.

Meanwhile, the men in the equations hadn't been much better to me either.

Bill had manipulated me. He was still trying to manipulate me. It didn't matter that he was
delusional. What mattered were his actions.

And Alcide? I honestly couldn't remember what I'd ever seen in him. Once upon a time, I'd thought
that he was a kind man—a good man. But, even in Jackson, he'd not acted the part of a friend.
Though hung up on Debbie, he'd made a "move" on me, perfectly okay with the idea that I was
hurting from the Bill situation at the same time.

I'd shrugged off Alcide's flirting and kiss; I'd interpreted them as a sign that he needed help getting
over Debbie—that he'd been looking for a "rebound." And—needing to get over Bill—I wasn't
guiltless either. I'd flirted right back with Alcide Herveaux.

Nope. In that situation—neither one of us had been admirable. I shook my head, judging my actions
for what they had been: naïve.

And then Alcide had used me to make Debbie jealous—the exact same night she'd tried to kill me!
Plus, he'd put on blinders and had gotten back together with her!

After she'd tried to kill me!

What? Did he think that I'd jumped into a trunk with a starving vampire voluntarily?

I took a deep breath. Maybe—after dating Debbie the psychopath for so long—Alcide had thought
just that: that I would crawl into the trunk with Bill as some kind of "romantic gesture."

But that didn't eliminate the fact that he still used me to make his crazy ex jealous. I shook my
head, going over the other times Alcide had used me.

Being his "date" to a funeral so that I could help his dad become packmaster.

The whole packmaster fight debacle, where I was also in danger.

The crazy shaman thing.
I took another deep breath.

Yes—I was done feeling guilty about killing Debbie and Lorena.

Done!

I was done feeling bad because Bill still loved me when I didn't love him.

Done!

I was done being a friend to Alcide when he really wasn't my friend.

Done!

I sighed at the last thought. It was a sigh of regret—a sigh of recognition. I didn't hate Alcide. I supposed that—over the years—he and I had used one another in ways.

But the lack of respect he'd shown me when he'd climbed into my bed—assuming I would want him there when we weren't together—made me wonder if he thought too much of himself or too little of me. Either way, it didn't matter.

What mattered was that I had to be "diplomatic" for one more day in order to ensure that Eric and my plans didn't fail.

And that meant that I would need to lie like a dog—pun intended.
SOOKIE POV, CONTINUED

Ten minutes later, I'd peed, washed my face, brushed my hair, brushed my teeth, and put on a bra. And, for good measure, I'd put on some socks and a long-sleeved over-shirt, too.

I didn't care that it was over 80 degrees outside!

I wanted to send a clear message to any man who thought it was okay to strip and get into bed with me!

It wasn't okay!

When I got downstairs, there were three men at my table.

Claude was leering at Alcide like a fanboy as I shuffled toward the coffee maker.

Meanwhile, Alcide was trying to look contrite and Dermot was glaring at the Were.

I shook my head as I saw that there was less than a swallow of beverage in the coffee pot.

Meanwhile, the three men each had a full cup in front of them.

Selfish bastards! All of them!

As I took the steps to make more coffee, I "heard" Alcide wondering if I was going to make food, too.

The day before, I would have done just that—without a moment's pause. I would have thought about manners and Gran, and I would have already been pulling ingredients from the refrigerator. Of course, I would have been trying to stay out of Alcide's head too.

But—for better or worse—I wasn't the same person as I had been the day before.

And—just to clarify—I felt I was "better."

So—no! I didn't want to pour the others refills before I got myself a cup of my coffee in my house! And—no! I didn't want to prepare food for three Supernatural men who didn't actually seem to have my best interests in mind—now that I was looking at the situation with opened eyes.

But what did I do?

I opened the refrigerator and took out ingredients for sandwiches. I wasn't about to cook for them, but it would beg too many questions if I did nothing.

"Sookie, I'm more certain than I was before that we need to get you out of here!" Dermot said. "Before the sun sets. You must know now that the vampire is wrong for you—that he'll hurt you."

I picked up the coffee pot as soon as the coffee maker beeped to indicate that it was done, and then I went around the table pouring refills for the "menfolk"—as Gran would have called them. However, I no longer believed that she would hold me to my manners with the people at the table.
if she were alive and knew about the situation. But I was sure glad I'd become an expert at them anyway. They were something to fall back on—something to prevent me from going off on the "menfolk."

"I think Eric was just stressed out last night," I said. "His bond with Pam got interrupted, and he got scared—because he initially thought she was dead. And then—when I told him I wanted our bond to be broken too so that I could tell his feelings from my feelings . . . ." I paused for a moment as I finally took a drink of nice, fresh coffee. "Well—he got mad. And then I got mad. I really think we can talk it out though. You know—cooler heads and all," I smiled.

"He plans to punish you tonight," Alcide said through gritted teeth. "Do you have any idea what that could entail?"

"Well—that'll be Eric's test then," I sighed, having decided on my strategy while I was in the bathroom.

"Test?" Claude asked.

I nodded. "If Eric has calmed down and is ready to be reasonable, then I'll know that he regrets last night. If he does . . . ." I paused and sniffled as the onion I was slicing made me cry.

It was a good prop.

"If he does punish me," I continued, "then I'll know—really know—that I can't be with him."

"But Northman already made you quit your job!" Alcide reminded insistently. "Surely you don't need any more proof of how he wants to control you!"

It seemed that Eric was right. Supe gossip really did travel fast!

"I did quit—but just for now," I said cautiously. "And just to pacify Eric till he calms down. And—anyway—I've been thinking about taking some online classes. And I have money now." I shook my head as I spread some mustard on bread slices. If anyone preferred mayo, they could just deal with it. "I've worked almost nonstop since I was sixteen, and a little time off would be a good thing."

"You wouldn't have to work if you were with me," Alcide said.

Dermot practically growled. "Or me."

Alcide looked at the fairy with new eyes—jealous and disgusted eyes.

Well—at least Alcide and I agreed on the disgusting part.

"What the fuck?" the Were asked Dermot. "You're her uncle or something!"

"Fairies don't have the same rules as humans do," I said calmly, as I put some sliced ham on the bread. I turned to look at Dermot. His eyes—so intense—seemed to be looking into me, and the only thing I could think about was how much he looked like Jason.

And how the feeling that he elicited in me reminded me of Uncle Bartlett—even though I didn't think that Dermot would use force.

Still—the situation was more than enough to freak me out!

"No, fairies don't follow the same rules," Dermot agreed.
"But I have my own rules," I said decisively. "While I appreciate the offers of protection and whatnot, I need to resolve the Eric thing before I do anything else. Please understand that," I entreated.

"But what if the vamp hurts you tonight?" Alcide asked with concern that matched the look in Dermot's eyes. Meanwhile, for a split second, Claude looked downright pleased at the prospect of Eric hurting me.

"Then Eric will have failed the test," I said, turning back to my sandwich-building task. "Anyway, he can't hurt me too much—right? I have the king's protection."

"The king could very well decide to take you—to take you away from Northman. Away from here," Dermot observed.

"That's why Eric and I got pledged," I said as I added tomato slices and lettuce to the sandwiches. "Listen—Eric's really not as bad as he seemed last night," I added confidently before finishing the sandwiches. After taking them and some plates to the table, I once again refilled the coffee cups like the good hostess I was.

But—in my head—I was already counting down to the time when I wouldn't have to play hostess at all.

One thing was for sure. Now that I was paying close attention, I could see things I hadn't before.

Claude's malice.

Dermot's infatuation.

Alcide's selfishness.

Still—I tried to smile and engage in casual conversation as I ate with them.

In other words, I pretended to tolerate them.

Just like they pretended to care about who I really was and what would really make me happy—even as they tried to dictate it.

After he ate, Alcide left—hoping that Eric would "punish" me enough for me to finally "grow up."

"So—are we going to have to stay away again tonight?" Claude asked a bit abruptly—not that that was abnormal behavior for him.

"That would probably be best," I said.

"You shouldn't stay here," Dermot frowned. "You should let us take you away and protect you from the vampire," he tried again.

Talk about a broken record.

"But Eric would find me because of our bond," I reasoned.

"You should let your witches break it," Claude said offhandedly.

"Yes—you should," Dermot agreed. "It's unnatural for a fairy and a vampire to have such a connection."
"Maybe," I allowed, holding in my true feelings, which amounted to a whole lot of anger and disappointment in that moment.

I'd been so keen to have a family that cared for me that I'd ignored the obvious.

The proof was on the faces of the fairies in my home.

They sure as hell didn't care about me like a family ought to!

I wanted to un-invite them from my home so badly that my mouth opened to do it several times. But I didn't. I had to be patient.

7:00 P.M.

VICTOR POV

Patient. I simply needed to be patient for a little while longer, and Sookie Stackhouse would be mine.

Of course, I'd already been patient.

I'd patiently endured Felipe's foolish notions that Eric Northman could be spared, given his potential value as an asset.

I'd patiently waited for Northman to do something irrevocably stupid so that I could take his head and his so-called "pledged."

Yes. I'd been patient.

Saint-like!

And—as I'd been patient—I'd observed Eric Northman. Like a hawk.

The Viking had proven to be "odd" for a vampire—especially for one as old as he was.

He showed care for his child and his minions.

Actually showed it!

And he cared for his "human" enough to risk his hide for her.

Just as one example—he'd risked the king's displeasure with the pledging stunt.

And he'd also been willing to face down fairies for her.

Ridiculous!

Meanwhile, Sookie Stackhouse had seemed like a cold fish when it came to him.

Good for me. Bad for Northman.

But now the telepath had finally pushed him too far. I'd known that I'd simply needed to be patient for that to happen, too.

All the questioning looks she'd given to him—even during the brief time I'd been around them—had spoken volumes.
But even a vampire as pitifully in love as Eric Northman had his breaking point. And that had come when Sookie Stackhouse had decided to look into bond-breaking.

Of course, I'd doubted the claim that such a thing existed, but—after I'd received Jock's very interesting report—I'd had a New Orleans vampire loyal to me find and glamour Octavia Fant, who was Amelia Broadway's mentor.

Yes—glamouring witches could be tricky since it was possible that they might remember it, but—given the situation—I'd decided that the pros outweighed the cons. And Ms. Fant had sung like a canary.

The witches hadn't been lying. There was a way to break bonds!

At first, upon hearing that Northman intended to punish Sookie Stackhouse, I'd determined that killing him during the punishment phase would be best.

After all, Miss Stackhouse would see me as her savior if I did.

But—then—Northman had presented me with an even better opportunity to kill him.

During the hunt of Sandra Pelt—a hunt where accidents might very well happen.

I closed my eyes and let my mind wander as I contemplated how I would punish a defiant pet.

I imagined Sookie Stackhouse on her knees—naked before the Fangtasia crowd. I imagined her whipped again and again—her flesh peeling away and her blood rising to the surface of her body. I imagined Northman allowing all vampires present to feed upon her—to fuck her.

Pussy, ass, mouth—I pictured them all being filled.

With me being the one to take her ass.

But then I shook my head. No—if I hoped to gain Sookie's affection and trust later on—I would have to refrain from participating in her punishment. I would have to pretend as if I were troubled by whatever penalty Northman exacted upon her. Perhaps, I could even find a way to "stop" him at a certain point.

And, then, later I would kill him.

Yes—Sookie would "owe" me. She'd be desperate for the protection of the only one who'd shown her any compassion as the Viking had punished her.

And it would ultimately be good that Sookie was punished. She'd be stripped of some of her more "troubling" qualities: her propensity to defy, her desire to question, and her inclination to make her own decisions.

Indeed—in the end—Eric's punishment would help me with the telepath.

But his death would help me more.

THALIA POV

Eric Northman wasn't as bad as most "rulers" I knew.

And—make no mistake about it—even though he was "just a sheriff," he was a ruler. Eric inspired loyalty because of his strength. Only idiots like Compton and the current bartender at Fangtasia
took what they found in Area 5 for granted.

I would have told Eric to watch out for Compton—if the "Southern Gent" weren't so transparently shifty.

I would have told Eric to watch out for Jock—if the bartender knew anything about subtlety when it came to his "spying."

However, the Viking wouldn't have deserved his well-earned reputation (or my loyalty) if either of those two "tools" had fooled him for a moment.

Granted—I knew that I could take Eric out in a one-on-one fight. I was stronger, faster, older.

But it would be an enjoyable fight because I was pretty sure that he was slightly craftier than I was. Slightly.

"Yes," I said to myself with a fangy grin. "The Viking and I would have an amazing fight!"

Just to savor such a fight, I was almost tempted to challenge him. But I knew I'd be hard-pressed to find another ruler of equal merit—especially one whom I could also tolerate. When I'd opted to settle in the Americas years before, it had taken me a long time to research and decide upon which territory I wanted to live in. My choices had come down to either rural Illinois or rural Louisiana, for I was tired of larger cities. Both areas were sheriffed by strong vampires who were wise enough to know I would be no threat to them. Initially, I settled in Illinois because the cooler climate was more appealing to me. However, after the Great Revelation, I found myself in a little trouble because I injured and then glamoured a few humans that had tried to stake me.

I rolled my eyes. It wasn't as if I'd killed them!

Still, I was "encouraged" to leave the area. The Norsman's territory had been the obvious place for my resettling, though I'd almost changed my mind when Eric decided that a portion of every vampire's "duty" to him would be spending time at Fangtasia.

However, I'd decided to tolerate the arrangement since I would be able to find easy meals on the nights I had to "work."

The truth was that being around fangbangers who revered me was annoying, but it wasn't without some benefits. For example, I was able to take out my annoyance on them. Many of the ones who'd joined my "fan club" enjoyed the rougher aspects of sex and didn't mind a more "rigorous" feeding. And all of them were easily influenced.

I'd kill anyone who found out, but I'd created my own anonymous "username" and had recently joined the social networking site that was devoted to my "followers." As "thalias_favorite_bite," I'd suggested things that "I" did to make "Thalia" want me: certain soaps to use, certain foods to avoid, certain habits to give up, etc.

I figured that, in addition to having better meal choices, I was also "helping" the humans who had given up smoking and fast food for me.

"I'm a regular humanitarian," I said dryly to myself, somewhat disappointed that no one was there to enjoy the joke with me.

Despite my personal policy of staying out of political shit—especially when it hit the proverbial fan—I'd noticed more than my fair share of "propelled fecal events" during the previous years. Many
of them had involved Sookie Stackhouse.

I was an old vampire—older than the Viking.

I had smelled Sookie Stackhouse's uniqueness the first time I'd encountered her.

Part fairy.

Trouble.

I could have told Northman that nugget of information, but—truly—for vampires as old as we, "mystery" was a greater gift.

I'd been "serving my time" at Fangtasia the first time Sookie had walked into it. Bill Compton, the clueless fool, had been incorrect (unsurprisingly) when he'd proclaimed that Eric Northman was the oldest thing in Fangtasia that night, but—in Bill's defense—I was good at hiding how strong and formidable I truly was.

Perhaps that was my vampire gift—since I didn't seem to have inherited any others from my maker.

But stealth and subterfuge were enough; after all, they had helped me to survive for a very long time. Thus, it wasn't remarkable that I'd recognized those two impulses in Northman when he'd asked me to be his second the night before.

I'd opted to tolerate the "job"—as long as I didn't have to do it for very long.

I didn't think I would.

My first piece of evidence? Sookie.

My second? Pam.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to know why Northman's previous lieutenant was currently MIA.

Though rocket scientists could actually be quite tasty.

I'd made a point of trying several astronauts, just to see if there was a difference between their "pre-space" blood flavor and their "post-space" blood flavor.

Thanks to the limited food choices in space (especially early in the program), there had been! Indeed, Neil Armstrong still ranked right up there as one of my favorite bed companions.

I'd preferred his blood "post-space." It had seemed "purer" somehow.

Probably because of all of the gelatinous food he'd been forced to eat.

That thought aside, when Eric had "ordered" it the night before, I'd guessed immediately that he didn't actually want me to be his second. I'd also known that his supposed attack against Sookie Stackhouse had been staged.

Yes—I'd witnessed Eric and Sookie together the first night they'd interacted. And I'd witnessed them on subsequent nights.

In my time, I'd seen real love. And I'd seen attempts at it.

What Eric and Sookie had was not an attempt; it was real.
Not that the two didn't try to deny that.

Amusingly, they had been stuck in the "we're just attempting it" mode for years. But that didn't make their love any less real.

Thus, I knew that there was no way that Eric would publically—and cruelly—attack Sookie unless it was as some kind of ruse. Just as there was no way that Pam would disobey her maker—no matter how much she liked her dying human lover.

Whom I figured was dead by now—though soon to be rising.

At exactly 9:00 P.M., I parked the sedan Eric had loaned me—since I didn't keep my own vehicle—in front of Sookie Stackhouse's home. It was a quaint farmhouse, and most humans in the area would have considered it "old." I scoffed. Humans, especially those in the United States, had very little conception of the word "old."

As I got out of the car, I inhaled deeply.

Fairies—a full-blooded male and a half-blooded male from the scent of them—had been at the home recently, though they were not there presently. I knew that the fairies lived with Sookie, so I was not surprised by the lingering scents.

As a rule, I had nothing to do with fairies. They were more trouble than they were worth—especially since the meal garnered from one of them could hardly be remembered.

Trust me on that.

My memories of my one and only meal from fairies were hazy at best—but I did recall that I drained three of the "candy-smelling" creatures.

After that, I'd been lucky to get out of the sun in time not to meet my true death when I "missed" the orb's impending arrival.

I'd been too drunk to recall that anything—even sunlight—could be a danger to me.

It had taken me weeks to heal from my burn wounds!

Fairies!

So. Not. Worth. The. Trouble!

And—clearly—even part-fairies attracted their fair share of dilemmas. I didn't need to ask the Viking to confirm that either.

In addition to the fairies, I also picked up the scents of several Weres, two of whom were nearby in the woods—Sookie's "guards" no doubt.

The only scent that surprised me was the smell of brimstone. Demons had been there recently; in fact, they'd likely left only ten or so minutes before.

Interesting.

Before I could knock on the door, a nervous-looking Sookie Stackhouse opened it. She was dressed in the first garment I'd ever seen her in: a white dress with red flowers.

Wholesome. Enticing.
"Ready?" I asked her.

She nodded and locked her door before following me to the car.

We'd been driving for a few miles when she spoke up for the first time.

"Thalia, you need to know what to expect tonight."

The tone of her voice made my fangs click down.

Trouble indeed.

But not necessarily unwelcome.
Chapter 19: Family Matters, Part 1

FOUR HOURS EARLIER

SOOKIE POV

"I just think it's best if you two plan to stay away from here for the time being—at least at night," I said to my fairy kin. "I'm sure that Eric will calm down—if he hasn't done so already—but it's better to be safe than sorry. Right?"

I felt a little bad that I was basically kicking out Dermot since he didn't have another home to go to, but—given what I'd observed from Claude that day—I didn't feel bad about him at all. It seemed that Claude's "attentiveness" to me hadn't been "because we were kin" at all. Likely, he'd been drawn to me and my home because of his own questionable motives and the cluviel dor. And now that the magical object had been used, Claude clearly had no use for me—beyond the fact that he likely wanted to exact revenge upon me however he could.

Whether that be by violence.

Or by saddling me with a Were who didn't see any problems with climbing into my bed unbidden!

Or by encouraging my own uncle to pursue me romantically!

"Are you kicking us out?" Claude asked, rather acerbically.

"Not at all," I responded with as much sincerity as I could muster. "You'll always be welcome here," I lied. "But I'm worried about your safety." I glanced outside at the waning afternoon sunlight to make my point.

"You should simply end all your acquaintances with vampires," Dermot said decisively.

"Bill is my neighbor and friend. And—for better or worse—I'm sort of married to Eric," I hedged, biting my lower lip as if nervous—hoping that my performance was convincing.

Claude scoffed. "You're never going to learn your lesson until everyone around you is dead." He glared at me. "And I don't intend to be added to that tally!" He grabbed Dermot. "Come on!"

"Wait!" Dermot yelled out.

"Please, don't leave so angry," I said, keeping up my performance. "I love you two. You're family! It's just that—right now—the different parts of my life just aren't gettin' along."

"Gettin' along!?" Claude sneered.

"Yeah—and I'd hate myself if anything happened to y'all," I said, admittedly pouring it on a little thick.

"Yourself. It's always about you!" Claude said with a snarl, no longer even trying to hide his disdain for me. Even Dermot was looking at him with surprise at this point—though he wasn't speaking up in my defense.

"No—this is about keeping you two safe," I returned. "Look—you both have every right to be
angry at me. All I ask is that you give me a little time to make things right—to make things safe here for you again," I said, hoping they were convinced of my sincerity.

But then I realized that whether they believed me or not was ultimately unimportant. All that mattered was that they left Gran's home. Suddenly, that very thing was something I wanted desperately—and immediately.

Yes—even the night before—I'd been prepared to let them have the place once I moved in with Eric. But my vampire had helped me to really see the two fairies. Claude would never be my "family" again. And—as for Dermot? Well—at the moment—his desires were reminding me too much of another "funny uncle" I'd had. And, now that I'd made that connection (whether the analogy was completely apt or not), it would take me a long time—and a complete 180 in Dermot's feelings for me—to unmake it.

Yes—it was safe to say that I was more than ready for both of the fairies to be out of the home I loved, even though I wasn't planning to spend even another night there for the foreseeable future.

Thankfully, they packed their belongings and left before sundown.

Partly in thanks to the sad look he'd given me on the way out, I shed a moment's regret about Dermot. The last several years of his life had been horrible. He'd suffered through a curse that his own father had set—for goodness sakes! I had wanted to help him—to be his family. His niece!

But I doubted whether that was possible anymore. And—frankly—the one that I was the most pissed off at in that moment was Niall. He should have taken care of his son. Yes, Dermot had once sided with Niall's enemies, but had that given Niall the right to be-spell him—especially after Dermot had begun to come to terms with his own dual nature? No. Like always, Niall had used magic to give himself an easy way out, and he'd turned his back on a member of his own family.

I knew what that felt like.

But that didn't mean that I should have to be responsible for the fairy twin of my grandfather—especially since that fairy wanted to make me his mate.

I cringed.

In truth, I felt as if I still owed Dermot for killing Colman when Claudine's mate had wanted to kill me. But how had Dermot known that was going on? He'd been watching me: part concerned uncle, part stalker.

I cringed again.

Yep—it was best that I no longer had anything to do with any of my fairy kin—at least for the time being.

But "best" wasn't always practical, which was why I dialed the number I had for Niall as soon as I knew Dermot and Claude were out of range.

"Hello," a female voice answered.

"Tell Niall that I need to see him right away," I said, trying to sound forceful.

"That is not possible," the woman responded.

I wondered if she could hear the roll of my eyes. "I think it is possible. Tell him now!" I said before
hanging up.

I sat at my dining room table and waited.

A few minutes after I'd called Niall's answering service, I received a message from Mr. Cataliades, conveying that he and Diantha would be arriving in about 90 minutes. I couldn't help but hope that Niall would have come and gone by then.

Of course, Niall was the wild card. Would he even come? Or should I call Dermot back and start planning for "Plan B?"

I looked at the clock. I'd wait an hour—just long enough for Claude to be on stage and working—before I took that step. I knew that it would take no time at all for Dermot to "pop" to the house—after all.

Knowing that I needed to play the part of a grateful-to-be-guarded damsel, I stepped out onto my porch and hollered out, "Hey, could one of y'all come up here real quick?"

Within a few moments, a male Were stepped out of the woods and approached the house. I could tell from his thoughts that he was bored, but he didn't have any opinion one way or the other about being asked to guard me. Frankly, it was good to know that he wasn't a threat.

"Yes, ma'am?" he asked politely.

I attempted to give him a sincere smile. "I wanna thank you for helping to guard me," I began.

"It's no problem," he responded.

"Um—I'm gonna be having some visitors tonight—before I get picked up by one of Eric's vamps later on. The visitors are going to be demons," I said, deciding not to mention my potential fairy visitor.

"Demons?" the Were asked.

I had a feeling that he'd been reporting that fact to Alcide.

"Yeah. One's a lawyer, and he's coming by to discuss some stuff about my cousin's estate with me," I lied. "She died pretty recently and left me some money," I added.

"Oh—sorry for your loss, ma'am," he said sincerely.

I nodded, hating the fact that I was using Claudine as my excuse for seeing Mr. Cataliades, but I couldn't come up with a different "innocent" reason for needing to see him. I said a quick prayer asking that she would forgive me.

"Anyway—I just wanted to let you know they were coming so you wouldn't worry," I told the Were. "Plus—uh—the wards around the house will keep out anyone with bad intent, but I'm sure you already knew that," I added for good measure.

The Were nodded in confirmation and then turned to go back into the woods. I followed his mind until he was well away from the house and had joined the other Were. From the other Were's brain signature, I had a feeling that it was Jannalynn, but she wasn't close enough for me to confirm that hypothesis by delving into her thoughts.

I stretched out my telepathy as far as I could and only picked up on the two Weres. I determined to
keep my shields down to keep track of them and then returned into the house.

"Hello, Great-granddaughter," Niall greeted.

I jumped as I closed the door, even though I recognized the voice coming from the living room.

"Niall," I gasped.

After calling his service, I'd invited him through the wards, and I did trust Amelia's magic to keep out the unwanted, but I was still startled by his sudden appearance.

"I have covered my scent so that those outside will not know I am here," Niall informed with a smile. He looked better rested than he had when I'd last seen him.

I returned his sincere smile; I couldn't help myself. For all Niall's faults, I really did think he wanted a good life for me. And that's why I'd chosen to ask him—rather than Dermot—for what I needed. Asking Dermot might have led to complications I didn't need.

"You said that you needed to see me immediately. How are you?" he asked, studying me for any injuries—I suppose.

"I am finally taking steps to get the life I want," I answered. "Would you like some tea?"

He chuckled at my non sequitur. "Tea would be lovely. Thank you."

He followed me into the dining room and sat down at the table while I fixed us both iced teas. I "listened" for the Weres' thoughts to make sure that they were still far enough away from the house that we'd neither be seen nor heard.

"I have two tasks I want you to complete," I said as I delivered Niall's beverage and sat down opposite him.

"Favors?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"No. Tasks," I corrected. "Eric was very specific. He told me to make sure you knew that I was not asking for favors."

He smirked. "Your vampire is wise."

"Mine is right," I said.

"Ah—so you have finally decided to acknowledge your relationship," he said with a bit of amusement. "You know—I offered my approval of the Viking a long time ago."

I nodded. "Yes—you said that he loved me and that he was a good man."

"Well," he chuckled, "man might be pushing it. And good too. But he seems good for you."

I sighed. "Yes. Yes, he is. And I really am glad you approve, but I need more than your approval right now."

"What do you need?"

"Fairy blood," I responded.

Niall took a long drink of his tea. "Why?" he asked after what must have been two full silent
"We need to weaken some vampires," I responded.

"Why not ask Claude or Dermot for blood?" he asked.

"Claude, I think, is playing a game of cat-and-mouse with me. I think he wants me dead because Claudine died trying to protect me, but he doesn't seem to want to do it himself. And—as for Dermot—he wants me in his bed," I cringed, "and I'd rather not ask him for anything that he might construe as a favor."

"Though it's not a favor," he responded, not addressing my words about either Claude or Dermot.

"No. It's not."

"How much blood do you need?" he asked after another awkward few minutes of silence.

"Enough to rim the glasses of about a dozen vampires," I said.

Again, he considered for a moment.

But I was getting tired of silences.

"Why did you seek me out when you knew I would be in more danger with you in my life?" I asked him.

"Selfishness," he responded honestly. I suppose I had to respect him a little for that. "I wanted to know you," he added.

"You should have left me alone," I said.

He nodded. "Yes. I realize that now. I am sorry that danger befell you, and I recognize that I brought much of it to your doorstep. I'd been hoping to keep it away from you."

"The fairy blood would help to remove quite a bit of danger from my life," I said.

After a few moments, Niall nodded and materialized a small glass vial. "I assume you would prefer it if the vampires couldn't smell the fairy blood."

"Amelia gave me something I could mix with it so that they won't know it's there," I informed.

"There's no need," he responded, even as he took a dagger from his jacket and then pierced his thumb deeply before putting it over the vial. "I'll bind the scent of my blood with my magic. But any blood remaining will turn to dust at the dawning of the sun tomorrow."

"Thank you," I told him sincerely.

When it was about half full, he handed me the vial.

"What is the second non-favor?" he asked.

"Dermot. He's listless here; maybe that's why he thinks that a relationship with me would be a good thing. And Claude isn't much of a help to him. And—honestly—given Dermot's desire for me, I don't want him to live here anymore either. I think it would be best if you took him back to the fairy realm."
Niall sighed deeply. "I will ask him to return with me, but I will not force him."

"Be persuasive," I told him. "Dermot has a good heart, and I don't want to see him get hurt, but it'd be best if he wasn't in Area 5."

Niall nodded. "I will do my best to convince him. I swear it."

I nodded. "Good enough."

"Are you going to ask me to do anything regarding Claude?" he asked. "You seem to believe he's a danger to you."

"I do, but I don't know what to ask—because I'm convinced that he won't return to the fairy realm," I answered honestly. "And alerting him to my suspicions might increase the danger he is to me."

"Why do you believe that he wants to harm you?" Niall asked curiously.

I frowned. "Looking back, I think Claude was helping Colman, rather than trying to stop him," I responded. "I believe that I've had my head buried in the sand about why both Claude and Dermot wanted to be in my life, but I've unburied myself. And every instinct I have is now telling me that Claude wants me hurt—or dead."

Niall shook his head. "I cannot imagine that your vampire will let Claude live if he tries to harm you."

"No. Eric won't," I agreed. "And I won't just stand idly by and let him hurt me either. I get that Claude's angry with me about Claudine." I wiped away a tear that fell when I thought about my fairy "godmother" and her unborn child. "God knows that I have done my fair share of blaming myself for Claudine's death. And her baby's death." I paused to wipe away another tear. "After all, their deaths were ultimately my fault."

A deep frown etched into Niall's face. "No," he said gently—grandfatherly. "They were killed by Breandan and his people, just as you were kidnapped and tortured by them. How can you believe that any of that was your fault? You must stop that immediately," he added authoritatively.

"But it is my fault," I said. "Eric asked me to move in with him days before Neave and Lochlan kidnapped me, but—like a stubborn fool—I didn't do it. If I would have, Eric could have protected me better, and Claudine would still be alive. So would her baby."

Niall sighed and shook his head. "I did not know that you'd taken the guilt of Claudine's death upon yourself," he said sadly. "You should not! She loved you. She valued your friendship. And she was also a warrior," he added proudly. "I know you will have difficulty truly understanding this, Sookie, but Claudine's death was a good one."

"How can you possibly say that?!" I demanded, as angry at Niall as I'd ever been.
Niall looked momentarily confused at my outpouring of anger.

"I do not mean to suggest that Claudine's death was 'good' in the sense humans generally think of the term," he said conciliatorily. "I meant that Claudine died for something she believed in. She was fighting for you and for me at the time—and trust me when I tell you that she truly believed in the fight against Breandan." He paused. "Do you not realize that ours was a fight against genocide? Claudine fought next to me on many a battlefield. Claudette, too, fought beside me when called upon. By contrast, Claude was never one to let a little thing like ethnic cleansing bother him too much." He shook his head disapprovingly. "I have tried to understand Claude, but I have failed again and again. And—in truth—I resent him to a certain extent." He sighed. "In a very tangible way, he separated Claudine and Claudette from me."

"How?" I asked.

"The only reason why my granddaughters settled in this realm for so long was because they wanted to try to maintain a relationship with their brother. Trust me when I say that Claude didn't make it easy for them either. He didn't understand why either of his sisters would sacrifice anything for a cause they believed in—especially when he couldn't see how it would benefit them. Or him. He thought Claudine was foolish for protecting you, for trying to carry on the Brigant bloodline, and for wanting to be an angel. Claudette was not nearly so caring as her sister, but she was fierce, and she aspired one day to become a general within my army. Claude held her back, and he ridiculed her dream—just as much as he ridiculed Claudine's aspirations."

"I tried to be Claude's family," I said after a few moments of silence. "I wanted to be. Maybe I wanted to make up for my guilt. Maybe I was hoping that he and I would really become—I don't know . . . ." I trailed off.

"Like brother and sister," he supplied.

I shrugged. "Yeah. Maybe. But I would have been okay with cousins—you know? When he wanted to stay here after Claudine died," I said, my voice cracking a little, "I'd hoped that he wanted for us to become close."

"You always wondered why I did not wish to become closer to your brother," Niall said after a few moments.

"Yeah," I responded. "I did."

"It is not because of his lack of a spark. It is because Jason reminds me of Claude."

"What?" I asked with a startled chuckle.

"Their similarity is not in their sexual preference, of course," he replied with a smirk before becoming more serious. "The similarity is in attitude. They are both self-absorbed to a great extent. Both could use their charisma to do wonderful things, but neither has. While Claudine and Claudette bent over backwards to be a part of Claude's life—to show him their love for him—he took that love for granted. Or, worse, sometimes he mistreated them—ridiculed them for their
love." He paused. "From what I have discerned—and from what Claudine told me—Jason treats you in much the same way. He often takes you for granted or he completely discounts you as he becomes enmeshed in his own life. And—other times—he does things to harm you." He frowned. "The episode when you had to break the werepanther's hand comes to mind; I know that that must have gutted you to do."

I could only nod in agreement. It had gutted me.

"Meanwhile, I know that you have risked yourself for your brother more than once," Niall finished.

"Jason does his best," I defended, but then deflated a little. "With Michele, his girlfriend now, he's doing better. She's helped him to not be so . . . ." I paused for a moment. "So Jason."

"Well—Claude has never committed enough to one paramour to allow himself to be changed by him," he sighed, looking quite sad. "He believes I disapprove of him because he prefers men to the extent that he won't even take a mate short-term in order to try to increase Fae numbers or the Brigant bloodline."

"Is there truth to his belief?" I asked with challenge. I wasn't about to imagine that Niall had suddenly become unselfish in his own motives—despite the things he'd said and the insight he'd demonstrated about Jason's involvement in my life.

"There is truth in it," the fairy admitted. "I have tried more than once to convince Claude to return to Faerie and take up a role with me—though I will admit that, until recently, much of my motivation was getting Claudine and Claudette back, since they were determined to stay in this realm as long as their brother did. And—yes—I asked Claude more than once to help to carry on the line."

"You shouldn't have tried to make him get married to a woman," I chastised lightly.

Niall shook his head. "But I did not. I realized—even when Claude was a small child—that he would not want such a thing. But there are many Fae women who just want to carry children, and their husbands lack the ability to procreate." Niall laughed a little, though the sound was melancholy more than anything else. "That is why Fintan recognized no moral dilemma at all when he made his offer to supply your grandmother with children."

I left that topic for another time.

"But Claude—uh—wouldn't want to be with a woman in any capacity," I reminded.

"I know," Niall sighed. "But you must understand. In the fairy culture, homosexuality is acceptable. It is not seen as a sin or as abnormal—as it is by many in the human world. It is simply a preference, and for longer than I have been alive, male and female fairies have cohabitated with or married whichever gender they preferred, but the duty of proliferation is seen as something that can occur outside of a relationship—outside of love."

I frowned. "So lots of fairies have affairs so they can produce kids?"

"Yes," he responded simply and a little too casually for my sensibilities. "Humans would see such a thing as infidelity, which is frowned upon by your society, but in the fairy realm there is not even a word for 'infidelity,' though some mates do choose monogamy. I am afraid that I did not understand Claude for a long time. I did not recognize just how adverse he was to the idea of having sex with a female. In addition—once humans came up with artificial insemination and fairies adapted the practice—I am afraid that I pushed Claude again to try to father a child."
"You can't make someone be a parent," I said.

"No. You cannot," he agreed. "But I never asked Claude to take on fatherhood in any emotional sense. Essentially, I asked that he be a sperm donor—first physically and then later into a cup." He shook his head. "And—honestly—I still neither understand nor agree with his refusal to do this. Our race may very well die, Sookie," Niall conveyed sadly. "Every year, fewer children are born. It will take time for the Fae to completely die out—unless we can come up with a solution—but it will happen if we fail to increase our rate of proliferation. I would never force my people to mate, however." He closed his eyes tightly for a moment. "Claude has always had his choice. And I have tried very hard to love him despite that choice. Perhaps, the difficult thing for him was to feel that I disapproved of his decision—which seems to me to be derision for all Fae-kind." He shook his head. "Honestly, I don't know how not to disapprove of his choice—especially because contributing to the Fae no longer even involves him physically being with a female," he added, his voice sounding somewhat tortured. "The Brigant line is fading from the world, and Claude seems glad about that."

Niall held up a hand when I went to speak. "Before you say anything, please don't think that I blame you for my line diminishing—or your brother." He sighed. "There is so little Fae blood in you—only one-sixteenth. Yet you—Sookie—are Fae because of your spark."

"So I could have little Fae babies?" I asked.

"If you mated with a fairy."

I was shocked to see the image of a face I recognized shimmer quickly through Niall's thoughts. I rarely picked up on any of my great-grandfather's thoughts, but this time, there was a sense of longing in them—a "wish" of sorts.

"Preston Pardloe," I said with a hazy kind of recognition.

"Your telepathic reception has gotten stronger—I see," he observed evenly, though I could see some guilt in his eyes.

"How do you know him?" I asked of the Were I'd had a one-night stand with. In truth, the whole encounter had begun to seem like a dream to me—something I'd imagined or that had been created by drinking too much on that lonely Christmas Eve.

"Wait," I whispered as I grabbed onto Niall's memory and took a better look at the "Were" in Niall's thoughts.

For one thing, I now knew with certainty that he hadn't been a dream. And I also knew something else: Preston Pardloe hadn't really been a Were!

"Preston has pointed ears in your memory," I gasped.

Niall sighed. "You don't want to know about this, Sookie," he warned.

"Oh—I do want to," I returned, trying to be angry, but it was almost as if I couldn't be.

Niall seemed to sense and understand my frustration.

"I felt that you were lonely that Christmas Eve. Preston is a fairy who can shape-shift. He was my gift to you. Afterwards, the magic used ensured that you felt only unburdened pleasure about the situation," Niall conveyed somewhat reluctantly.
"A gift!" I gasped, still trying to latch onto my anger. "Was Preston trying to get me—uh—pregnant?" I followed up, though the question was difficult to speak out. It was almost as if the night of Preston's "visit" was a topic that I could barely access or feel anything about—other than a casual sense of happiness.

A false sense.

"Yes. A gift," Niall responded. "But, no, Preston was not trying to impregnate you—though I will confess that I thought about the benefits of such a pregnancy—but only briefly. I realized that you were not ready for a long-term relationship at the time. However, I admit that I would have approached you about the possibility of dating fairies like Preston if the political situation had been less volatile at the time. And, of course, later—when Breandan was gone—it was clear that you were with the Viking again. And it was just as clear that you loved him. So I didn't introduce the possibility of your mating with fairies then either."

I closed my eyes tightly as the all-too familiar feeling of having sex with a man who was only manipulating me weighed me down.

"I'd hoped that you would never learn of Preston. When Claudine found out, she was terribly angry with me. And she explained my error to me."

"Claudine knew?" I gasped.

"Yes—I saw no reason to hide it from her; plus, she would have recognized Preston's scent, and I didn't want her to worry. In retrospect, I know that I should have never sent Preston to seduce you like that. But I wanted for you to have some happiness, and your heart seemed to be crying out for love."

"Love yes! But from Eric!" I yelled out, my anger finally being "allowed" to escape a little—as if from a fissure in my body. I remembered that horrible time. It was after Rhodes, but before the takeover by Nevada and Eric's reclamation of his memories. Quinn had killed Andre in the rubble of the Pyramid of Gizeh, and he and I had recently broken up, but my longing was for Eric—my Eric—as it had been since the witch's curse was lifted. Of course, back then I'd been too scared to call Eric—to talk about the situation with him—even though we'd recently completed our bond. Instead, I'd wallowed in my misery and confusion—and, yes, my loneliness—and Niall had apparently decided to help me by becoming an "f-in" pimp!

"I am sorry," Niall said, looking truly ashamed—though for only a moment. "I did not mean you any harm."

"I don't even remember the details of it all! I slept with a guy, and I can hardly recall his face!" I shook my head. "That's not me!"

"There was a great deal of magic in the air during Preston's visit," Niall said. "I wanted you to have pleasure, but some of the magic was also preventing you from facing any consequences regarding that night—including a child."

I frowned. "But there are always consequences, Niall! One is that I don't think I'll ever be able to trust that you could even know what my best interests are—let alone act on my behalf."

He sighed loudly. "Then I regret my error even more than I already did. I will endeavor to earn your trust in the future—if circumstances allow for it," he promised contritely.

"I don't know if I want to have you in my life anymore, Niall," I said, feeling suddenly drained.
"Surely, Claudine told you how Bill manipulated his way into my life and into my bed—how because of that I could never be certain what was real and what was fake during our time together. And—even though I didn't know the full extent of it at the time—Quinn did something similar. He insinuated himself into my life and passed along information about me and the vampires I cared about to Felipe. And—now—it seems as if three out of the four men in my sexual experience have been with me only because they were sent to seduce me," I added, completed deflated.

I had to push down my insecurities and remind myself that Eric was different. No wonder I had such a hard time trusting Eric!

"I am sorry you feel that you cannot trust me," Niall said. "If it makes any difference, Preston would have pursued you if it wouldn't have been too dangerous for you at the time."

"It doesn't make me feel better," I said flatly. "If Preston had come back as a Were, it would have just compounded the lies. And if he had come to me as a fairy, then I would have felt the pain of being manipulated just that much sooner. No—any real interest he had in me wouldn't have mattered because I wouldn't have believed him after what Bill did."

Again, there was silence between us, but I did nothing to alleviate it.

"I regret many things when it comes to you, great-granddaughter," Niall said tiredly.

I closed my eyes tightly. "There's a lot to regret." I agreed.

"I will ask Claude to come back to Faerie with me," my great-grandfather offered after even more silence.

"Thanks," I responded, trying not to sound quite as bitter as I felt. "That would be for the best. If Claude leaves, it will likely save his life."

Niall nodded. "Yes. And if he will not leave, I will have him watched and will alert you and your vampire to any information that pertains to you. Perhaps, I can begin making up for my shortcomings."

I nodded in return, but didn't vocalize an answer. Even if Niall was being sincere about alerting us to any plans Claude might make against Eric or me, that would mean that he was betraying his own grandson in the process. I could admit that Niall was in a difficult situation. He would have to betray one of his kin to help another. But that idea was a reminder that Niall would betray kin if he felt it was right. And I just didn't trust my great-grandfather's moral compass at all anymore.

Of course, Claude would certainly be making his bed if he insisted upon a vendetta against me. Eric would see to that! But I knew that Eric would put his own people in place to keep track of Claude's movements if he stayed in the human world. And I sure as hell trusted my bonded's methods more than I trusted Niall's!

My great-grandfather rose to leave. His expression conveyed regret. And I imagine that mine did as well. I recalled the hope I had felt after meeting him the first time—the happiness I'd felt in having more family that wanted to know me.

Yes—regret was what I felt now when I thought of my great-grandfather.

Mountains of it.
Chapter 21: Grandfather

SOOKIE POV, CONTINUED

I wasn't surprised when I "heard" two fuzzy brains enter the area about fifteen minutes after Niall had left.

Demons.

I looked out of my living room window to make sure that the demons were who I wanted them to be. I breathed a sigh of relief as I confirmed the presence of Diantha and Mr. Cataliades.

I was already opening the door before Mr. Cataliades knocked.

"Come in," I said, looking toward the woods where I still "heard" the Were. I wondered if they had already informed Alcide that I would be having demon visitors; I was glad that Niall had "popped" in and out so that he wouldn't be seen by them.

Mr. Cataliades simply nodded before stepping in. "Diantha will stay on the porch—watching. She'll make sure that no one gets close enough to hear us," he added significantly.

I nodded in understanding. One of the reasons why I'd picked up on Niall's "stray" thought about Preston was that my shields had been completely down so that I could monitor how close the Were were and make sure that they didn't realize that I had fairy company. I'd felt the male Were come a little closer as the demons had driven up the driveway, but he'd subsequently backed off again. Regardless, I was glad that Diantha was keeping watch so that I could rest my mind a little. I figured I'd need all the rest I could get before the night was over.

I waved to the frenetic female demon gratefully as she began pacing my porch. I was amused—and strangely heartened—to see that her style hadn't altered since I'd last seen her. It was still the epitome of eclectic and "loud." She was wearing a chartreuse twin-set and a pair of red and purple checked capris with orange suspenders. Oh—and a pair of black and hot pink high tops with turquoise shoelaces. And a stark white headband. Somehow, she managed to pull off the look, however.

As soon as my front door was closed, I turned to look at Mr. Cataliades—in all his "round" glory. His eyes betrayed concern.

"Please tell me that the Viking has a plan—that he is not actually planning a cruel act against you." He sighed. "I have liked him for many decades and would truly hate to have to kill him."

Honestly, the part-Dae's matter-of-fact tone was disconcerting. Seeing his sincerity, I had no doubt that he would kill Eric—or, at least, try to—if he hurt me. That fact was both nice to know and frightening.

"No! Um—I mean—no! Eric isn't planning to hurt me. In fact—um—he told me all about Freyda. And I want to . . . ." I paused, searching for the right words. Finally, I settled upon vampire-speak.

"As a Supernatural, I want to publically claim Eric as my own," I emphasized. "Freyda needs to recognize that he's belonged to me ever since we shared blood for the first time! And that was long before Appius negotiated that fucking contract with her," I cursed.
"Sookie, I . . . ," he started.

"Don't try to talk me out of it either, Mr. Cataliades," I interrupted. "It's about time that my fairy-ness worked for me, rather than against me. And, surely, being a fairy princess—even just a part one—is worth something in the Supe world. And—even if no one's worried about Niall right now—vampires are smart enough to appreciate the fact that my great-grandfather could seek out revenge a century or more from now if my claim isn't recognized," I added, trying to sound confident in my words, even though I wasn't really sure whether or not Niall would do much of anything to make sure I could "keep" Eric—despite his promises that he wanted to make things up to me.

After all, helping me "keep" Eric wouldn't overtly help Niall's own interests.

Mr. Cataliades contemplated for a few moments. "Eric will have a difficult time holding onto you if you do this, Sookie. Oh—and you should call me Desmond."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He frowned. "I would like for you to feel comfortable enough to call me by my first name."

I sighed with frustration. Supes could be so literal! "No. What did you mean when you said Eric would have a difficult time holding onto me?"

"Oh!" the rotund man nodded. "Well, honestly—as a sheriff—Eric will always be somewhat vulnerable, and that means that his claim on you will be at risk. If you assert a prior claim upon him where the marriage contract with Freyda is concerned, I think we can win that battle, but that won't stop a king or a queen from trying to kill Eric in order to take you. And—since he's a mere sheriff—the consequences wouldn't be that great if one did. Alternatively, Freyda could always try to take your life—thereby removing you from the equation. Or she might simply hold off on acting on the contract until after you meet a natural human death."

"She could do that?" I asked, horrified by the prospect that Eric could get "claimed" by Freyda after I died—even if it were years from now.

"Yes. She could. There was no 'start date' for Eric's service specified on the contract signed between Appius and Freyda," he informed.

"But if Eric had a king or queen who objected to the contract?" I asked.

The part-demon thought for a moment. "That would change things. For example, Felipe could buy out the contract if he wanted to. The amount would be a small fortune, but Felipe could claim that he'd lose even more without Eric as his sheriff. I happen to know that Eric has asked Felipe to do this and has even offered to provide the money, but the king has refused."

"Bastard," I muttered.

"Indeed," he agreed.

"And Eric can't buy out his own contract," I observed.

"No. I'm sorry, but no," he confirmed.

"And what if . . . ." I paused. "What if Eric becomes a king?"

Slowly, an almost-sinister smile spread onto Mr. Cataliades's face. It was disconcerting—to say the
least. "Then Eric could buy out his contract with Freyda, and he'd be in a much better position when it came to keeping both you and himself safe."

I nodded. "Okay—then."

"You used the cluviel dor—didn't you?" he asked knowingly.

I nodded again. "Yes."

"Forgive me for being so bold—but may I ask what you wished for?"

"I wished to stay Eric's," I informed.

He closed his eyes and smiled—a lot less sinisterly than before. In fact—despite his razor-sharp incisors—he looked downright benevolent in that moment. "Ah—a wish for enduring love. Made on a fairy love token." He opened his eyes. "And an unselfish wish too."

"How so?" I asked. Honestly, I'd felt pretty darned selfish when I'd made my wish—even though I'd not intended for it to "take" before I'd discussed it with Eric.

The stupid cluviel dor took things too literally too!

"You offered yourself to him. You didn't wish for him to take you. And you didn't wish to claim him." He winked at me. "Despite what you now want to do 'officially.'"

He used air quotes around the last word of his sentence—which was just weird, given the fact that he was still showing his sharp teeth.

"Do you think the wish will keep Eric and me together?" I asked.

Mr. Cataliades shrugged. "Fairy wishes are unpredictable things—which was why I cautioned Adele against using the cluviel dor without great thought."

I sighed and frowned. "I can't imagine all of the moments when she would have been tempted to use it: when her husband died, when my daddy died, when Aunt Linda got cancer." I felt a tear slip from my eye at the thought of all Gran had lost.

"A cluviel dor can reverse death," he said quietly. "But such a thing is ill-advised. I'm glad Adele intrinsically recognized that. Plus—I know that the wish she came closest to making on the object had to do with you," he confessed, his expression becoming suddenly fraught with guilt.

"What wish?" I asked.

"To rid you of the curse I gave you," he whispered.

"Curse?"

"Please—let us sit, and I will tell you all that I know," he gestured, leading me to the dining room table. Within moments, he'd gotten me a glass of water. I noticed that he'd gotten none for himself.

"I'm sorry," I said, chastising myself for my lack of manners. Obviously, I'd used them all up on Alcide, Claude, and Dermot earlier that day. "I should have offered you something."

He waved off my self-critique. "Do not worry about it."

"What did you mean the curse you gave to me?" I asked.
He exhaled loudly and sat down across from me.

Somehow, even though we were sitting exactly where Niall and I had been sitting not an hour before, I was more comfortable with the creature before me than I had been with my own kin—even though the part-demon had just told me that he'd "cursed" me somehow! It was Mr. Cataliades's eyes. They conveyed only concern for me.

Not concern for himself.

Examining the part-demon's face, I wondered for the first time how old he was. I knew that the "rules" of human aging didn't apply to any Supes, and Mr. Cataliades looked to be in his 60s. I wondered if he really was 60. Or 160. Or 1,060.

The part-demon looked like he wanted to start speaking several times, but then stopped himself each one.

"Mr. Cataliades?" I finally probed.

"Desmond. You should call me that," he said decisively. His smile was kind, and his eyes seemed even gentler than before. They were brown, but had yellow and orange flecks in them. They were odd, but somehow comforting too.

"May I tell you a story?" he asked me.

I nodded. "Sure."

"I am not a full-demon. Did you know that?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I think our part-nature was why Fintan and I first bonded. Neither of us felt truly comfortably in our own skins."

"Fintan? As in my biological grandfather?" I asked.

Mr. Cataliades nodded in confirmation. "Yes. In a way, I'm the reason why he met your grandmother, Adele. The portal near your home is the closest to New Orleans—you know. And Fintan had come to this realm to visit me the first time he saw her."

My eyes opened wide in surprise. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yes. Fintan is—was—the closest friend I ever had. A brother—really. You see—he was already estranged from Dermot when we met. And my own brother, Nargal, used to be less than enthusiastic about his part-human relatives. Of course, falling in love with a human woman changed all that for him," he added with a humph. "Nargal and I are actually quite close now. Just last month, I took him fishing in the Gulf. It was quite an interesting excursion," he recalled.

"Do you know why Fintan and Dermot fell out?" I asked, hoping to get Mr. Cataliades back on track.

"It had to do with Dermot's beliefs at the time. He had said disparaging things about his and Finn's human mother. Dermot hated that he was a half-breed. As for Finn? Well—he always believed that there was a good reason why he'd been born half and half. Of course—like I said—it wasn't always easy for him. He loved Niall and served him faithfully throughout his life. In fact, the only thing he ever did against his father's wishes was to hide your family from him. But—even as Finn did what
he could to be the son his father wanted—he still felt drawn to the human realm: his mother's realm. He desperately wanted to belong to both realms that had provided his blood."

"And Dermot?"

"At least, back then, he hated that he was half-human," Mr. Cataliades conveyed. "He was convinced that the only way that he could make up for his deficiencies was to join with Breandan in eradicating all other human-fairy hybrids."

"What about himself?" I asked, thinking of the uncle I'd just displaced from Gran's house.

"Dermot planned—at one time—to take his own life once all other hybrids were destroyed," the demon lawyer said.

"That's so . . . ." I stopped, not really having a word to describe Dermot's intentions.

"You are allowing Dermot to live here?" Desmond asked stiffly.

"I was. But not anymore. You don't think he's changed?" I asked him.

Desmond shrugged. "Honestly, I don't give a fuck. In addition to everything else he did when he was one of Breandan's disciples, Dermot tried to kill Finn more than once."

"But he said that he had nothing to do with Fintan's death—or the deaths of my parents," I frowned.

The part-demon shook his head. "That doesn't mean he didn't try to kill his brother. He just didn't succeed. And I cannot even begin to tell you of all the murders of hybrids Dermot perpetrated before he supposedly reformed," he said angrily. He looked at me with a sympathetic smile. "You are of a forgiving nature. And that is a good thing. It is good that you have the heart to recognize that Dermot is most likely repentant. Supernatural lives are long, and if we didn't get the chance to change . . . ." He paused. "Well—if we did not—it would be a bad thing for most of us."

"Was Dermot truly that bad?" I asked in a quiet voice.

Desmond closed his eyes for a moment. "Dermot's name once rivaled Neave and Lochlan's when it came to cruelty."

I cringed.

Desmond sighed. "Most Supernaturals have many skeletons in their closets. But—eventually—certain patterns form. Finn taught me that."

"Patterns?" I asked.

"Patterns of good or evil," he answered.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Take me, for instance," he said. "I have killed many," he said, matter-of-factly. "I don't necessarily enjoy the act of killing, though there have been exceptions."

"Jade Flower," I whispered.

He smiled widely. "Yes—I enjoyed taking her life very much. But I had a good reason."

"Gladiola," I said.
"Yes. Similar to your Viking, I try to limit my killing to those who are in need of it, and I try to make sure my rationale is just."

"Just?" I asked.

He nodded. "I don't kill for ambition or selfishness. I kill to protect my family and friends."

"Or to avenge them?" I asked with a little challenge in my tone.

"Yes. Or to avenge them. But I try not to kill those who simply have different ideals than mine—those whom I dislike," he added. "And I don't kill in corollary."

"Huh?" I asked inelegantly. "Corollary" had never made it onto one of my word-a-day calendars.

"I don't kill the relatives, friends, or associates of enemies," he clarified. "And I don't kill situational enemies."

"Huh?" I asked again.

He smiled somewhat indulgently. "What I mean is that I work very hard not to blame those who are not actually responsible for a misdeed."

He must have seen that I was still confused.

"For instance, Gladiola died while she was trying to deliver a message to you," he said. "But her death wasn't your fault." He pointed toward the window. "The Weres out there are guarding you. If they died in that service, that wouldn't be your fault either."

We were silent for a few moments as I took in the part-demon's words. They were more healing to me than he could have ever imagined.

"But you insinuated that you would kill Eric if he were actually going to be cruel to me," I pointed out.

He nodded. "And that is the reason I began telling you the story I wanted to tell you," he said. "You'd better tell me the rest then," I replied, "because I'm not getting it yet."

He gave me a gentle smile. "More than forty years ago, Finn visited me with a huge smile on his face. Having been in love myself, I recognized the look. Finn told me all about Adele. He wanted her so badly, but she was married, so he hesitated to make love to her."

"He did?" I asked, fascinated to finally be hearing details of Gran and Fintan's story. In my mind, I'd always imagined Fintan being the aggressor.

"Yes. Adele was the love of his life—you see," Desmond said softly. "But her husband, Mitchell, was the love of Adele's life."


"Finn determined to take what he could get. Mitchell couldn't father children, so Adele agreed to an affair—but only after she got Mitchell's permission."

"Really?" I asked.

Desmond nodded. "Adele and Mitchell discussed the issue at length. And—finally—it was decided
that Fintan and Adele would have sex."

"And Fintan really loved her?" I asked.

Desmond nodded. "So desperately that he prayed she wouldn't conceive right away."

"I don't know if I like this story," I frowned, not wanting to think of Gran as a sexual being at all. I suppose all "kids" were that way.

The part-demon smiled. "It is an odd story—to be sure. But Finn never regretted Adele. He was proud of his children with her. He was proud of his grandchildren. But he loved Adele enough to know that haunting her life would damage it." He paused for a moment. "Finn had the gift of mimicry and could take on the form of another."

I thought for a moment of Preston Pardloe and shuddered.

"Mimicry," I whispered.

"Yes. Finn sometimes took on the form of Mitchell so that he could spend time with your father and aunt and Adele."

"Did he ever have sex with Gran that way?" I asked, a part of me not wanting to hear the answer.

"No," Mr. Cataliades said immediately. "Finn wouldn't do that."

I sighed with relief.

"Why didn't I ever hear about Fintan from Gran's head?" I asked. Maybe I also hoped that Mr. Cataliades would tell me why she'd never told me about Fintan—why she'd never alleviated my own angst by telling me why I was "different."

"Another of Finn's gifts was a kind of glamour," Mr. Cataliades said. "Finn glamoured Mitchell to forget about Adele's infidelity. In fact, Mitchell truly believed that your father and aunt belonged to him." He took a deep breath. "And eventually Finn glamoured Adele so that she didn't have the ability to think about him when he wasn't right in front of her or unless someone mentioned him."

"Did Gran realize that Daddy and Aunt Linda weren't her husband's children?"

"Only when Finn was present. Or when someone spoke of him," he said.

Suddenly, I felt overwhelming sadness for the fairy who'd loved my grandmother.

"You should know that when I spoke to Adele about Finn, she smiled," Mr. Cataliades said. "In my presence, she was able to remember him with great love, but she felt great guilt, too."

"I wish I would have known," I said. "It would have helped to have known why I was so different. But Gran couldn't tell me—right."

"No," he confirmed. "Most of the time, she simply didn't remember Finn well enough to keep him in her mind."

I thought about the magic that had kept me from remembering much about Preston. But then I realized that the analogy I was making between Gran's experience and my own was a false one. It seemed that Gran had loved Fintan—at least in a way. And he'd certainly loved her. Her not remembering Fintan was tragic. My one night with Preston had been a magic-laced episode, based completely on manipulation. By contrast, Fintan had given Gran and Granddaddy the time and
opportunity to make up their minds and had—only afterwards—hampered their memories.

I frowned. "How did Fintan cope with Gran not remembering him?" I asked.

"Honestly, he was quite altered after he stopped allowing himself visits to your grandmother and your father and aunt," Mr. Cataliades said. "He loved them very much. But he was convinced that staying away would be safer for you all."

"It wasn't safer," I whispered, thinking of my mother's and father's deaths.

"I know. And Finn knew too. He made many mistakes regarding his human family," Desmond said weightily. "I tried to talk him out of some of them. But—in the end—he talked me into the worst of them."

"What was that?" I asked, barely hearing my own voice.
"Very few who are only one-quarter Fae inherit the fairy spark," Mr. Cataliades informed, his voice laden with an apology that I wasn't sure I wanted to know anything about. "One such as yourself—one of only one-eighth blood . . . ." His voice trailed off. "Well, that's unheard of."

"What of Hunter?" I asked. "He's less than me."

Desmond shrugged. "Even more unheard of."

"So you know about Hunter?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes. I met your great-grandfather and then Finn because my family members have worked for Brigants for as long as fairies have needed attorneys in this realm."

I accepted that information with a nod.

"I have kept track of all of Finn's descendants—and I did more too."

"What's the more?" I asked.

He looked away, his eyes betraying guilt again. "Finn didn't think any of his descendants would inherit the Fae spark. As long as Finn's children didn't have a spark, individuals like Breandan wouldn't be able to find them. But—if they did somehow get a spark—Finn wanted them to have an advantage."

"Telepathy," I gasped with realization.

Mr. Cataliades nodded. "Some fairies can read minds, and some cannot. The gift is random—really. But—with demons—the ability is wrapped up in the blood so completely that it is inherited without a doubt. In other words, if a child's father or mother has it, the child will have it—without fail." He took a deep breath and then spent some time letting it out. "Finn asked me to give Adele blood both times that she was pregnant. The magic of my telepathic gift has existed in all of Finn's descendants—because my blood is a part of you all—but it takes a fairy spark to transform that gift from dormant to active."

"You're the reason why I can read minds?" I gasped.

Desmond still wasn't making eye contact with me. I took that as a bad sign.

"Yes. Telepathy was meant to be a gift that would give anyone in your family who had the Fae spark an advantage over other Supernaturals—including vampires. Finn begged me to give the gift to all of his spark-bearing progeny, and I relented to him because of our friendship. In retrospect, I would have denied him. But—please believe me—I didn't know that you would gain telepathy without any of the controls that made it," he paused, "normal."

"Normal," I said flatly.

"Yes. Normal. Telepathy generally comes with control, Sookie. Among all the Supernaturals I know with the gift, the ability to discern between thoughts and spoken words is innate—as is the
ability to close one's own mind off against receiving or sending thoughts." He shook his head. "I never imagined that it wasn't that way for you until after Finn was dead."

"It wasn't that way for me," I concurred flatly.

"I'm sorry," he said, and—given the look in his eyes and the way his mind opened up to me—I believed his apology.

"Why didn't you tell me all this before—when you first met me?" I asked.

Mr. Cataliades sighed; the sound seemed to hurt him. "The queen—Sophie-Anne. I enjoyed being her employee, but she was crafty. The day you and I met, the car she sent me here in was bugged. Hadley's apartment was bugged. Of course, Sophie-Anne's palace was also bugged. And, then, there was the fact that the queen had me watched. Had I paid you more attention than she expected—or if I had sought you out before I had the excuse of Hadley's estate—it could have been bad for both of us."

"What? Why would Sophie-Anne watch you?" I gasped.

"There comes a point in time when an attorney knows a critical level of his client's secrets. Sophie-Anne didn't dare have me killed, but she couldn't afford to distrust me; thus, she kept very close tabs on me."

"So you knew you were being spied upon?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I had ways of eluding Sophie-Anne if needed, but—honestly—I don't have much to hide. And I certainly didn't want to risk you. Gladiola was to enquire about your ability and offer help, but she was killed before she could," he added sadly.

I frowned at the memory of her death. I'd not known her well, but she'd seemed nice.

He shook his head. "Despite knowing Hadley and eventually figuring out that she was one of Finn's descents, I didn't know about Hunter's existence—let alone his ability—until you asked Niall to find out his location."

"How did you learn about it then?" I asked.

"Niall asked me to perform the search," Mr. Cataliades responded. "As I said, I have worked for the Brigants for centuries."

"Does Niall know that Hunter's a telepath? That he has the spark?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Niall didn't ask, and I offered nothing to him beyond the address."

"Thank you—for that," I whispered before taking a long drink of my water. In truth—after the day I'd already had—I could have used a stiffer drink. And I knew that the night was only just beginning.

Mr. Cataliades seemed perfectly content to let me stew in silence for a few minutes as I drained my glass.

"Would you like me to get you more?" he asked with a slight smirk as he motioned toward the empty glass.

I shook my head. "No thank you. So—just to clarify—you're telling me that Hunter and I are both
"Yes," he confirmed. "Finn and me. His spark combined with my blood."

I sighed deeply. "I kind of hate you right now."

"I really don't blame you," he said sadly.

I closed my eyes for a moment. "Where are your loyalties, Mr. Cataliades? I know you are an attorney, so I'm not asking for State secrets or anything, but I need to know."

"Call me Desmond," he reminded softly. "And—as for my loyalties? Finn was my best friend. You are of him and you are of my own blood. I have no children of my own. So you are the closest thing I have. You and Hunter. My loyalties are yours—first and foremost—though I have always felt it best to keep my distance. Perhaps, that was a mistake. But—please believe that I have been trying to help." He paused and his earnestness seemed to be a living being in the room. "That is why I have strived to help Eric get out of the marriage contract his maker forged. Otherwise, I would have counseled him to accept the contract without contest, for the situation with Freyda would likely be good for Eric on a professional level."

"Really?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It is well-known that Victor dislikes Eric. Yes, de Castro is relatively fair, but—if a choice had to be made—Felipe would choose Victor over Eric."

"Why did Felipe leave Eric alive during the takeover? Do you know?" I asked.

Desmond contemplated for a moment. "Eric really is a good asset, and a vampire of his age isn't that common in the Americas. But—frankly—it was likely Appius that made Felipe pause."

"Appius!" I gasped.

"Appius was an unimaginable monster—and a complete asshole," Desmond said flatly. "But no one wanted to cross him. He was strong and unpredictable. Likely, Felipe would have figured that Appius would have been extremely disappointed if his eldest child was killed in something as petty as a state takeover."

"Really?" I asked, flabbergasted that Appius could have been the source of anything "good" for Eric and me.

"Yes," Desmond responded with surety. "But now that Appius is gone, the threat of him is gone too. Don't get me wrong—Eric is powerful on his own. And he's careful of himself, but he does have weaknesses," he said, looking at me significantly.

"I'm his weakness."

"You. And Pam."

"But once I embrace my lineage? Come out publically? Will I be more of a weakness to him? Or less of one?" I asked him, studying his face for an honest answer—though I was certain that he'd been forthright with me up to that point. Still, I had to be sure. The last thing I wanted to do was to make Eric more vulnerable, and the plan could still be altered if need be.

"It is hard to say," he said.
"Why?" I asked.

"Being a fairy—the great-granddaughter of Niall Brigant—will make many vampires stay away. But it will entice others. Most in positions of power—kings and queens—will know better than to try to take you by force, though they might try to secure you in other ways."

"What other ways?" I asked.

"They will offer you money or try to seduce you. They will offer Eric alliance after he is king—or try to seduce him. They might threaten those you care for. Or they could pretend to be your friend until they gain an advantage." He frowned. "You must be careful of those in power, but—if you reveal yourself as Fae royalty and Eric succeeds in becoming king—you will almost certainly ensure that those in power will, at the very least, pause before acting against you in a violent manner."

"What about others?"

"Vampires who keep themselves outside of the power structure might make attempts to get ahold of you. And, then, there will be the occasional insane or obsessed Supernatural being." he said gravely.

"Like Victor," I muttered.

"Yes," Desmond agreed. "Exactly." He looked at me as if to study me. "You must be sure, Sookie. Once you make your family connections known—once the supernatural community knows that you are part-fairy—there will be no going back. Your telepathy is already well-known, of course. But—some vampires believe things about fairies that might make them covet you."

"The insane and obsessed ones," I muttered, repeating his earlier words.

He nodded. "Exactly. Some vampires, for example, believe that fairy blood will help them to safely venture out into the sun."

"Can it?" I asked, thinking of Eric.

"No," Desmond responded. "That idea is myth. What is true is that the blood of a full-blooded fairy will make a vampire intoxicated in a way that will make him or her extremely vulnerable. I have witnessed fairies sacrifice their own kind—just to capture a vampire after he or she is drunk and virtually helpless. That is why wise vampires—like the Viking—are very careful in their dealings with fairies. For instance, Eric knew all along about Hooligans and the fairy presence there. However, instead of seeking out treats there, your vampire issued an Area 5 edict that no vampires were to go within a certain radius of the business, or they would be punished harshly."

"I didn't know that," I responded.

Desmond shrugged. "The edict was made years ago—obviously before Eric would have had any knowledge of you. Such laws work to protect younger vampires from urges they might not be able to control. Older ones—like Eric—are affected by the scent of a fairy, to be sure, but they are generally disciplined enough to avoid putting themselves into unfortunate situations."

I thought about every time that Eric had smelled fairies on me. I'd always figured that the scent was like an aphrodisiac to him. And—of course—I'm sure it was. His rubbing, biting, and having sex with me comments certainly betrayed the fact that he was attracted to the Fae scent. However, thanks to Desmond's words, I was beginning to understand just how much care Eric had always had for me, for—even when I smelled like fairies—he'd never hurt me or taken too much blood
I also thought about how he'd drained the fairy, Colman, after he'd tried to kill me, but had killed Appius instead. That had been a difficult night all around—what with Alexei going more nuts than usual.

Talk about your insane, obsessed vampires!

However, looking back, I knew that I'd initially misinterpreted some of the things that were going on that night.

For example, when Colman and Claude were together in my yard—fighting Alexei in a twisted game of cat and mouse—I'd assumed that Colman had come to harm me and that Claude was either trying to stop him or would have tried to protect me from him. When I learned about who Colman was and that he'd blamed me for his unborn child's death and wanted me dead, I'd developed a soft spot for Claude because I'd thought that he wanted to protect me. In fact, I'd assumed that the only reason Claude had moved in with me was because he wanted to guard me—as he worked behind the scenes to talk Colman out of his revenge plot. It hadn't occurred to me to ask why Claude didn't stop Colman when he went to stab me. It hadn't occurred to me to question why it was a be-spelled Dermot—NOT Claude—who managed to throw his knife into Colman's back, allowing Eric to grab the fairy and drain him.

Still, even that night, I'd recognized that Eric was showing a lot of control after "drinking" Colman. Of course, the intoxicating effects of Colman's blood were partially counteracted by the sobering scene—as well as Eric's pain over losing his bond with his maker. Not to mention the pain he'd been enduring throughout the night thanks to Appius and Alexei.

Nevertheless, I'd seen bloodlust in Eric's eyes after he'd finished off the fairy. But he didn't come near me—not even to kiss me. Instead, from many feet away, he'd told me that I was his "dearest," before he'd flown away to go take care of Pam, who'd also been injured by Alexei.

Yes—looking back—it was easier to see certain truths.

Eric didn't touch me after he'd drained Colman because he didn't want to risk harming me. Instead, he'd made sure that I knew how he felt about me and let me feel those feelings through our bond. And then he'd left—to protect me. After all, I was his "dearest."

Dearest. I smiled a little at that thought.

Likely, Eric had also not wanted to feel the effects of his drunkenness in the proximity of Claude and Dermot.

Smart vampire.

On the other hand, Claude had been "caught" with a fairy who wanted me dead, but—because of my desire for a family who loved me, especially in the face of Eric's deranged vampire "family"—I'd bought my fairy cousin's explanation that he'd been trying to convince Colman to stop his plans. Hell—I'd been grateful to Claude for "trying" with Colman since I knew that Claudine had been happy with her chosen mate and would have preferred it if Colman wasn't harmed.

I shook my head and looked up at Mr. Cataliades, who seemed to be waiting patiently for me to finish having whatever thoughts I needed to have. I had to say that Supes were often good at recognizing the need for silence when it came to making major decisions. Humans didn't have that same skill. Come to think of it—Pam didn't either (unless she happened to be in down-time). So
maybe the "skill of silence" had nothing to do with "species."

"So?" Mr. Cataliades asked.

"Oh—I'm definitely still claiming Eric, and I'm claiming my lineage. The way I look at it, keeping it a secret hasn't stopped fairies and vampires from coming after me to this point." I shrugged. "And maybe I'm just tired of trying to be normal when I'm not normal." I sat up a little straighter. "I'm the part-fairy, part-human, apparently part-demon, telepathic, bonded and pledged mate of Eric Northman, one-thousand-year-old vampire." I chuckled. "That's my normal, and—even though I was scared and/or in denial for a long time—I'm now liking my chances at being happy for the first time in a long time."

Mr. Cataliades smiled and took my hand. "Sookie, would you allow for me to claim you as my goddaughter? As I said, Finn was my best friend, and you have your telepathy because of me. The least I can do is to claim you. And—with that claim—would come my protection as well. I am only part-demon, but I have influence among many Supernaturals. And many vampires would be loath to fuck with the Dae."

"Unless they are really insane or obsessed?" I chuckled, wiping away a tear of gratefulness at the same time.

"Indeed," he smiled warmly.

"You'd really do that, Mr. Cataliades? Wouldn't associating yourself with me add danger to your life?" I asked, touched by his offer.

He nodded. "It is Desmond," he emphasized quietly. "Know this: I would have died for Finn. And—if I didn't think it would have drawn attention to you—I would have tried to get to know you after he was gone, especially once I knew you were having difficulty with your telepathy." He sighed and ran his hand through his thin hair. "Finn didn't want any Supes to ever learn about his family with Adele. That's why I covered my tracks very carefully when I came to see Adele after his death."

"That's when you gave her the cluviel dor?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"What did she want to wish for? You said that it involved me, but you weren't specific earlier."

"She thought about wishing that your telepathy would go away," he said softly, "It was then that I began to comprehend that what was meant to be a gift that you could use to protect yourself was actually a burden. For not realizing that sooner, I am sorry."

"What did you tell Gran? About wishing my mind-reading away?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"I told her why Finn had wanted you to have telepathy in the first place. In turn, she told me that you had begun to learn how to construct your shields, but that things were still hard for you. In the end, I . . . ."

His voice trailed off.

"You what?" I asked.

"I didn't envy her the choice, but I told her I wouldn't blame her if she used the cluviel dor to undo what I'd done. Clearly, she decided not to."
"When was this? When did Fintan die?" I asked him.

"You were nineteen," Desmond said somberly. "Adele told me that you were at work when I came to the house."

I nodded. "I was already working at Merlotte's by then."

"Finn hadn't visited your family for a very long time by then—though he kept tabs on you all. However, he was very fearful that he would inadvertently lead Niall's enemies to you—so much so that he used his magic to block the portal near your home."

"But that magic died when he died," I sighed.

"Yes," Desmond confirmed. "In a letter to Niall, he asked that his father use magic to hide that portal—and to conceal Adele's home from fairies who might be traveling nearby. He confessed that it was his own desire to look in on your family which had led Neave and Lochlan to your parents on the night they were killed. He never recovered from the guilt of your father's death. And he hunted the fairy twins after that. But they eventually killed him."

I closed my eyes in pain as I recalled Neave and Lochlan. I was even more glad that they were dead than I'd been before.

"But Niall chose not to close the portal or conceal Gran's home as Fintan asked," I said, shaking my head.

"No. It was more than half a decade after Finn died before Niall responded to my request to meet to discuss Finn's wishes. Some rumors had Niall captured by Breandan during that time. Other rumors just indicated that he was in hiding. The most charitable reports said that he was in mourning because of Finn's death. I do know that—around that time—Claudine was instructed to keep an eye on you from afar. When Niall finally sought me out, I gave him Finn's letter, which outlined his wishes that your family be concealed and left alone. When Niall seemed anxious to seek you out, I told him that you had a relationship with Eric. I had hoped that the Viking would prove a buffer between you and Niall. And, honestly, I worried about Niall finding about Eric on his own."

"Because a fairy's natural inclination is to kill a vampire who's hanging around his kin," I sighed.

"Yes."

"When I first met Niall, he worried that he would lead his enemies to me. But he wanted for us to have a relationship."

Desmond nodded. "Finn had the same dilemma. In the end, he realized that even keeping his distance wasn't being distant enough—when it came to certain fairies."

"The insane and the obsessed," I noted, my mouth feeling dry.

"Yes. To his credit, Niall has been trying to eradicate that ilk from amongst his people all of his life. His mistake was the same as Finn's."

"Thinking that he could protect his family by hoping that we'd stay a secret," I sighed.

"Yes. But secrets have a long time to be revealed in the supernatural world," the part-demon said. "It was naïve of Niall to believe that you would remain a secret. Just as it was naïve of Finn."

"Oh, God! Hunter!" I exclaimed.
"I have already arranged for him to be guarded full time," Desmond said calmly. "In fact, I know that you visited him just yesterday."

"Really? How much money . . . ."

"Do not worry about that," he waved me off. "In truth, I have been considering relocating Remy and Hunter so that the boy can be trained. Luckily, Niall expressed no interest in having a relationship with him—spark or not—given the fall-out with his relationship with you. And—again—I worried about drawing attention to Hunter with my presence, so I've had to rely upon others to watch him. I trust them, but . . . ." He shook his head with frustration. "It is difficult to know what is best to do."

"Remy has a job in Red Ditch. They have a nice home there. And Remy's doing his best to take care of Hunter," I pointed out, though I cringed a little as I recalled Remy's proposition to me. Desmond sighed. "I will continue having them guarded then. And I'll arrange for Hunter to receive some private training from someone who cannot be traced back to me."

"I've been tryin' to help him—a little," I said.

He smiled at me. "That's good. But you are about to get a whole lot more notorious."

I frowned. I hadn't thought about what my decision to "claim" Eric and my heritage would mean to my seeing Hunter. "Will you—can you—make sure that Hunter stays okay? Even if it's better that I don't know the specifics—just in case?" I asked the demon lawyer.

He nodded. "I will pull Hunter and Remy out of Red Ditch only if their guards find that vampires or fairies are sniffing around the child."

"If that happens, Eric will help," I said quickly.

Desmond nodded. "I will keep that in mind and call upon him if needed."

I breathed a sigh of relief as a weight upon my shoulders seemed to lift.

"I want to keep seeing Hunter—if there's a way for me to do it secretly," I sighed. "But I won't endanger him."

"Understood," Mr. Cataliades said. "I'll see what I can do. But it might be a few months before it is safe."

I nodded in understanding.

We were silent for a few moments. "Did you mean what you said? Would you really claim me as a goddaughter?"

The part-demon smiled. "Yes. Without reservation or pause," he added.

"Niall never publicly claimed me," I shared.

"A calculation he—no doubt—thought would be safer for you," he responded.

"It made me feel like a dirty little secret," I said honestly.

"Well—soon you will have a lot fewer secrets," he smirked.
I nodded. "Yes. Thank you, Desmond," I said, trying out his first name for the first time.

"You are very welcome, my dear. Now—tell me how we are going to make your vampire a king so that I can help with that part too," he smiled, his eyes alit with anticipation.

Supes and battles!

Even if I was ready to embrace being a Supe, I didn't think I'd ever really come to appreciate bloodlust.
"You are early," I said to Victor as he approached my throne, where I'd been nonchalantly playing with my phone.

The Regent had three guards—aka paid goons—in tow. I'd seen them with Victor before. Their combined ages didn't approach mine, so I didn't see them as a threat to my plans. However, that didn't stop me from judging Victor for always needing an "entourage" with him—and for having to pay them to be there.

The asshole had no idea what loyalty truly meant.

"Your club seems quite empty," he remarked as he gestured around him.

I smiled congenially. "I opted to close Fangtasia to the public tonight due to," I paused, "upcoming events."

He nodded. "Ah—of course. So—what are your plans for Miss Stackhouse?"

To cherish her.

To find even more ways to make her mine.

To build a solid and happy life with her.

To keep her safe.

To make her my queen.

I had so many plans.

"That will depend upon her level of cooperation," I said enigmatically to the vampire I hated.

Victor looked toward the entrance of the club and waved over a human female.

"Come!" he yelled in a tone of voice most often used for calling dogs.

The approaching blonde looked to be about twenty years old and smelled tolerable. Before Sookie, she would have tempted me. After Sookie? Well—she smelled like pigswill.

"A new pet?" I asked Victor diplomatically.


I kept my countenance even—despite the fact that I wanted to behead the smarmy bastard right then and there.

"You are too kind," I nodded in deference and then looked around the room as if for the first time
that night. "I am sorry, but—obviously—I have no donors here tonight. The waitresses are
generally compliant," I said, looking at the three human servers who were there that night. "And I
did order two cases of Royalty Blended for the occasion."

"Royalty Blended?" Victor asked, licking his lips. "That would be acceptable."

I looked over at Jock. "Prepare a goblet for Victor immediately," I ordered.

"Yes, Royalty blended is a treat," Victor added somewhat excitedly as he watched my bartender—
his spy—retrieve one of the "fancy" goblets from the top shelf behind the bar.

Pam had insisted upon the goblets—for when we had pretentious guests. She used to be hard-
pressed to control her amusement when Andre would be served TrueBlood in one.

Ah—the good old days!

To be sure, I found Royalty Blended to be more tolerable than TrueBlood, but it was still not as
good as human blood, and it was nothing compared to my bonded's nectar. However, because it
was expensive and somewhat rare, Royalty Blended was favored by pompous, affected status-
seekers like Victor. And that fact worked right into my plans.

"I have other treats planned for tonight as well," I said.

"In addition to our Miss Stackhouse's punishment?" he asked, clearly trying to goad me with the
word "our."

"Yes," I responded. "I believe that you enjoy Bubba's singing?"

Victor perked right up. "You have convinced Bubba to perform?" he asked.

I nodded. "I promised there would be only vampires here tonight—besides the waitresses and
Sookie, of course. But their presence won't bother Bubba because he is familiar with them. And, of
course, the waitresses will be glamoured not to react to Bubba. He may sing only one or two songs
before he discombobulates," I commented with a wave of my hand, "but it is something."

"Yes. A rare treat, indeed," Victor agreed, though he was trying to sound casual. However, his
excitement was palatable.

Just then, Jock delivered the goblet of Royalty Blended to Victor.

"We shall all have a toast when Bubba begins to perform," I announced loudly to those who had
already gathered in the club. An appreciative murmur was heard.

I looked at Victor. "You should, of course, feel free to partake in as much as you wish, Regent," I
said with a nod.

"Thank you," he nodded back. "And you should partake of your own meal," Victor said, gesturing
toward the woman he'd brought.

Clearly, he was testing me.

I grinned as I rose from my seat. "I believe I will," I said before taking the woman's hand and
leading her back to my office. I closed the door and had her trapped in my glamour a moment later.
"What are your instructions?" I growled.

"To have sex with you. To give you blood. To make sure I leave with at least one strand of your
hair—even if I have to pull it out," she said mindlessly.

"And after that?" I asked.

"I'm to deliver the hair to a vampire named Bill Compton," she conveyed.

I sighed deeply. "Sit on the couch and take off your panties. Masturbate until I say otherwise."

Immediately, she complied, and I went into my small bathroom. The problem of getting the woman's scent of arousal on me would be easily solved, but I had to get mine on her as well. I closed the door of my bathroom enough so that the woman couldn't see me, and—with a sigh—I pulled out my cock.

I closed my eyes and thought of my bonded, imagining that it was her hand that stroked up and down along my cock. It lurched in my hand.

I imagined Sookie sinking to her knees before me, her blue eyes getting darker and darker with lust as she licked the head of my cock and then teased me by gently kissing and nibbling along my shaft. I imagined her doing that until I begged her to take me into her mouth. My bonded had not had much practice in fellatio, but—what she lacked in experience—she made up for in enthusiasm. She seemed to know just how to work me with her tongue, and she wasn't afraid to use her teeth—but just a little. The effect was almost like a tickle along my cock.

But the best part of being blown by my bonded was what she could do with her tongue. She'd tighten her lips around me, and her warm, wet tongue would practically cradle the part of my cock she could fit into her mouth.

And she always seemed greedy to fit more.

"Mmmm," I moaned, increasing the pace of my hand and gripping my shaft tighter.

I thought about Sookie moaning and humming around my cock. I thought about reaching the point when I could no longer be patient—the point when I would pull her to her feet, put her up onto the sink edge, and drive into her. I moaned louder, thinking of my bonded's tight, warm pussy embracing my cock.

I imagined the noises she would be making. My name—she always panted my name. And she grunted and moaned unintelligible sounds and curses as she reached for her own pleasure. Gods, I loved her noises!

In a haze of fantasy, I felt myself getting close to release and quickly grabbed a towel. Even before I'd come down from my Sookie-inspired masturbatory session, however, I was interrupted, by the woman in the other room reaching her own climax.

I grabbed another towel and scowled as I went to "finish" what Victor had made me start. I was looking forward to the night when I wouldn't have to answer to anyone!

Ten minutes later, I led the donor out of my office.

She had been glamoured to believe that we'd fucked, and she had a new set of fang marks on her. Thinking about Sookie's instructions the night before, I'd choked down a few swallows of semi-decent A-positive to make sure that I was as strong as possible, even though doing so was like torture.

I'd ripped a few pieces of my own hair out and entwined it into her fingers before making sure that
the obligatory "fluid transfer" occurred.

I grimaced—just thankful that Sookie didn't have a supernatural sense of smell. It was bad enough that I had to smell like I'd had sex with the woman!

As least, I reconciled myself with the idea that—even if Sookie could smell the evidence of a fluid exchange—she would be able to feel through our strengthened bond that I'd done nothing with the woman.

Except set up a scene.

Sookie and I had wondered how Victor was going to go about getting a sample of my hair to give to the witches. And now we knew.

It was almost a clever ploy on his part—but a little predictable.

Of course, the spell that the witches intended to brew would be about as effectual as one of the many phony elixirs that were sold around the world in the 1800s. Come to think of it—I bet that Compton had fallen for some of those "cure-alls" during his human lifetime.

Speaking of falling for a ruse . . .

I made sure I had a self-satisfied smirk on my face as I walked the young woman back into the main bar.

"You didn't tell me that you'd secured a hell-cat for me," I remarked as I sat onto my throne. Victor had taken up the seat I'd placed next to it for the night.

From the corner of my eye, I saw that he was inhaling deeply to check for "evidence" of sex. Creepy fucker.

Luckily, his expression immediately relaxed as he determined that I must have fucked and fed from the woman. In fact, only one of those things was the truth.


"Oh—this one likes it rough," I said, winking at the woman. She didn't even have the grace to blush. "She's especially into hair pulling," I grinned.

"I wouldn't think that you'd mind such a thing," Victor remarked, a slightly nervous edge to his tone.

"Oh—I don't," I stated. "It's just that I'm usually the one doing the pulling."

"Would you like to go again?" the woman asked shamelessly as she licked her lips. "You could pull my hair all you want."

Well—I had glamoured her to believe that I was the best she'd ever had.

"No!" Victor said quickly.

"No?" I asked innocently.

Victor composed himself. "Well—you said yourself that tonight was for vampires only. Other than your bonded, of course. And it is approaching 10:00 P.M.," he added.
"True," I said evenly.

"So Stacy here should be on her way." Victor waved to one of his men. "Make sure she gets where she needs to go, and then return immediately."

"Stacy," I said as if glad to have learned her name, "it was a pleasure. I hope that you will visit Fangtasia on another night," I lied.

"Yeah," she grinned dreamily before Victor's goon grabbed her arm and led her out the door.

Good riddance.

I glanced at Victor and thought about my plans for the next few hours.

It would be good riddance—indeed.

But the trouble with plans—especially those that involved killing one's Regent—was that there was almost always an unpleasant part to them.

Especially with a vampire like Victor, a direct attack wouldn't be prudent. To defeat him, I would need Victor's help; I'd need him to let his guard down.

Victor would need to think that he was in the ascendancy, on the way to a victory of his own. And—when he did—he would be vulnerable.

Before that, I would have to make myself vulnerable by placing the most important thing in my life—Sookie—before him on a golden platter!

And that meant that my plan could backfire.

However, I was counting on Victor's patience and his "Bond villain persona"—for lack of a better description. Victor was known for enjoying his conquests—for reveling in dragging out any time he spent "punishing" them.

In fact, Victor had been "punishing" me for months—torturing me with endless paperwork and hoops to jump through. He knew that his passive aggressive attacks on me would provoke me much worse than a direct assault, so he'd taken great pleasure in them.

But I was determined to get the last laugh. But to do that, I would have to risk everything.

SOOKIE POV

9:36 P.M.

I'd spent the car ride to Shreveport telling Thalia what she needed to know about my and Eric's plan—and what we needed her to do.

Luckily, she seemed up for the challenge.

Anxious even.

Supes and bloodlust—I should have known.

Thalia drove even more quickly—and recklessly—than Eric did.

However, she'd slowed down as we'd approached Shreveport—likely so that we wouldn't arrive too
As if she were the mind reader, she looked at me in the rearview mirror. "We are to arrive at Fangtasia at 9:55 P.M.," she stated. "Not a moment before."

"Okay—um—that gives me time to broach Plan B with you," I said, mustering my courage.

"Plan B?" she asked.

"If Eric dies, he wants you to take me—to bond with me," I said, my voice catching on each word as I quite literally winced at the possibility of Eric dying.

"He has progeny. Why not them?" Thalia asked.

I sighed, recalling Eric's words from the night before. "Eric loves his children, but he thinks Pam's too young to protect me. Plus, she has a new child of her own. And—as for Karin? Well, they've been estranged." I took a deep breath. "He trusts your strength, and I trust that you would have no personal interest in me."

"You helped to decide on Plan B?" she asked with a bit of amusement in her tone.

"Just the 'who.' I didn't want to discuss Plan B at all. I didn't want to imagine the need for it," I said honestly—and a little stubbornly.

"If Eric dies, I will leave this area—and likely this continent," she returned. "At least for a while."

I nodded. "Okay. I won't give you any argument—or trouble."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course, you will be trouble. But a human companion can have benefits too," she contemplated.

"Eric made me promise that I would," I paused, "follow your lead."

There was silence for a moment as the ancient vampiress seemed to be mulling over the request.

"You will be barely seen and almost never heard in my nights," she said with surety. "But I will take you on, and I will endeavor to place us into a situation that will ensure your safety. But—make no mistake—I am not a social animal. You and I would not be friends. You would live your life during the day. I would live a separate one at night. But I would give you my protection when needed. Would this arrangement be acceptable?"

"Yes. Thank you," I whispered.

"You will live a life under the radar," she said sternly. "Understand that before giving me your choice."

"I agree," I said. Honestly, I knew that under the radar was exactly where I'd want to be if Eric wasn't alive. In fact, a very large part of me wondered if I would survive without him.

Eric seemed confident that I would live through the breaking of our bond, but I wondered if I could survive the broken heart that his dying would create within me. I thought of Gran and how sad she'd been after Grandpa Mitchell had died. I couldn't help but to wonder if she would have succumbed to her own broken heart if she'd not had Jason and me to see to. Of course, there was also the Fintan factor. Had her relationship with him made a difference in her love for Grandpa Mitchell?
Now that I had Eric—really had him—I doubted that I could ever agree to be with another man, even if I had a motive like getting pregnant. That thought made me realize just how different Gran and I were—not that I judged her. Actually, I sort of admired her: to be willing to go that far to have children—to be a mother. I'd certainly never felt compelled to be a mother to that degree—if at all.

I sighed and looked out the window, the blurred image of the trees in the night—ironically enough—making my thoughts sharper. In that moment, I knew that I didn't want to be a mother. I could be one. I even felt that I would make a good one. But the freedom of not being one—the freedom from the worry that having a possibly telepathic child in the Supe world would bring—was enough to make me certain of my decision.

I found myself smiling a little.

And I could see that relieved smile in the reflection of the car window.

"You are happy," Thalia remarked, scrutinizing me from the front seat.


She nodded. "Confidence and peace within one's self is a hard-won thing," she said sagely. "You will make Eric a good companion."

I smiled. "Thank you."

We were silent for a few moments.

"When will Desmond Cataliades provide the distraction?" she asked, obviously ready to turn the conversation back to the night's plans as we drew closer to our destination.

"About 10:45 P.M.," I responded.

She nodded and seemed to be making mental calculations.

I was certain that Desmond and Diantha would provide just the distraction that Eric wanted. And, of course, I would need to do my part too—affecting just the right mixture of righteous indignation and resignation at my punishment.

"Bubba will begin performing at 11:00 P.M.," I added.

Again, she seemed to be making some calculations.

"The fairy blood?" Thalia asked.

I pulled it from my purse and handed it up to her. She quickly pocketed it.

"Niall said that it can't be smelled, but you should check it to be sure," I said, before handing her a vial of clear liquid as well. "This is the potion Amelia made up to cover the scent of the Fae blood. Use this if Niall's magic isn't doing the job."

"You doubt your great-grandfather?" she asked, somewhat surprised and somewhat amused.

"Was that a rhetorical question?" I intoned.

Thalia laughed as if I'd just told the funniest joke in creation. It was the first time I'd heard the
noise from her. I immediately wished that I hadn't.

Thalia looked at me in the rearview mirror. "All questions should be rhetorical—don't you think?" she commented, before chuckling darkly.

Not knowing what to say, I didn't answer, a fact which caused her to laugh again.

"Um," I started when she'd finally stopped laughing, "do you think Jock will be a problem?" It wasn't a rhetorical question. Luckily, she answered.

"No—as soon as the demons enter, I will have him go to the storeroom to get the second case of Royalty Blended. At that time, I will lace the appropriate glasses."

"How will you make sure that the right people get the right glasses?" I asked.

"I will glamour the waitresses as needed," she said simply.

"How? When?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Surely you have realized that older vampires do not have to voice their desires when they glamour," she said drolly.

I frowned. Come to think of it, I did know that. Eric had, after all, tried to use glamour on me the first time he'd seen me. I'd felt it against my thoughts. And he'd not said a word.

"When does that ability kick in?" I asked.

She shrugged. "For all vampires, it is different, but it is uncommon to see one younger than eight hundred or so with the ability to glamour in such a way. It is called 'pushing' actually. And most vampires—even older ones—continue to voice their desires during glamour. It's a habit that is hard to break—I suppose. But don't worry. Especially in the weak-minded—and trust me when I tell you that most of the Fangtasia waitresses are that—it is easy to 'push.'"

"So you'll just push them to give the tainted glasses to Victor's people," I commented.

"Indeed—and those whom I suspect are his spies," she added.

I frowned. "Spies? You mean—like Jock? There are more?"

She nodded. "Fifteen vampires have checked in to Area 5 since the takeover. Some are Eric's allies, whom he's asked to come to the area for additional support. A few are innocuous—relocating here for completely innocent reasons. But half a dozen are Victor's people."

"Eric told you that?" I asked.

She chuckled. "The Norseman is wise, and I do respect him—but I trust my own judgment when it comes to determining a friend from a foe."

"So you told him—about the spies?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Why would I need to?"

"Does he know about them?" I asked, suddenly concerned.

"That is a rhetorical question!" she exclaimed, laughing loudly. "You are quite funny! Plan B might not be such a hardship, after all—though I'd prefer it if the Norseman lived."
Again, Thalia's laughter was a scary sound, but I felt like she was conveying—although somewhat creepily—that Eric didn't need her help knowing what Victor was up to.

Given the fact that she was controlling the distribution of the Fae blood—and, therefore, who would likely die that night—I decided not to tell her that my question hadn't been rhetorical.

"Would you become a sheriff for Eric?" I asked. "If he becomes king?"

Her laughter died immediately, and she looked at me through the rearview mirror again.

"That is a rhetorical question too," she stated flatly.

"Okay," I responded. "Eric figured that would be the case." Clearly, her answer was a resounding "no."

Thalia looked over her shoulder at me.

"I will step in whenever necessary to protect Eric and you from outside enemies. But I enjoy my solitary life too much to give it up," she shared.

I smiled at her. "Bon Temps is very solitary. And I won't be using my house there for the foreseeable future. Would you like to use it?" I asked her.

"I thought your fairy kin lived there," she commented.

"Not any more. And—with Amelia's magic—only people I invite can get in. I've already uninvited Claude and Dermot—and Niall after his visit earlier," I conveyed.

She frowned. "You are really offering to make me your tenant?"

I chuckled. "No. I wouldn't expect rent. You could make one of the rooms light-tight if you wanted. And you could upgrade the security if you didn't trust Amelia's spell—though I think it's probably pretty good. Honestly, I hate to think of the old place not having anyone living in it, and I can't think of anyone better to do that," I offered sincerely.

"I have already agreed to help you. You cannot bribe me to become sheriff with the promise of a secluded residence," she scowled.

I almost choked on my laughter. "My old house is hardly a good bribe! I just thought it might suit you."

The vampiress contemplated for a minute.

"Anyway—you have already agreed to Plan B, and that's a whole lot! I owe you for that."

She scoffed. "That won't be needed."

"I hope not," I sighed, looking out the window again. "Thank you, Thalia. For everything," I told her.

She shrugged. "Victor Madden is inferior to Eric. So is de Castro."

I shook my head and smiled. For Thalia, choices seemed to be quite easy. I would have envied her if my own choices hadn't been becoming more and more easier during the last couple of days.
Chapter 24: Don't Be Cruel

ERIC POV

After listening to Thalia's terse Greek explanation of her plans for the evening, I dismissed her from my office and looked at my bonded, who was standing nervously before me.

It was 9:58 P.M.—two minutes before Sookie's "punishment" was to begin. As instructed, Thalia arrived with my bonded at precisely 9:55 P.M.—after having "stalled" by "taking a scenic route." She'd been able to confirm that one vehicle with two Weres inside had followed her—Alcide's people.

"This is not going to be pleasant," I whispered to Sookie, even as I stroked her cheek lightly. It would be the only intimate gesture I would allow myself until after Victor and his people were dead.

"I know," she returned. "But it won't last long."

"No—it won't," I agreed.

"Ready?" she asked me.

"No," I returned. "I don't want to do this part."

"And that's why I love you," she smiled. "Well—one of the reasons. I also love you because you are going to do it anyway."

"Yes—I am," I sighed.

VICTOR POV

I was aflutter with excitement. Eric Northman would be dead by the end of the night, and Sookie Stackhouse would belong to me!

I looked around me as I sipped my second Royalty Blended.

I reveled in the fact that the tacky club was on the decline thanks to competition from my own new establishment in Area 5. I was also gratified to see that all of my people were in place. In addition to Jock, I'd planted six other vampires in the area, though they knew better than to acknowledge me beyond the usual respect afforded to a Regent.

I noticed Hank, the guard who had delivered Stacy to Compton so that she could deliver Northman's hair, entering the bar. He gave me a short nod before taking his customary place behind me.

I smiled to myself. Counting Jock, I now had ten loyal vampires in Fangtasia and three more outside as back-up. Northman's remaining ragtag group added up to twenty-two, though only about a half dozen of them were absolutely loyal to the Viking, according to Jock. Quite a few of the "neutral" vampires were recent transplants to Area 5; thus, they likely would feel only indifference when Northman died. Regardless—soon—any of Area 5's subject that didn't bow down to me would be dead just like the current sheriff.
Speaking of Northman, he blustered into the room with Sookie trailing him.

True to form, the telepath was looking more defiant than contrite, which I felt would serve my ultimate purposes well enough—though it would be hard to hide my hard-on at the site of her insolence to the Viking.

And her punishment for that defiance.

I'd contemplated inviting the weretiger for the "show," but I'd decided that Quinn's presence might complicate matters in Sookie's mind. Plus, there was no need offering him up as another potential "hero." Still—I regretted not having the tiger present. It was so fun to watch Quinn lose his composure. His ungodly purple eyes would change to yellow at the drop of a fucking hat! It was a hilarious sight!

Plus, there would have been the chance of having a "cat fight" between the tiger and the Viking. Oh well. Quinn's absence was a relatively small disappointment—all things considered.

Similarly, it was a pity that Compton wasn't there. It would have been fun watching him deal with Sookie's punishment too. However, he would have likely given away his connection to me or Felipe because of his unnatural emotional attachment to the telepath.

Despite not having Quinn or Compton at Fangtasia, I knew I'd have plenty of fun. And my plans for later would be even more gratifying. After I secretly enjoyed Sookie's ordeal—but outwardly conveyed compassion for the telepath—Northman and I would go hunting for Ms. Pelt.

I smiled to myself.

Of course, Eric had no idea that he was the one who was truly going to be hunted. My personal guards and several of my most trusted vampires would be following us. And—once Northman and I were away from "civilization"—they would move in, and Northman would be slain.

I hated to admit it, but Eric was stronger than I was—because of his age. Thus, I wouldn't be able to deal with him alone as I would have preferred. However, I was willing to give up the death strike—if necessary—as long as Northman was gone by the end the night.

And then I would collect Sookie.

I glanced at the Viking. He seemed distracted by his bonded. That was a good thing.

Hopefully, he'd be distracted by the hunt too. Indeed, concentrating on finding Sandra Pelt, he would be vulnerable. And—between me and my six comrades—I was certain that we would be able to easily take him out, despite his thousand years. And Ms. Pelt would be the perfect pansy to frame for the "crime."

"My bonded, Sookie Stackhouse, is present to receive punishment for defying me," Eric announced to the crowd of vampires as soon as he'd taken his ridiculous throne.

I was also sitting on the dais—though in a less "gaudy" chair. I made sure that I was looking at Sookie with pity and compassion in my eyes.

Sadly, she wasn't paying any attention to me. She was too busy staring daggers at Northman.

"You will kneel," Northman told his bonded in a cold tone. "You will show me proper deference."

Sookie jutted out her chin defiantly.
"If you don't kneel voluntarily, I will make you strip off your clothing and then do so," Northman said almost casually.

I grew harder just thinking about her kneeling while nude.

A tear fell down Sookie's cheek. I wondered if it were from anger or fear. Whatever had caused it, she took to her knees before the sheriff.

"I hate you," she muttered.

"Your feelings don't matter, pet," Northman said cruelly—before he apparently caused her pain through their bond. The Viking seemed extremely pleased with himself as she writhed on the floor—her face the picture of agony.

"I'm not a pet," she seethed through her pain.

"Funny that you mention that," Northman said before motioning toward his new second, Thalia. The sour-faced vampiress approached the dais with a dog collar.

"Put it on," Northman ordered his bonded after Thalia had placed the object onto the floor in front of her.

"No," she muttered.

"Put it on, or I will strip you and whip you and then put it on you myself," the Viking said. "Not to mention the pain I will bring you through the bond. You know that I can make you heel when I require," he reminded with a self-satisfied look. "I believe you smart enough to recognize that you are powerless here."

"And I believe you know that I hate you," she reiterated, even as she moved to put on the collar.

"Your feelings truly are immaterial to me now, my lover," Northman leered, even as he reached behind his throne and pulled out a chain. Within moments, he'd attached that object to Sookie's collar.

"You will sit here like this with me every night for the foreseeable future," he said steadily. "You will use your telepathy to warn me of any danger. From now on, you will not leave my sight—unless I decide to allow another vampire to enjoy you," he added, glancing at me.

It was safe to say that I was even harder than before.

Sookie looked at her bonded with wide, horror-filled eyes. "You wouldn't!"

"I wouldn't have," Eric corrected. "But then you decided that our bond didn't suit you. So you must learn to appreciate me," he added in a steely voice before looking around the room.

After a few moments, his eyes settled upon me. "Victor, you are my honored guest and Regent. Would you care to enjoy my bonded? I believe a fuck and a feed would do her some good."

Surprised, I looked at Sookie, whose eyes were now on mine—and pleading.

It was time for me to be her hero. But it was hard to do so—in more than one way!

"No thank you," I said after reminding myself that I needed to be patient and follow my plan.
Sookie looked at me with surprise and then gratitude.

It was gratifying.

"I already fed and had my fill of pleasure tonight—in anticipation of our upcoming hunt," I added to explain my decision.

Northman, too, looked surprised at my response. "I had thought that you desired my bonded," he leered.

"Certainly, Sookie is attractive and worthy of interest," I returned, nodding at the woman. "But I do not want to take her by force."

Northman shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, even as a commotion could be heard toward the door to the club.

I was surprised to see Desmond Cataliades there. He was flanked by one of his nieces. I'd forgotten which of the "flowers" had died and which had lived. It didn't really matter, however.

"Demon? We are having a private," Northman paused, "party. Do you have business here?"

"I am here to demand that you set my godchild free," the part-demon emphasized.

"Godchild?" I asked.

"Miss Stackhouse," he clarified.

"Explain!" Northman demanded, before I could demand the same.

"The fairy, Fintan Brigant, was Sookie's grandfather. He was also my closest friend. He named me Sookie's godfather."

"What?" Sookie herself asked, clearly surprised.

"I am sorry I haven't claimed you before," the part-demon said compassionately as he looked down at the kneeling telepath. "However, it seemed better to cover up your lineage—until tonight," he added, glaring at the Viking.

I could hear the rumbling of several vampires in the room as they recognized the name "Brigant." Some of them pulled out their phones and could be seen texting. Undoubtedly, Sookie's bloodline would be fodder for the Supe rumor mills within a few minutes—as would the demon's "claiming" of the telepath as a goddaughter.

To his credit, Eric seemed to take the news in stride, though he was clearly surprised by it. "You are aware that Sookie is my bonded," he emphasized.

"Yes," Cataliades said stiffly.

"And she is also my pledged," Eric observed.

"Yes. I know these things," the lawyer grunted.

"Therefore, it is my right to punish her—my duty—given her disobedience of me."

"But she is a fairy princess!" Cataliades yelled out, drawing a gasp from many of those present.
I could see that more vampires had their phones out now.

"Are you challenging my right to punish my bonded as I see fit?" Eric asked gruffly.

Mr. Cataliades took a step back—both literally and symbolically. The part-demon had no choice but to recognize a blood bond. "I ask for mercy on her behalf. The girl lacks experience. She didn't know that her notion of breaking the bond was so forbidden in our world."

Eric looked at the demon coldly. "Am I not already being merciful?" he asked, looking down at Sookie coldly. "I've not physically injured her."

"You humiliate her by making her kneel—by making her wear a collar like a common pet! She is the granddaughter of Niall Brigant!"

Again, there was a murmur throughout the crowd. Many who didn't know the significance of the Brigant surname had likely heard the name "Niall" before.

"I know who and what she is," Eric snarled. "And when she acts like an animal, I will treat her like one. Thus, for the time being, she will stay on her knees next to me!"

Mr. Cataliades looked upset. "If she is physically harmed, vampire, there will be consequences," he said before giving Sookie one last look and storming out of the bar with the "flower" in tow.

"The plot thickens," I said to Northman once the demons were gone.

"It is nothing that I was not expecting," Eric sighed. "Of course, I'd thought it would be Sookie's fairy kin rather than a demon godfather who would challenge my authority over her, but," he shrugged, "'tis of little matter who did it. Sookie is mine and will stay mine," he said confidently—over-confidently—as he looked down at the still-kneeling blonde. It was clear that it had taken all of her resolve not to speak up when her demon godfather had been in the club.

"You should be careful not to make too many powerful enemies," I told Northman with a smirk.

He simply shrugged and then motioned toward his second.

"Is he here?" he asked Thalia.

The vampiress nodded.

"Bubba is here?" I inquired, looking around.

"He will be ready at 11:00 P.M. as planned," Thalia said.

Northman nodded and then looked at Jock. "Excellent. Make sure all vampires get a glass of Royalty before the show," Northman ordered.

There was a murmur throughout the club as Jock nodded and began pouring drinks for the waitresses to distribute.

Eric sighed. "As a club owner yourself, you must be as concerned as I am that Royalty Blended is becoming more scarce."

"Yes, it is a pity," I said. "But that does add to its value."

"But you indicated that you were sated when you turned down Sookie," he frowned, looking at my goblet. "I don't suppose you'll want any more."

"Are you challenging my right to punish my bonded as I see fit?" Eric asked gruffly.

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"Yes, it is a pity," I said. "But that does add to its value."

"But you indicated that you were sated when you turned down Sookie," he frowned, looking at my goblet. "I don't suppose you'll want any more."
I glanced at Sookie, who was watching me curiously from her knees. Honestly, she looked pretty damned good there.

"I will take some more—since you went to so much bother to secure it," I said.

"Jock!" Eric yelled out. "Another goblet for the Regent."

Within moments, the drink had been delivered to me. The other vampires now all had drinks in their hands as well.

Eric stood and looked around at the gathered crowd. "Please, I must ask that you all turn off your phones now and put them away. You know how skittish Bubba can be."

Immediately, all of the vampires in the bar complied. The information that Bubba would be performing had already circulated among them, and none of them wanted to do anything to fuck things up.

"You know me to be a fair ruler!" Northman said with a raised voice. "Many of you admire my bonded for the help she has offered to our kind in the past. It is because of that help that I have kept her punishment mild." He looked down at Sookie, his eyes softening a touch. "I love this woman."

There were a few gasps throughout the room at his confession.

"But I won't have her undermine me!" Northman's voice stormed a second later, causing Sookie to shrink away in fear.

A moment later, his tone was measured again. "There is such a thin line between love and hate," he said in barely a whisper—as he looked at his bonded. "You must respect me. Revere me. However, a line between us has now been forever erased," he added significantly. "That line is trust."

For her part, Sookie looked petrified.

"Yes!" Eric said more loudly, once again addressing all the vampires in the room. "Respect, reverence, and trust are what I require from Area 5 subjects! But," his voice softened as he raised his glass, "in return, I offer the spoils of success! Let us drink to that—and to loyalty!" he proclaimed, looking down at the woman on her knees before him as he took a drink.

As one, everyone in the room drank immediately after him, many murmuring their appreciation as they did so.

And—with that—Bubba himself appeared on stage.

I gasped as I watched the crooner stand behind the microphone.

"Do you have a request?" Northman asked. "I'm sure that Bubba would accommodate you."

Star-struck, I shook my head. "No. Any song Bubba chooses will be fine."

"Singer's choice then," Eric said, as he nodded at Bubba.

"Thank you. Thank you—very much," Bubba said as he began playing the first notes of "Heartbreak Hotel."

I will admit to the fact that I felt giddy as I sat back in my seat and continued to sip my blood as I listened to Bubba sing. In fact, I'm pretty sure that my legs bounced with excitement, though I tried to hide that fact. By the time Bubba began "Don't Be Cruel," I felt downright light-headed.
And it was then that I realized that I was light-headed.

Abnormally so.

I looked down at my glass.

Drunk. I was drunk.

Fairy blood?

Fairy blood!

But how? I couldn't smell it!

I looked at Northman, but there seemed to be more than one of him.

The Viking was looking back at me—his gaze cold and hard. And then triumphant. He yelled out a single word: "Now!"

It was the last word I heard.

And his sword, which seemed to appear out of nowhere, was the last thing I saw.
Chapter 25: A Good Shop-Vac

APPROXIMATELY AN HOUR LATER—12:04 A.M.

ERIC POV

"It was Sandra Pelt, Your Majesty," I said calmly, even as I looked at the Were bitch. She was struggling to break free of the silver chains I'd had her restrained in.

Fortunately, she was also gagged.

With one of Pam's creations—a ball-gag coated with silver.

Though Weres didn't have the same reaction to silver as vampires did—which was a pity—Sandra was clearly in pain because of the silver holding her down and keeping her mostly quiet.

"What?" the king asked.

"Ms. Pelt led a group of Weres and fairies into Fangtasia. They attacked while Sookie was being punished. I'm afraid that Victor is dead."

"What?! How?!" Felipe demanded angrily. "How could you have allowed this to happen?"

"I'm afraid I was slightly incapacitated at the time, so our enemies had the upper hand for a few minutes. In addition to Victor, eleven others were killed."

"Incapacitated? You? How?" Felipe demanded. "How the fuck did you allow Weres to get the upper hand on you?"

"Weres and fairies," I reminded.

"Fine! How?" he questioned again.

"I ordered some Royalty Blended to honor Victor's presence. It seems that the beverage was laced with fairy blood, which caused me and many others to be," I paused, "inefficient at taking care of the threat."

"Fairy blood!" the king gasped.

"Indeed, I suspect that Victor told you of an incident at his own club the other night when someone tried to give Pam and myself fairy-laced blood."

"No. He didn't," Felipe returned in a clipped tone.

"Oh!" I said, feigning surprise. "I would have thought that Victor had told you. Perhaps, he felt that the matter had been contained."

"Well—if you knew of a possible threat, then why were you not more careful about your own blood supply?" he accused.

"I'm afraid that my bartender may have been in collusion with the attacking fairies and Weres—or he was simply incompetent. Or," I paused, working hard to keep the amusement out of my tone,
"perhaps the Fae have figured out a way to conceal their scent!"

"What!" Felipe yelled out. "Is that even possible?"

"Well—Niall can hinder his scent when he is in my presence," I shared. "Perhaps, that Fae ability goes farther than I thought."

"You think Niall did this? You think he was behind the attack?" the king asked.

I rolled my eyes at the king's inane question and let silence build up as if I were contemplating it.

"Well—Northman! Do you!!"

"No," I said after "considering" for a few more silent seconds. "Though Niall might have been angry that I was punishing Sookie, I cannot fathom that he would have had time to plan the attack I witnessed tonight. Moreover, Niall respects my claim upon Sookie," I added. "And he would understand my need to punish her for threatening the blood bond."

"Really?" he asked skeptically.

"Indeed," I responded. "Niall is old and believes in traditional ways. Plus, if he wanted to kill me, he would do so directly. I can tell you for certain that he wasn't in Fangtasia tonight. Moreover, Sookie seemed to be one of the targets—if not the primary one. And we cannot forget that Sandra Pelt, a known enemy to my bonded, was involved. And that fact would exclude Niall."

I rolled my eyes again. The king should have been quick enough to draw that conclusion for himself. Obviously, his cape must have been tied too tightly around his neck—cutting off blood flow to his brain.

There was a pause. "How—specifically—did Victor die," he asked.

I smiled. A sword wielded by my own hand.

It had been glorious!

The look of shock on Victor's face.

The sound as his body had "splatted" onto the stage.

Followed immediately by the thud of his head hitting the floor.

"Victor was in my office with Sookie when the attack began; although he'd not taken the fairy-tainted blood, he was distracted. Ms. Pelt and a fairy I didn't recognize attacked Sookie and Victor specifically. I am almost certain—as I suggested before—that their aim was to kill Sookie, but Victor protected my bonded valiantly, gravely injuring Ms. Pelt in the process. However, the fairy staked Victor. I am sorry, Your Majesty. I know that the Regent was a valuable asset to you."

The vampire king growled. "Where is Sandra Pelt now? Is she receiving medical aid so that she can be questioned?"

"She is in front of me," I said with a wink at the tied-up Were. "However, like I said, Victor gravely wounded her. I'm afraid she bled out before she could be questioned or treated by Dr. Ludwig."

"Ludwig? You called her in?" Felipe asked.
"Of course," I grinned, turning to the little "troll" who was tapping her foot behind me.

"I want to speak with her!" Felipe demanded.

I winked at Ludwig. "Of course, Your Majesty."

I handed my phone to the "good" doctor.

"What!" Ludwig demanded into the phone.

Secretly, I loved how she had no more reverence for a king than she did for anyone else.

"You treated Sandra Pelt?" Felipe asked.

"Yes," Ludwig answered shortly.

In fact, the doctor had put a Band-Aid on a "cut" Sandra had gotten on one of Thalia's fangs when the Were had tried to get away from the vampiress.

"And?" Felipe followed up.

"There was absolutely nothing I could do to save that girl's life," Ludwig pronounced. "Now—are you done questioning me so that I can finish my work?"

"Are there any Weres or fairies left to question?" Felipe asked her.

"Not that I see," Ludwig said—right after she closed her eyes. Earlier, she did tell me that she refused to lie. It was good that she could be creative about telling the "truth." We had that in common.

"What about Victor's guards?" Felipe asked.

"I could scrape up their remains into Ziploc bags for you," she said dryly.

"Who do you have left to treat?" he asked.

"Sookie's Were guard was concussed," she said, looking at Jannalynn Hopper—who was, indeed, concussed.

Another "truth"—though another misleading one.

Felipe sighed. "Fine! Give Northman back the phone."

I winked at the doctor again and momentarily contemplated acting affronted that Felipe had wanted her report because he didn't believe my word. The doctor held up four fingers and wiggled them, reminding me that I'd agreed to pay her four times her going rate for her time, and then she "popped" away.

"Well—at least you secured adequate medical care," Felipe snarled.

"Ludwig makes up with expertise what she lacks in bedside manner."

"And Victor died protecting your bonded?" he asked, sounding very skeptical.

"Regrettably," I replied.

"Well—where were you when that happened?"
"I was in the club. Unfortunately, I had drunk some of the tainted blood and was caught up longer in the main attack than I would have liked. I had been giving Victor some time alone with my bonded—as part of Sookie's new training."

The line was silent for a moment.

"Victor was with Ms. Stackhouse? Training her?" he asked.

"Yes. As part of my bonded's punishment, I felt it best to humble her and to make it known that vampires who are my superior can have her body and blood when they desire. I felt that Victor would be an ideal first lesson for Sookie in this new reality so that she would be more," I paused, "compliant should Your Majesty decide to partake."

"You expect me to believe this? You—who have always done all you could to keep Sookie to yourself?" he asked with barely controlled rage.

"As I told you last night, Your Majesty," I said evenly, "Sookie Stackhouse has betrayed me, thus killing any affection I may have felt for her. I will see to her needs and protect her. And I will even treat her congenially if her behavior merits it, but I will no longer allow her the latitude I once did."

"Eleven were killed in addition to Victor?" he asked coldly.

"Yes," I returned. "Oh, wait, twelve if I include Jock."

"You will get me a list of those who have met the true death by sundown tomorrow," he instructed in a clipped tone.

"Of course," I said evenly.

"What about the fairies?" he asked. "Did you recognize any of them?"

"I'm afraid not. As I said, Niall was not among the attackers, nor were any of the fairies I've seen in his company before," I returned.

"How many were there?" he asked.

"Fairies? Five that I saw," I responded.

"And how many Weres?" he asked, clearly trying to make me stumble in my story.

"Ten or more," I answered. "I haven't yet studied the video footage; once I do, I can offer you a more accurate count."

"Why attack Sookie at a club full of vampires?" he asked suspiciously. "Surely, there are other places that would have been easier."

"The large number of attackers indicates that the fairies and Weres also wanted to eliminate as many vampires as possible. I don't want to sound too alarmist, but it is possible that Niall's enemies were trying to take revenge on us for killing their leader, Breandan."

"What were the enemy's losses?" Felipe asked.

"About half of the Weres were eliminated. Three fairies were killed, including the one who killed Victor," I reported. "The others withdrew once the tides had turned in our favor."

"So you avenged your Regent—at least," Felipe growled.
"Yes, Your Majesty."

"But you did not protect him."


"I will see to your punishment when I arrive tomorrow night," Felipe growled.

"You are coming here?" I asked, completely unsurprised.

"Yes. Sandy will be in touch with the details," he said.

"Of course, Your Majesty."

"In the meantime, I want you looking into this fairy threat. If these are, indeed, the enemies of your bonded's forbear, then Niall needs to be partly responsible for their eradication. I don't want to risk war with the fairies at large."

"I will do what I can," I responded. "But I must warn you that my relationship with Niall has been tepid ever since Victor prevented me from immediately going after my bonded and preventing her torture at the hands of Neave and Lochlan. As you can imagine, such a slight was seen as betrayal by Niall. Come to think of it, Sookie's disobedience seems to have stemmed from around that time, too. But I do not wish to speak ill of my former Regent's decisions. I'm sure he did as he thought best at the time," I added with full knowledge that Felipe, too, had been frustrated at Victor over the Fairy War situation.

"Have the videos of the attack ready for me to study tomorrow night," he ordered.

"Of course. Despite the unpleasantness, I look forward to your presence and your counsel, Your Majesty," I remarked as I looked at Sandra and then Jannalynn. The latter was still unconscious, but her pulse was strong. The former was still struggling against her bonds. I stepped over Jock's dusty remains and made my way to the dungeon stairs. "Given the situation, I am at a bit of a loss—especially since there may also be an issue with the . . . ." I deliberately stopped my sentence as I paused on the stairs.

"What other issue could there be?" Felipe growled.

I grinned, trying to imagine the be-caped ruler's sour expression. "Well—the part-demon, Desmond Cataliades, showed up at Fangtasia during Sookie's punishment, though before I gave her to Victor for the night. Cataliades claimed to be her godfather, but that was the first I'd heard of it."

"Cataliades is your attorney!" Felipe yelled.

"Yes—but he certainly wasn't here in that capacity tonight."

There was a moment of silence.

"Perhaps the telepath is becoming more trouble than she's worth," Felipe grunted.

"Oh—she is certainly trouble," I said, having to work hard not to let the smirk show in my tone as I continued up the stairs.

"She attracts much attention," he said.

"Indeed," I agreed. "Would you like for me to kill Sookie?" I asked, even as I emerged from the basement and winked at my bonded who was waiting for me in the hallway. "Or I could allow her
to break our bond—cut ties with her."

She stuck out her tongue at me.

I really wanted to put that tongue to better use—for at least a week.

The king's slithery voice interrupted my lascivious thoughts. "Just wait until I fucking get there before you do anything else regarding the telepath!" Felipe yelled before hanging up.

Fat chance of that! I intended to do many things to my bonded that night.

"Oh—he's angry," I said, smirking at my mate.

"Well—you've made a mess of things here," she smirked at me.

"Surely, the shop-vac will clean up most of the ash," I grinned. Vampire remains might be "messy" at first, but once they turned to ash, there was nothing that a high-powered vacuum couldn't accomplish. I thought of Pam; she so liked being the one to perform the clean-up.

She generally sang "I'm Every Woman" by Chaka Khan when she vacuumed.

My amusing, charming child.

Sookie shook her head at me as if to chastise me for being flippant about the body count, but I could tell through the bond that she was also amused.

My grin turned into an earnest smile. I was discovering that it was moments like this one when I felt the most love for Sookie—and the most love from her. It was clear as a bell that she disapproved of killing. It was also clear that she'd come to accept the fact that I had a different attitude about killing enemies than she did. Sookie had finally recognized that what had been happening in Area 5 between Victor and me—and between Felipe and me to a lesser degree—was a war that would inevitably end in violence. And she'd finally trusted that—while she and I were different—we ultimately shared similar notions when it came to the concept of justifiable killing. She'd finally learned that—like her—I wouldn't kill except in the defense of me and mine or in the case of war.

As she smiled up at me, I couldn't help myself. I took her into my arms and kissed her with every bit of passion in my body.

A throat cleared behind us. It was Thalia. Desmond Cataliades stood beside her—his bloody sword still in his hands. Clearly, he'd had "fun" that night too.

"Report," I asked Thalia. I couldn't help but to notice that she held the shop-vac, and it was already full of ash.

Victor and his minions had been "cleaned" up.

I grinned widely.
"All is quiet," Thalia reported. "The remains of Victor's minions have been cleaned up. And I will see to the cleaning up of Jock now," she added with an evil grin as she effortlessly held up the shop-vac.

The ash already inside of the appliance whished a bit as she shook it.

I nodded. "And Indira? Has she called in with her report?"

"Yes. She continues to watch the house where Bill has gone with the witches," Thalia indicated. "The fangbanger arrived with your hair slightly before 10:00 P.M. She stayed to," she paused, "bang Bill. And get fanged."

"Wait!" Sookie exclaimed. "What fangbanger?"

"She seemed quite welcome to the idea of having sex with Bill," Thalia said dryly. "I can't say that I understand that. Though—from what I heard—she was much more attracted to Eric," Thalia directed toward my bonded. "Enthusiastic even."

When had Thalia started channeling Pam? And how could I stop it?!

"What?" Sookie demanded.

"Are you upset that she fucked Bill?" Thalia asked with confusion.

Sookie waved her hand as if she were brushing away Thalia's words—as if they were ridiculous. Then she looked up at me. "She took your hair? Your hair? Where? How?"

I gave a sideways glare to Thalia and then assured my bonded. "Victor used the woman to get a hair sample," I conveyed. "He wanted to test me to see if I would feed from and fuck her. I did feed," I said contritely.

Sookie waved away my words just as she'd done Thalia's.

"The bitch took your hair? Took. Your. Hair?!" she emphasized possessively, looking at my head as if to gauge exactly which strands were gone.

I chuckled. "It's just a few strands of my hair, min kära. And she didn't actually take it. I pulled the strands out myself—after I'd made it look as if she and I had . . . ." I paused.

"Fucked?" Thalia asked with a smirk.

"Yes. Precisely," I said, giving the vampiress another glare. She looked like she was having fun.

Channeling Pam—indeed.

Sookie's anger ratcheted up.

Uh-oh. Luckily, it didn't seem focused at me.
"You mean that Victor brought you a woman—specifically—for you to feed from and fuck!"

I knew better than to try to send my bonded calm at that moment. "Yes," I answered.

She glared at the shop-vac—as if she might open it up and pour out its contents just so that she could stomp on Victor's ashy remains.

"If he weren't already dead, I'd wanna kill him for disrespecting our bond! Our marriage!" she said passionately.
Possessively.

I pulled her to my side. "Even if Victor had been capable of seeing how we truly are together, he wouldn't have understood our bond—or us," I said quietly. "The donor that he brought played a small part that we needed to be played tonight. That Victor provided that piece for us is all the more satisfying—do you not think?" I soothed. "Remember: the witches did need to be taken a piece of my hair for what is to come."

Sookie sighed and leaned further into me. "But you had to make the fangbanger think that you'd had sex with her." She shivered. "And I'm sure that you had to set the scene so that Victor thought so too." She looked up at me. "That must have been awful for you!"

I smiled down at my chosen mate—not because of the disgust coming from her into our bond, but because she did not doubt for a second that interacting with the donor, Stacy, had been disgusting for me.

"Well—at least you fed since the battle was to be happening soon after," my bonded said decisively.

"I knew that you would be angry with me if I didn't," I said a little playfully. "But she left a bad taste in my mouth," I pouted.

Sookie rolled her eyes at me and then giggled. "Spoiled boy."

"Yes," I agreed, bending down to kiss her.

"Please tell me that Bill will smell you on the woman—that he believed he was getting sloppy seconds," Thalia intoned flatly, interrupting my kiss with my bonded.

"Gross, Thalia," Sookie frowned.

The vampiress shrugged. "Only if you are Bill."

Sookie cringed.

"As I was saying before," Thalia smirked at me, "Indira reported that your hair was delivered, and the witches have been going through the motions of prepping for the supposed bond-breaking ceremony. It is almost 12:30. If all goes to plan, the witches will conduct the spell then—as they were instructed. Oh—and, according to Indira, Bill was done with the fangbanger less than ten minutes after she arrived! He glamoured her—likely to think that she had been satisfied when she clearly was not—and sent her away in a taxi."

"Ten minutes?" Mr. Cataliades asked, joining the conversation.

"Less than. It seems lacking to you too?" Thalia asked him.
"Indeed." Mr. Cataliades confirmed. "Even when Eric was faking it with the young donor, he gave
the girl twenty minutes of his time."

"Oh?" Thalia asked.

"Yes. The bar was abuzz with gossip while I was claiming Sookie as my goddaughter," the demon
shared before looking at Sookie. "Do not worry. Most of the vampires thought that she looked like
a cheaper version of you."

"She probably was cheaper—or at least less of a trouble-attractor," Thalia commented a smirk.

"Enough!" I said with exasperation.

Of course, the two ignored me. Perhaps, they were practicing a comedy routine.

"Still—just ten minutes?" Mr. Cataliades asked.

"Less," Thalia reminded with emphasis.

Maybe they had rehearsed their routine?

"Only 7.5 minutes from the time the fangbanger arrived to the time she left, according to Indira," Thalia added. "And the hair transfer was included into that time too."

"Surely that was not part of the sex act!" Mr. Cataliades exclaimed. "That would be kinky indeed!"

"Enough!" Sookie yelled out, putting her hands over her ears. "Seriously! Gross!"

Both supernaturals looked at her indulgently, though they—gratefully—shut their mouths.

"And now?" I asked. "What is Bill doing now?"

Thalia rolled her eyes. "He is getting antsy, according to Indira. He keeps on checking his phone,
though he has yet to try to make any calls out on it—not that he could because of the signal
scrambler Indira activated at 11:00 P.M."

I nodded. That had been right before Bubba started his performance—right before we'd attacked
Victor and his people. Similarly, Thalia had activated a device in Fangtasia to eliminate the
possibility of calls originating from the club during the fight.

In the modern world, I knew that whoever controlled the information, controlled the "game."

After the fight was over and only my trusted vampires were left in Fangtasia, the device blocking
phone signals was turned off, and my people began spreading the "official story." Gossip could be
very useful after all—as long as it was controlled gossip.

And as for the "official story?"

Well—it was just logical enough to be believable and just astounding enough to be doubttable—the
perfect combination. Officially the story was to be told—and embellished as followed: 1.) because
of fairy blood lacing our Royalty Blended, the vampires in the club had become intoxicated; 2.)
having succumbed to the euphoria brought on by the tainted blood and Bubba's performance, we
did not initially recognize that we were being "attacked" by a group of Weres and fairies; 3.) the
bartender—the rat-bastard—seemed to have been in collusion with the attacking group; 4.) after a
few moments to get ourselves together as we were able, the Area 5 vampires fought back valiantly;
5.) many Louisiana vampires perished, including the Regent, who had been "with" Sookie at the
time; 6.) ultimately, "our" side prevailed.

I instructed my people to offer whatever details they liked—as long as they fit the overall narrative and were "rambling" in nature. I encouraged them all to claim to be the hero or heroine of the tale—even if they had done little during the fight. The more invested they were—and the more self-interested—the better. Moreover, the more versions of the story, the better. After all, we had all been "drunk" during the fight.

Plus, I encouraged them to feel free to discuss the "aftermath"—since we had "sobered up" by then because of the battle we had endured. I "encouraged" them to all brag about "battle wounds." Of course—with vampires, such injuries could neither be proven nor disproven.

As for Bill? I had felt that it was better to make sure that he was kept in the dark until I saw fit; in truth, I did not want to risk him talking to Felipe until later. Honestly, I did not know how much Felipe knew about Victor's plans or Bill's involvement in them, but I did know that—if Bill learned that Victor was dead—he might call Felipe immediately and tell him everything. And I did not want to risk Felipe ordering Bill not to go through with the "severing" spell. On the contrary, by the end of the night, I wanted both of them to believe that the spell had been conducted and had worked.

"According to Indira, Bill seems to be counting down the minutes until the witches perform the spell," Thalia informed, breaking me from my thoughts.

I nodded. "As planned, send Rasul to Bill after the spell is completed. Remind Rasul to give Bill the 'official' story, but with the addition that I became incapacitated a little after 12:30 A.M. Once Bill learns that Victor is dead and believes me to be harmed because of the severing spell, his first impulse may be to do something asinine—like searching for Sookie. Make sure that Rasul suggests that Bill inform Felipe in order to seek counsel from the king before doing anything else. And make sure that Indira knows to turn off the scrambler once Rasul arrives."

Thalia nodded and lifted up the shop vac, shaking it again. "I'll just finish the cleaning and then discuss matters with Rasul."

I nodded, motioning toward the basement door. "Jock awaits you," I said morbidly—for which I got a swat on the arm from Sookie. And for that swat, she got a long kiss.

Gods, how the woman could rile me with a mere touch—albeit an aggressive one!

I let Sookie up for air in time to see Mr. Cataliades opening the door to the basement/dungeon for Thalia so that my temporary second could see to Jock's remains.

After the battle had started, the bartender had proven himself a "better" coward than a spy, and he had tried to flee and call Felipe. However, Thalia had intercepted him just as his call failed to connect, and then she had ripped off his hands. I'd had "fun" questioning Jock to make sure that I had discovered all of Victor's minions in my area.

I smiled. Victor may have had his spies, but my spy had been better. Rasul had been an invaluable source of information regarding the Regent, and the information garnered from Jock was even less than Rasul had already given to me.

And I was certain that Jock had given me all the information that he could. There were ashy parts of him all over the dungeon as evidence of my "coercive tactics."

If only I had been able to have had as much fun with Victor.
"What about Alcide's people?" Sookie asked me after she had caught her breath from our kiss.

I took a moment to try to understand Sookie’s concern for them before I responded. "The one called Jannalynn was colluding with Sandra Pelt to kill you, so she is currently in the basement awaiting questioning. The other so-called guard was found waiting in his automobile. Completely useless."

"And?" Sookie asked with challenge.

"And I had Palomino glamour him," I told my kind-hearted bonded. "That Were will remember seeing Sandra, Jannalynn, and other Weres entering the club with some fairies before he was knocked out."

"Was he really knocked out?" Sookie asked.

"I made sure that he would not be damaged permanently," I said enigmatically. In truth, a little "brain damage" might do the inefficient Were some good.

"Thank you," Sookie told me, even as she took my hand and squeezed it.

"Tomorrow night will be more difficult than tonight," I said quietly.

"I know," my bonded answered.

I leaned down to kiss her forehead. "Tonight was only as easy as it was because of your idea to use fairy blood to lace the glasses of Victor and his people."

"Well, he tried to do it to you and Pam," Sookie said stubbornly—though a little guiltily. I could tell that she was once again regretting all the killing that had been done that night, but it had to be done. "At least they got to be buzzed so most of them never saw it coming," she muttered to herself as a kind of consolation.

And Sookie was right. Most of them had not seen their deaths coming.

Except for Victor.

I had made sure that he knew exactly who was the agent of his death!

Me! Eric. Fucking. Northman!

As Bubba had sung, I had watched Victor closely as his eyes had become slightly unfocused. I was gratified that he did have a moment of recognition in the end—despite the Fae blood he'd ingested. In an ideal world, I could have taken my time with him. And I would have thoroughly enjoyed it, too! But—since I'd struck quickly—my loyal subjects had recognized that they needed to do so as well. Though none of them were in on the plan except for Thalia, they had quickly joined in the fray—moments after Thalia had quite literally dropped a box of stakes in the area where most of my subjects stood.

Talk about dropping the symbolical gauntlet!

In thanks to the quality of vampires my area attracted, my people intuited enough to quickly recognize whom we needed to eliminate. I was especially impressed by Maxwell Lee, who had been a loyal subject for many years, and Palomino, who'd moved to Area 5 after Hurricane Katrina had decimated her nest. I had been surprised to see Molly wield a stake with tremendous accuracy. And even Bubba had joined in the fray—initially using his microphone stand as an impaling weapon before grabbing a stake and finishing off his victim.
I smiled a little. Indeed, I had been impressed by how quickly those who were loyal to me acted. It was as if they had been looking for something to happen. Likely, they had been waiting for me to make a move against Victor (whom they called "Prictor" among themselves). After all, it was well-known among them that the Regent had been trying to undermine me at every turn—and there were a limited number of "turns" that a Viking was willing to make before he or she killed.

Speaking of killing—as I had "offed" Victor, I eliminated two of his guards before they could even register that their charge had been attacked. The third guard, who was clearly not as drunk as the other two, tried to attack me from behind, but my bonded—amazing warrior that she was when required—took him out with a stake that had been hidden in her clothing.

All told, the battle had lasted less than a minute, and none of my people had been injured thanks to the fact that Thalia had been extremely precise and accurate in ensuring who received the incapacitating Fae blood.

In fact, the whole battle had been so easy that it had seemed like we were cheating! Part of me hoped that the next night—during which de Castro would be dealt with—would be just as easy. But—then again—the fighter in me longed for a much more challenging and satisfying battle.

I glanced at Mr. Cataliades, who was leaning casually against the hall wall and seemingly content to wait patiently for whatever came "next."

I envied him a little. As the fight had been occurring in Fangtasia, he and Diantha had joined Rasul outside the club in fighting against Victor's other two people. That battle had lasted several minutes, according to Rasul. And, clearly, it had been much more stimulating.

I sighed. At least I'd gotten to go "hunting" for Sandra Pelt, whom Thalia and I had caught skulking around with Jannalynn Hopper, whom I knew was dating Sookie's shifter ex-boss. My temporary second and I had toyed with them for a few minutes before I knocked out Jannalynn and we brought both of the Were bitches to the dungeon. That was when poor Ms. Pelt "scratched" herself on Thalia's fang—completely accidentally, of course.

While I was silently reviewing the events of the evening up to that point, Sookie kept hold of me, embracing me tightly as a myriad of emotions swept through her. Whereas I was gratified—if somewhat disappointed because of the quickness of the battle—Sookie's emotions pinged around like a ball in a pinball machine. She felt relief. She felt love for me. She felt disgust. She felt guilt over all the killing. She felt anger. She felt sadness. She felt lust. She felt happy. She felt hungry. And she felt tired.

She was a complicated creature. And I loved her all the more for it.

"I should help you question Sandra and Jannalynn," Sookie sighed, as she looked up at me.

"You do not have to," I told her softly.

"I need to—for Sam," she responded. "I know y'all caught Jannalynn with Sandra, but Sam really likes her, and if there's any possibility that she's not as guilty as she looks, I need to find that out," she added with determination.

"Sookie," Mr. Cataliades said gently, reminding her that he was still nearby. "Will you entrust me with the task?" he asked with a barely noticeable gesture to his head.

I guess that answered my question about whether or not he was a telepath.

"If you are needed, I will call you," I said to my bonded softly. "There is no need for you to hear
the venom in Sandra Pelt's addled brain. And I swear to you that—if Merlotte's girlfriend is redeemable—she will not be harmed in any way. I will glamour her and send her on her way."

My mate sighed even more deeply than before. "I'm not sure I like the idea of the two of you teaming up and trying to shelter me from things," she said somewhat accusingly.

"We are not doing that," Mr. Cataliades returned soothingly. "We are merely offering to complete a task that goes against your nature. If you want, you can participate. No one is stopping you," he added evenly—almost indifferently.

Given the softening of Sookie's stubborn look, I knew I was going to be taking notes from the part-demon about how to "handle" my bonded.

Sookie looked back and forth between me and Mr. Cataliades for a moment. "Okay. But call me if you need me?" she asked. "And—if Jannalynn turns out to be bad, I need to be the one to tell Sam," she added demonstrating that her stubbornness was still there to a certain extent. "And I need to be able to tell him that it was quick."

"Agreed," I said as I bent down to place a soft kiss on Sookie's forehead.

"Thanks," she smiled up at me. "I needed that kiss."

"You'll get more later," I smiled after giving her a quick peck on the lips. "Meanwhile, there is some food for you in my office," I told my bonded. "Feel free to partake while Mr. Cataliades and I question the Weres."

When Sookie looked at me with a question in her eyes, I shrugged. "Mustapha hated Victor too—as you know. And he wanted to join in the fight, but having Weres in the club might have made Victor suspicious. Still—I was able to give Mustapha an essential task."

"So you had him get me food?" she asked incredulously.

"Sonic," I clarified. "I know you enjoy that restaurant."

She chuckled. "Yeah. It's my favorite fast food."

"A chili cheese Coney, an order of tater tots, and a cherry vanilla Dr. Pepper await you," I said.

My bonded shook her head, probably because of the fact that I recalled her favorite order at the eating establishment.

"I have perfect recall," I said matter-of-factly.

"Yes you do," she said before rising up on her tip-toes to nip my lips. "But I know that you hate the smell of fast food, especially the tater tots," she whispered.

"Yes—absolutely." I agreed. "The oil they are prepared in is likely months old. And I smell no potatoes when you eat them. And it is my understanding that they should be made from that vegetable." I frowned. "However, you were too nervous to eat dinner before, and I knew you would require sustenance. Comfort food."

"How do you know that I was too nervous to eat earlier?" she asked with a smirk.

"I know you," I returned.

She tip-toed her way up to another brief kiss.
"Those tater tots are delicious. You're just jealous you can't eat them," she whispered.

I chuckled. "Keep telling yourself that they are food. I—for one—am not certain."

She giggled. "Well—a vampire as old as dirt wouldn't know a good tater tot if it hit him upside the head."

I cringed dramatically. "Shhh, min kära, do not give potential enemies any ideas about new weapons that could be developed against vampires." I winked at her.

She giggled a little louder and rewarded me with another peck.

"Mustapha, Maxwell Lee, and Palomino will look after you while we're busy," I assured her.

"No violence—okay?" Sookie implored.

I lifted a brow.

"What I mean is no torture—not unless you have to," she corrected.

I sighed. "Not unless we have to," I relented.

"And—even Sandra. I know that she . . . ." Sookie stopped for a moment. "I know that you will likely have to kill her because she'd never stop trying to kill me otherwise. But do that one quick too. Okay?"

I sighed. I really, really wanted to torture someone! More than I'd tortured Jock, that is.

"Fine," I conceded.

"I'll let you take your bloodlust out on me later—okay?" Sookie said, half-seriously and half-playfully. Clearly, the idea of more deaths that night was preying upon her, but she was trying to accept the necessity of them.

And that made all the difference in the world to me.

"They will be treated better than they deserve," I promised my bonded.

She nodded. "Okay."

"I'll come to you soon," I said before Mr. Cataliades and I moved toward the basement.
Chapter 27: Of All the Gin Joints

ERIC POV, CONTINUED

Mr. Cataliades and I passed Thalia on the stairs; she was carrying the now-almost-full shop-vac and humming a heavy metal tune.

Megadeth's "Killing Is My Business . . . and Business Is Good!"

If I was not mistaken.

The sight of the petite, deadly vampiress was a funny one—given the fact that the vacuum was almost as tall as she was.

"I hope you did not miss any Jock," I stated flatly.

She smiled evilly. "I will not miss him at all. And—I even cleaned up the remnants of his arm."

"Found that in the far corner—did you?" I smirked.

"Wasn't taking his arms excessive—given the fact that I had already removed his hands?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Your actions inspired me. Plus, he had a tattoo on his right arm that I'd never appreciated"

"That was a ridiculous tattoo," she agreed, continuing her progress up the stairs.

"I believe that I am required to threaten you with bodily harm if you ever actually hurt Sookie," the part-demon attorney said abruptly—as soon as the door to the basement had shut behind Thalia.

I will admit that it took me a moment to "catch up" with his choice of subject.

I will also admit to being comforted a little that he was clearly protective of my bonded.

I shook my head. "I have hurt Sookie—but most of it has been inadvertent."

"I suppose that many things have been beyond your control since you met my goddaughter," the part-demon observed sagely.

"I thought I would be freer after my maker was gone," I shared openly. Mr. Cataliades was my attorney, after all, and I did trust him with my secrets. "But I have not been free. Maybe there is no such thing as freedom."

"Sookie has told me of your plans to become a king," he said, barely audibly.

I nodded in confirmation.

"There will be a kind of freedom in that," he winked. "And I have missed working for a monarch I actually liked." He smacked me on the back. "Good talk!"

"Good talk? Um—what do you mean by 'good talk,' Mr. Cataliades," I asked, slightly surprised
that "the talk" was apparently over.

He smiled a sharp-toothed grin. "Sookie is allowing me to be her godfather. And that makes us in-
laws. Thus, you will call me Desmond—at least when we are in limited company. As for your
question? We are—I believe—supposed to have a sort of," he paused, "clarifying talk every once in
a while. My brother Nargal enjoys speaking with Diantha's suitors while they are tied up to a tree
by their genitalia," he said pleasantly. "But you and Sookie seem to be beyond that courting stage,
so I have opted to forgo that step."

"Thanks," I muttered, placing my hand protectively over my own balls—just in case—even as I
contemplated the designation he'd indicated that Sookie had agreed to in regards to him: Godfather.

Godfather?

The part-demon smiled as if he'd not just suggested that I be "questioned" while hanging from the
family jewels. "Oh—by the way—speaking of Nargal, he is coming tomorrow evening with some
friends. I figured you wouldn't mind a little Dae help." He shook his head. "Don't tell Sookie this
because it might upset her, but demon help is so much more reliable than fairy help—don't you
think?"
I was momentarily stunned. "Uh—yes—I agree. Wait. You, your niece, your full-blooded demon
brother, and other demons are coming here—to help me?"

"Of course not," he winked. "They are coming to help Sookie and her bonded, who just so happens
to be you, because Sookie is my goddaughter. Oh—and—officially—we disapprove of you ever
punishing Sookie again. We insist that you treat her as an equal in your relationship," he added with
another wink.

I smirked. "Of course."

"Once Sookie officially claims you, it will help if the vampire community knows that she has more
trustworthy and immediate help available than her fairy kin," he commented. "Do you not think?"
he asked, smacking me good-naturedly on the back again.

"Yes. I do think," I responded.

I'd take Dae help over Fae help any day of the week!

And twice on Sunday.

"Well—then it is decided," he said matter-of-factly. "You will like Nargal. He can throw fire balls
at the rate of thirty per minute," he added proudly.

"Impressive," I said. And it was. The fact that some demons had the ability to propel fire from their
hands was one of the reasons why vampires rarely fucked with them. A hybrid like Mr. Cataliades
could produce fireballs only in a limited supply. His fireballs were certainly deadly; I had seen his
handiwork once or twice. But producing them tired him out. I knew that Diantha was impressive
with fire too, though her sister Gladiola had not inherited that gift. She had inherited tremendous
speed, making her a wonderful message deliverer.

That was why Gladiola had been sent to deliver a message to Sookie—a message which had gotten
her killed.

Suddenly, a small part of me worried that the part-demon might be "with us" so that he could get
revenge. All that Sookie had been able to convey to me in the limited time we'd had together in
private was that we could trust him. And I trusted her judgment. However, I wasn't about to further
risk my bonded until all of my own mental boxes were checked.

Call me high-handed.

The label fucking fit.

"I am sorry about your niece, Gladiola," I said, scrutinizing him in order to read his reaction to his fallen kinswoman's name.

A sad smile filtered onto his lips. "She was beautiful—was she not?"

I nodded. "Indeed."

The part-demon sighed. "She held you in very high regard—you know. Like me and Diantha, she would have been happy to serve you."

I saw no bitterness in the lawyer—only sincerity. I relaxed a little, but not fully. I needed to know why he was so willing to help. And—almost as pressingly—I needed to know why he had labeled himself as my bonded's godfather. "Sookie has not had a chance to tell me why you are doing this—why you are helping us," I said at a low volume, "not that I am not excessively grateful to you."

Mr. Cataliades seemed to be considering something for a moment. "Eric, Fintan Brigant was like a brother to me. In fact, he was closer to me than my own brother for many years. There were centuries of love and trust between us," he said in a hollow tone—as if remembering all of those years one by one. "He asked me to look after his human family if anything ever happened to him."

He sighed deeply as if in sudden pain. "And I owe Sookie much restitution because—ultimately—I was the cause of her telepathy."

As Sandra Pelt grunted to signal that she was regaining consciousness, he held up his hand to stop my questions from flooding the dungeon. "It is a long story, and I am certain your bonded will tell you all about it later. I told you what I have so that you could trust that I am truly prepared to help Sookie—even die for her—as are my kin. Fintan was important to me," he added, his voice catching with emotion.

"Thank you—for your help," I told the demon sincerely.

He nodded. "Now—let us get things over with concerning these Were. I cannot imagine that either will redeem herself," he sighed sadly.

I went to remove Sandra's gag.

"No need," he told me.

"You are a telepath," I commented.

He smirked. "No comment."

Demons were notorious for covering their covert abilities (since covering the ability to make fireballs was impossible). I—for one—had never suspected that Mr. Cataliades could read minds until quite recently when I had worked with him on getting out of the Freyda contract and he had shown an odd sort of interest in my knowledge of the telepath, Barry.

I frowned. Mr. Cataliades had said that he was ultimately responsible for Sookie's telepathy, but how could that be? Unfortunately, it clearly wasn't the time to ask him about that. Still—I could not wait for my bonded to tell me the story!
I did not like mysteries.

Too many variables.

The part-demon smiled at me knowingly. "Your curiosity will have to wait for the time being."

I lifted an eyebrow, wondering if the demon might be able to hear my thoughts! Vampire thoughts! If anything, I was even more curious now! But he gave nothing away as he moved to stand in front of the two tied-up Weres.

"This one deserves torture," he said sadly—but with certainty—as he looked at Sandra Pelt.

"Yet I promised not to deal it out," I said with resignation.

In truth, I had accepted the fact that I couldn't torture Victor because the plan to kill him and his people had needed to be carried out quickly and summarily. Moreover—torturing Felipe would be imprudent. If I killed him swiftly, it would help my narrative that I had eliminated him in the name of Sophie-Anne; plus, an unwritten rule among the monarchs of the nation was that torture would never be used upon them if they were overthrown.

And—now—Sookie had asked for my promise not to torture the Weres!

And that meant that my scant fifteen minutes with Jock might be my only "fun" throughout the entire takeover! Yes. I was pouting a little! Of course, Sookie was worth the trade-off, but still . . . . Call me "old-fashioned" or "Old Testament," but enemies equaled "fun" in my world.

Of course, there was still Bill. Yes—there was still "hope" that I might be able to take nights and nights "entertaining" him with my "knowledge." Indeed, before the next night was over—he would have more chances to either to dig his grave deeper or to pull himself out of the one he had already dug.

"Did you know that the Pelts were clients of mine?" Mr. Cataliades spoke, breaking me from my fantasy of finally punishing Bill for the pain he had put Sookie through.

"I did not," I said, truly surprised by the lawyer's statement.

"Mmmm," he sounded. "Gordon and Barbara Pelt were among the best wolves I ever knew."

"Their children did not reflect that," I said skeptically.

He sighed. "That is, unfortunately, true. Not being able to have children of their own, Gordon and Barb took in orphans—adopted them—but, unlike most prospective parents, they did not seek out infants or even young children. They wanted to help those that no one else wanted. They got both Debbie and Sandra when the girls were in their early teens. By then, both girls were somewhat wild, but that did not stop Gordon and Barb from providing them with love—and trying to offer them guidance and opportunity."

Mr. Cataliades stared at Sandra so harshly that I wondered if she might burst into flames from the gaze. Given the fact that he was part-demon, I wouldn't have been surprised.

Automatically, I subtly cupped my balls again—just in case his anger went "rogue."

"I know that your parents would have never sought to kidnap Sookie if you hadn't convinced them that she might as well be the devil," he frowned. "Debbie was troubled. She ruined her relationship with Alcide—likely ruining him too." He shook his head and looked at me. "You know how
promising Alcide once was."

I nodded in agreement. "Yes." Indeed, before his own father had mortgaged away the family's future with gambling and ill-made business dealings and before Alcide had taken up with Debbie Pelt, he had been a promising young Were.

"But—then," Desmond said, looking back at Sandra, "as soon as Alcide showed any interest in another, Debbie literally went crazy—doing everything she could to try to harm Sookie."

The demon lawyer looked back at me. "Gordon and Barb's biggest flaw was that they wanted to believe the very best of their children."

"Most parents do," I commented, thinking momentarily of my own human parents. Of course, I had lived up to what was expected of me time and again. I had deferred to my older brother and stood at his back—even though I was the more natural leader. Still, I had deferred—because that had been my duty.

When he had been killed—taking many with him because of the lack of leadership skills he'd suffered from—I had stepped up to take his place as my father's heir. Without complaint, I had married my brother's widow and treated her children as mine—announcing that my brother's son would be my heir, rather than any child of my own loins.

In my heart, I had not been the man I had behaved as during my human life. In my heart, I had been an explorer—not a chieftain.

Though I had led my people well—I had never wanted to rule them. I had always wanted to be one of those people who travelled west never to return; I had wanted to brave the sea channels and explore new lands. I'd dreamed of settling down into one of those new lands with a beloved; I'd dreamed of fathering children out of love, not just duty. I'd longed to live a quiet life—a peaceful one. I would hunt and fish and cultivate crops. My wife and children would be safe to walk the land—in no fear that marauders might come to try to take them as slaves or to steal what we had made for ourselves.

It had been a beautiful dream.

But that was not the human life I'd been given. Duty to my people and my parents took precedence over any personal desires I might have had.

But the kind of "duty" Sandra Pelt pretended to have for her sister was actually madness. And—if Mr. Cataliades was right about Barbara and Gordon Pelt—her actions did not honor her parents either.

"Your parents made their peace with Sookie once they realized the truth about what Debbie tried to do to her—once a light was shone on the lies you had made them believe," the part-demon told the young woman harshly.

Sandra again struggled against her ropes, even as I moved to get some smelling salts to wake up Jannalynn.

"You promised them, Sandra. You swore to Gordon and Barbara that your vendetta was done," he said wearily. "But as soon as they died in that car accident, you began to plot against Sookie again."

Sandra seemed to be trying to gnaw through her gag now.
"I know you were grieving, but think of all the havoc you have caused." He closed his eyes for a moment. "You corrupted your cousin, Tanya, to do your bidding. And then you almost killed one of Barbara's nieces—just because your mother had left her a part of your parents' estate: a part that you wanted to spend on a high-priced hitman to kill Sookie." He shook his head. "And, once out of jail for harming Barbara's niece, you turned your sights back onto Sookie. You made several attempts on her life. You seduced Alcide and others to get help or information. And—no matter what occurred—you would never stop."

The part-demon turned to me. There was sorrow in his eyes. "I was hoping—for her parents' sakes—that there would be something redeemable in this one, but there is not. She is not even insane—as Debbie was. Sandra is hate-filled and vindictive, and she gets pleasure from thinking of ways to harm Sookie—even though she knows that your bonded is not the cause of her troubles." He shook his head. "Sandra simply likes to think of Sookie as the enemy because she does not want to exist in peace."

Again, Sandra struggled, but she made no progress in freeing herself.

"Are there any other plans that she has set in motion? Things that could hurt Sookie?" I asked.

Mr. Cataliades looked back at Sandra, and soon he seemed to be peeling away the layers of the Were's skin with his eyes. Meanwhile, she squirmed as if his scrutiny hurt her physically. Maybe it did.

After about a minute, he shook his head disapprovingly. "She arranged for the fire-bombing of Merlotte's, but that strategy was mostly ineffectual. Given my position as her family's lawyer, I followed the money trail when she hired four thugs to try to kidnap or harm Sookie at Merlotte's. But the help I sent thwarted Sandra's plans."

"You knew of Sandra's plans?" I asked, feeling anger at the part-demon.

"Only at the last minute. I learned of it during the day—on the day that it happened. I called some associates of mine that were close enough to Bon Temps to arrive at Merlotte's in time to help. They made sure that Sookie was not harmed. The matter was resolved before nightfall, and—after that—I had assumed that Sookie would have sought you out to tell you and to take comfort in your bond."

I frowned, but then forced myself to calm down. Sookie had agreed that the days of our keeping things from one another were past. Thus, holding the past against her would only hurt us.

And—holding the past against Mr. Cataliades might hurt us both.

"What else?" I asked the part-demon.

"This one had placed herself at Merlotte's on the day that the thugs were to harm Sookie. She was hoping to witness Sookie's death," Desmond said, glancing at Jannalynn, who was now coming around thanks to the smelling salts.

My fangs clicked down as I looked at Merlotte's girlfriend.

"Why!?" I demanded.

"Jealousy," Mr. Cataliades reported dispassionately. "She believes that Sookie's boss, Sam Merlotte, is in love with Sookie." He looked up at me in question.

I nodded, forcing my fangs back into my gums. "I believe Merlotte is at least enamored with my
bonded, but Sookie views him as a brother-type figure."

The part-demon attorney gestured toward Jannalynn. "When Merlotte insisted upon taking Sookie to his brother's wedding, this Were interpreted it as a sign that the shifter could never truly be hers unless Sookie was eliminated. It did not take much for her and Sandra to bond over their mutual dislike of my goddaughter," he added.

"And tonight?" I asked.

"Jannalynn here was going to incapacitate her Were partner in order to make it very easy for Sandra to have access to Sookie. Sandra planned to kill Sookie and superficially injure Jannalynn."

"Would glamour reform her? Keep her in line?" I asked, thinking of my bonded.

"No," Mr. Cataliades answered after a few moments—during which he likely probed Jannalynn's thoughts. "Ms. Hopper is a bitter individual. Her 'love' for the shifter is more like possessiveness. Her dislike of Sookie is irrational and deep-seated. And—though she has been excessively loyal to Herveaux—that, too, is almost obsession. She would quickly shift her allegiance to another Were—if she thought the situation would enhance her personal feelings of worth. Thus far, she has only participated in the attempted murder of Sookie, but she would readily cause more damage." He paused and continued to scrutinize Jannalynn, who was now fully awake and looking at him with hate-filled, though frightened, eyes.

"She would like to kill me right now. And you," he said, gesturing toward me. "In fact, she would really like to kill you—even though she is glad that you have kept Sookie from Merlotte thus far. And Sookie . . . ." He stopped midsentence.

"Sookie?" I probed.

"Jannalynn would like to take her knife and stab Sookie again and again—though she wants to ensure that her death would last a very long time," the part-demon shared.

My fangs dropped again as I looked at the woman who wanted to harm my bonded—even as I tried to reconcile myself to the notion that I would be unable to draw and quarter the bitch!

"Jannalynn is of the mentality that—if she cannot have Merlotte—then no one can. And she also believes that you and Sookie have both undermined Herveaux's authority at times, and she despises you for that too. She is dangerous," the part-demon added. "Irredeemably so."

I nodded. I had heard enough—about both of the Were bitches.

"You had a friendship with Ms. Pelt's parents. You do not have to stay for what follows," I told Desmond.

"I need to do what follows," he said forcefully. "Barbara and Gordon understood supernatural custom as well as any of us. I believe they would have preferred for a friend to take care of Sandra in the end."

I nodded at the part-demon, my respect climbing even higher for him.

As the Were females struggled, I took my sword out of the sheath now strapped to my back, even as Mr. Cataliades lifted his own sword.

Without the need to communicate, we struck the two women as one, each of us taking a head. Neither woman would have registered any pain before she died—just as my bonded had wished.
"My goddaughter is odd," Mr. Cataliades mused as I pulled out a handkerchief and wiped down my blade before offering the cloth to the attorney.

"How is that?" I asked as he, too, cleaned his weapon.

Handkerchiefs: between Sookie's unexpected tears and the necessity for blood clean-up, I rarely traveled without several on my body.

"Sookie will be saddened over these deaths, despite the ill-will these women meant for her. She will feel guilt that Jannalynn's motives related to her. She will feel bad that Merlotte has lost his paramour."

I nodded. "Yes. She will."

"Was it her compassion that drew you to her?" he asked, looking at me curiously.

"When she met me, she was not frightened of me," I responded. "She spoke to me like she might speak to any human. Anyone. She behaved with me as each situation we were in dictated—never modifying her reactions to me based upon what I was. So," I paused, "maybe it was her compassion that drew me in—her impulse to look for the admirable qualities in everyone she meets. Even when she was being fed lies."

"Ah—Mr. Compton. It will be a good day when that vampire sees the sun again," he said with distaste.

"I agree whole-heartedly, Mr. Cataliades."

"Desmond," he corrected as I got on my phone to text Parker and Rubio, Palomino's nest-mates, to clear up the Were mess. While Palomino had proven her effectiveness in spades that night, her nest-mates had seemed disheveled—which meant that they could scrub in order to earn their keep.

After that night, I was honestly considering making Palomino a sheriff—if I managed to kill de Castro, to convince the Council not to kill me, and to be named king.

Tall orders—all of them.

I sighed. There were still a lot of hurdles to overcome, but the first of them had been leapt. Victor was dead. And—as a bonus—Sandra Pelt was no more.

It was a good night's work.

But there was more to do.

"Do you know the movie Casablanca?" Desmond asked randomly.

"Yes," I recalled. I had seen the movie more than once—which was saying something. Vampires rarely watched the same movie or television episode twice, for we could recall it with clarity after one watching. Theater, opera, and concerts were different. They always included at least nuanced changes—or sometimes sweeping differences, depending on the production.

But once something was on film? Well—it remained unchanged.

Which was why I'd actually disengaged Fangtasia's cameras that night—despite what I had led Felipe to believe.

"I believe that you and I could have a beautiful friendship," Desmond suggested, paraphrasing
"I do not have to sacrifice the girl to get it—do I?" I asked.

"Would you? Sacrifice her?" Desmond pushed. "To keep her alive? To keep her safe? To make her happy?"

"Yes," I said, barely audibly.

He smiled wide—his sharp incisors glistening. "As her godfather—and your friend—I will do all in my power to make sure you never have to sacrifice her. Nor her you."

A beautiful friendship indeed.
Chapter 28: Of Spies & Lovers

INDIRA POV

12:25 A.M.

Bill Compton had always seemed rather oblivious to me—and obnoxious—though I recognized that he thought of himself as a quite cunning individual.

And a charming one.

So wrong.

Of course, from what I knew of his background, it was a wonder that his head wasn't even bigger than it was.

That was mostly his maker's fault, though Bill's own natural human disposition had also added to his particular mixture of arrogance and self-loathing.

I had no pity for "human Bill," however: the white slave owner who had moral "compunctions" about the practice, but kept slaves anyway because it was "tradition."


Lorena should have been put down before she was able to make a child. It was as simple as that! Certain vampires were simply "born" with mental defects, and I had always felt that Lorena was one of them. She was a brazen vampire who killed enough to cause her to be expelled from many areas; plus, she was fucking annoying.

Just like her spawn.

She had obsessed over Bill from his rebirth. To her, he had always been perfect, an "ideal specimen."

A specimen of what, I was not willing to fathom.

After turning another child just to try to please Bill—and then setting him free to see whether or not the old "if you love him, let him go" adage would come true—Lorena had become even more batty.

When Sookie had slain her, the telepath had become respected by me—not only for her prowess, but also because of her public service.

Of course, by then Bill had spent too much time in the court of Sophie-Anne Leclercq, so even someone like Sookie could not redeem him—not that she should have been expected to do so, given the circumstances.

In fact, Sophie-Anne's court had likely been the worst place for someone like Bill Compton to have been if he wanted to improve himself. Oh—Sophie-Anne had not been a horrible queen, but she did love to "collect," and Bill was good at "collecting."

He was lauded for it by the queen, which fed his ego.
Of course, he likely also felt guilt for it, feeding his self-loathing.

Bill's gift as a vampire was in glamouring. Almost all vampires rose with the ability to glamour, but very few of us were born with skills that would have rivaled a vampire of five centuries!

Bill also had a "gift" for assessing "talent"—perhaps another holdover from his human life. At slave auctions, I had been in the position to witness many slave owners in the American South assessing the Africans who had been captured from their homes on a different continent—a continent which many Americans still inexplicably deemed as being populated by somehow "lesser" people. I scoffed at the knowledge that Americans often confused the notions of "inferiority" and "difference." And, of course, monsters could be found in all cultures. Africa had had its fair share of war, violence, and genocide, but I dared any American to argue that the killing of the first Americans—the native ones—was any less brutal than any other genocide.

I shook my head and focused again upon Bill, whose silhouette I could see through the living room window. Indeed, my experience and observations of humanity had left me with no doubt that Bill Compton had once been an effective purchaser of human slaves, as well as an effective apologist for ignoring the "humanity" of an entire race!

Ironic—given the fact that he harped on his own "humanity" all the fucking time.

He was the worst kind of hypocrite! He'd "procured" for Sophie-Anne, after all. And he intended to manipulate Sookie so that she'd soon be in the clutches of his new king.

However—he continued to see himself as a "gentleman."

Honestly, when I was in Bill's presence, all I saw was a fuckwit who was ready to assign blame for his own bad behavior anywhere except where it belonged.

With the man in the mirror.

I sighed as I recalled a time in the 1950s when Bill and his maker and sister had settled with the nest I was a part of in Portland. At the time, Bill had attempted to charm me into his bed.

When I had denied him, he had accused me of prejudice. And—maybe I was prejudiced. I had no inclination to accept an annoying whelp into my bed—not when I was several hundred years older than he was!

And certainly not when I had absolutely no attraction for him!

Bill simply could not accept that someone would find him undesirable. However, honestly, the first word out of his mouth had turned me off for good.

He had mispronounced my name, calling me something like Indeereh.

I shook my head. Even though a hint of my Indian accent remained, I did not purposely "thicken" it was part of a seduction plan—as Bill obviously did. He used his full-on Southern lilt even back then to "increase his allure."

For me, that "lilt" and the horrible sideburns which had accompanied it had failed. I suppose that I had always felt a little sorry for Sookie Stackhouse because Bill's performance of gentility had worked on her—even if for only a relatively short period of time.

I was glad that the feisty woman found someone worthier of her in the sheriff.
I watched Bill through the large window as he "supervised" the witches' work—as if he knew anything about it.

In fairness, I had to admit that Bill had done better for himself than I would have imagined he would—though through a means that I disapproved of.

Of course, his means of "success" wasn't all his fault.

It wasn't his fault, for instance, that Sophie-Anne had been greedy enough to allow him to develop his database. Ill-conceived from the start, that technological terror had done more "good" for the Fellowship of the Sun and other similar groups than it had done for vampires—though it was a money-maker.

Even I had to admit that much.

I recalled the day that Eric had learned of Bill's database. He had called the "core" of Area 5's vampires to Fangtasia on a Monday night when the bar was closed. The "core" was what Pam had always called the vampires that Eric trusted. We were the ones that he had either specifically asked to live in his area or the ones whom he had come to rely upon over time. Most of the "core" had been in Area 5 for at least a decade.

Eric had warned us about Bill's database—warned us that the sanctimonious ass would likely try to question us subtly.

If he hadn't already.

Eric also warned us that Sophie-Anne might order us all to be "forthcoming" with Bill. He suggested that if any of us wanted or needed to fabricate our pasts in any way, we should begin getting our paper trails in order.

Given the fact that I'd participated in a "maker pact" with Rasul and had been his lover for years, I had asked my sheriff for help in covering up my own past.

Help which Eric had provided to both Rasul and myself.

Officially, a "maker pact" was one of the larger crimes that could be committed in the vampire community—but only if one got caught.

"Unofficially"—such a pact was often welcome.

Basically, when forming a "maker pact," two vampires would vow to bring the true death to each other's makers. It was a simple enough concept—and I had even anonymously penned a script about a similar theme. It was called Strangers on a Train, and Alfred Hitchcock himself had directed the film. I'd not made a penny off of the film, but I'd been gratified by the outcome nonetheless.

The truth was that neither Rasul nor I would have taken such a serious step as a "maker pact" if we had not been desperate. Rasul had been turned along with his younger sister, Fatima. Fatima had been but thirteen at the time of their turning, but their maker had used her like an adult woman—reveling in taking her virginity again and again, given the fact that her body would heal each time her hymen was broken.

And—because of a maker's command—Rasul had been powerless to do anything!

Even worse, his sister had been commanded to stay un-dead and endure night after night of their
maker's sadistic impulses.

Not surprisingly, Fatima had met the sun by choice the day after I'd killed her and Rasul's maker. Her death had been a fucking tragedy, but I likely would have done exactly what she did. In truth, Rasul probably would have met the sun with his sister—if he didn't still have his end of the "maker pact" to fulfill. In the end, I had been very glad he'd had a reason to live.

I sighed.

Where my own maker was concerned, I had been luckier than Fatima—in some ways. Less lucky in others.

I had been a widow and the mother of three children when my maker "noticed" me. Given that status, I had been somewhat independent, and my own family had been prominent enough to make sure that my children and I had all that we needed.

On a stormy October night, my maker—sick bitch that she was—followed me home from my aunt's deathbed, and she glamoured me to issue her an invitation. She made me select the child I "wanted" her to kill—after she threatened to drain all three of them if I did not comply. I chose my youngest child, who was only two at the time, because I figured that he would be less aware of any pain.

Less able to make horrific memories on his way to the afterlife.

I still remembered his screaming.

My maker had "made" me later that night, and—in so doing—she had made me abandon my other children too. However, as promised, she had left my two elder children to live—not that I had ever been able to see them or care for them again. Later, I learned that my family had taken them in. I also learned—courtesy of my mentally abusive maker—that my family thought that I had killed my youngest child before forsaking my other children.

She'd glamoured my remaining children to believe that too—to judge me as the worst kind of monster.

My maker was a bitter woman, and I came to almost feel sorry for her—given the fact that her own journey into vampirism was almost as horrific as mine. But I could never forgive her for what she had done to me and my youngest child. His death had been needless—her attempt to "get back at" the world for taking from her.

Still, I do not think that I would have ever formed a "maker pact" unless I had been positive that my maker would never let me go. And—worse—she had made me several sisters.

After forcing them to choose which of their human children she would drain—just as I'd had to choose.

She had been made into a monster, and she forced me and her other children to witness and endure her maliciousness time and again.

I was grateful the day that Rasul put a stake through her bitter, black heart.

Of my vampire sisters, two met the sun not long after our maker's death. They were the "middle children" and had never acclimated to vampire life—not that our maker had helped them to do so. My younger "sibling," Padma, like me, had chosen to live on. In fact, I had taken Padma under my wing, and she, too, had settled in Area 5 under Eric's leadership.
One reason why we had chosen to stay in Area 5? We knew—unequivocally—that Eric would never allow a vampire like our maker to survive in his territory.

Unfortunately, Eric's ideas about what constituted a "bad" vampire had much to do with the cruelty he had suffered at the hands of his own shitty maker. I was grateful Appius was dead—another thing that I knew his bonded was ultimately to be thanked for—but I knew that Eric was still having to deal with his maker's machinations.

However, I had a feeling that Eric had a plan to thwart Appius's wishes—or, at least, I hoped that he did.

It was too bad that Eric had never found another vampire who was capable of completing a "maker pact" with him. But locating a vampire old enough to kill Appius—let alone one willing to make such a pact—would have been almost impossible.

Rasul and my own quid pro quo deal had led to our having a romantic relationship, though we had managed to keep it a secret for more than a century.

Needless to say, our history as co-conspirators and lovers was not something we wanted to find its way into Compton's database.

Eric had graciously provided me and Padma with completely different histories. And he had made sure that Rasul had a "clean" history too. And—because of that—my lover and I would be able to go "public" soon. And no one would be able to connect us to any kind of "maker pact," given the fact that our "official" histories no longer overlapped anywhere.

For all anyone else knew, he and I were meeting that very night.

Yes—I owed Eric Northman much. But that was not the only reason—or the main one—why I was loyal to him. I had respected Eric from my first meeting with him. Initially, Rasul had asked me to come to Louisiana to be closer to him, but settling in New Orleans might have given us away. Being in Area 5, however, was ideal. And Rasul had assured me that Eric would be a fair leader. My beloved had been right.

By the time Padma and I settled in Area 5, Rasul was already acting as Eric's spy in Sophie-Anne's court—though he was not asked to be a "traditional" spy. Eric just wanted to know about any truly asinine plans that were afoot so that he could protect his people. To the old queen's credit, there had not been many of those, but sometimes the queen or Andre got a little "out of control."

All in all, Rasul had never had any moral dilemmas about working for Eric. Moreover, Eric had saved Rasul's life during the takeover too! As soon as Eric had known of de Castro's moves, he had alerted Pam, who had alerted the "core" of Area 5. Eric's next move had been texting Rasul to tell him to get underground—literally and figuratively.

Most of Sophie-Anne's court had been slain, but Rasul had hidden just long enough for the violence to end—thanks to the heads-up from Eric. After that, Rasul had made himself indispensable to Victor Madden—though, thankfully, my beloved's tenure in the capacity as a spy would soon end.

After that, Rasul and I would be able to begin seeing each other openly for the first time in our long lives—ironically, thanks to our fictitious backgrounds in Bill's database!

Eric was planning to make Rasul the sheriff of Area 1—a nod to both Sophie-Anne and Felipe. A nod to the "establishment"—so to speak.
I was prepared to be Rasul's lieutenant.

"You have always been stunning in the moonlight," Rasul purred as he came up behind me. Stealth was my lover's "gift." That was why he had always been a good spy.

"And you have always been a sweet-talker," I responded.

"I can talk sweetly," he whispered as he took me into his arms. "I can do many things—sweetly."

He kissed me fiercely—not surprising since we'd not shared a private moment together for more than a month.

"I know," I whispered when he moved his lips to my neck and nipped there. "But you cannot do them now," I added with a moan.

"Oh—trust me. I could," he grinned. "But you are right. We have jobs to do now." He glanced toward the house before leering back in my direction. "Plus, I want to take my time reacquainting myself with every inch of your body."

If I could have melted from his heated look, I would have. "I look forward to the reintroduction," I agreed.

Reluctantly, Rasul pulled his eyes from mine and looked back at the house. "What's been going on?" he asked.

"What's been going on with you?" I asked of his bloody and torn shirt.

"Just a little skirmish—and a bit of blood for effect," he grinned boyishly.

I chuckled and gestured toward the house.

"About three minutes ago, the witches started the spell," I conveyed.

"I wonder what the spell will actually do. I know that Eric and Sookie do not wish to break their bond," Rasul commented as we both witnessed the witches—Bob and Amelia—chanting over a caldron.

"I know," I agreed. "But I have no idea if the spell they are conducting now will have any effect on anything."

"Whatever they are doing will need to smell of magic for Bill to be convinced that it is real," Rasul commented.

"I am certain that Eric would have thought of that detail," I returned.

"To be sure," he agreed.

We were silent for about five minutes as we watched Bill and the witches through the window. Luckily, Bill would not think it odd for Rasul to smell like me since I was one of Eric's people, so I allowed myself to lean again him.

"I cannot wait until we are together in all ways—at all times," he whispered.

I chuckled. "Most of the time—not all. Do not forget that I am an independent woman."

"I can take that," he returned with a chuckle as we saw the witches finish their spell.
We stood in companionable silence for another fifteen minutes—just watching the actions in the house and a frustrated Bill Compton, who kept checking his phone as if expecting a call.

"We must survive tomorrow night," I whispered.

Unlike many of the vampires in Area 5, Rasul and I knew that Eric's plans had only begun with Madden; they certainly did not end with Victor's death.

"Yes—and we will survive. I know it."

"Well—as long as you know it," I said teasingly.

"Absolutely," he chuckled.

"Ready?" I asked, preparing to turn off the signal scrambler that had been interfering with Bill's phone.

"Absolutely," I grinned.

"You know what to do in there?" I asked.

"Thalia was very specific," he assured before kissing me quickly and jetting to the door of the home that Bill and the witches were occupying.

I smiled in his wake. I had confidence in Rasul—and in the Viking who led us both.
**Chapter 29: The Picture of Zen**

AMELIA POV

"That's it?" Bill asked, as Bob and I finished cleaning up the elements of our spell. If things had worked according to plan, absolutely nothing "bad" would happen because of the elaborate show Bob and I had made.

Still—I had my fingers crossed that all had gone according to plan.

After all, undeniably, I'd had my problems with magic before—and the spell Bob and I conducted did have to be magical. Even Bill would have been able to tell if it had not been since vampires (inept ones, included) could smell magic!

In the spell we conducted, Bob and I had used only innocuous ingredients associated with protection and peace—just in case the mixture of them somehow led to an unforeseen effect. And the words we chanted were actually a simple invocation of good luck for the target of the spell, which was Eric.

A fact that had made the Viking a little nervous.

He'd met Bob as a cat, after all.

But Eric had to be the spell's subject! It was his hair that we had to use, after all!

Again, even bumbling Bill would have been able to tell if it wasn't Eric's hair!

Bob had made a big production of clapping his hands ten times before wrapping the hair strands around a sprig of rosemary. In any other situation, I would have laughed out loud at his "acting!"

But I'd kept my countenance enough to join him in chanting a good luck spell for the person from whom the hair had come.

Sincerely, I hoped that the spell would offer the Viking and his mate all the good fortune they needed.

And I prayed that—if anything unintended really did "take" about the spell—Eric's hair might just be softer for a while. Or shinier? Like in a Pantene commercial or something.

Bob gave me a knowing look—as if recalling another time when I'd conducted a "spell" I wasn't exactly sure about.

He went so far as to mouth a "meow."

I had a feeling that the Viking wouldn't be amenable to whiskers and a tail—though if anyone could pull off the look, he could.

"When will we know if it worked?" Bill asked impatiently, breaking me from my reverie.

Since I hadn't responded to the accent-challenged asshole before, Bob answered for us and then continued to field Bill's unnecessary and inane questions—for which I was extremely grateful. Several hours before, Bill had reached my last nerve, and then he'd started plucking it.
In fact, the only way for me to remain calm in that moment was for me to remain silent.

The night before, Bill had questioned me several times about how the spell would work, what would be needed for it, etc. I'd conveyed nicely that Bob and my telling him about the spell wasn't a part of the deal; I'd also let him know that the bond-breaking spell had been partly crafted by Octavia—which was actually true. I'd assured him that—even under glamour—I couldn't "give up" the spell and that I would also remember if I was glamoured.

That part was actually quite true too.

As my powers as a witch had grown over the last several months, I'd developed the "extra sense"—as my mentor called it. And one of the things that the "extra sense" had given me was the ability to recall if my mind had been tampered with by a vampire.

I couldn't prevent myself from being glamoured, but—if I was—I could remember everything about it.

Bob—though a "younger" witch than I was—also had that gift. In fact, I liked to joke with him that he'd developed this "un-humanly" talent when he'd been "Bob-cat."

Still—just in case—Eric had strategically glamoured both of us while we were in his office at Fangtasia. We could remember the "plan," but we couldn't speak of it—even to each other. And we couldn't be glamoured by another vampire to speak of it either. Moreover, Eric had glamoured us not to bring harm to him, Sookie, or their bond—no matter what another vampire might glamour us to do in the future.

Oh—and because Sookie knew me very well—Eric had glamoured Bob and me to remain "calm" during any direct dealings with Bill. That "command" had most definitely been for the best. Given the fact that I would have been nervous about Bob and my part in the plan, it was nice to have a "calm" attitude about the whole thing. Thus, Bill hadn't picked up any heartbeat changes, etc., as Bob and I had lied to the asshole.

Oh—plus—there was the fact that I couldn't have stopped myself from telling off the Antebellum asshole if not for Eric's very effective glamouring.

Luckily, Bill hadn't tried to glamour Bob or me. Clearly, he was "playing nice" to keep us cooperative, but that, too, was as annoying as hell!

Just like his overall "manner," his manners were fucking annoying!

Still—I'd stayed calm.

However, Eric's glamouring had only worked during my "direct dealings" with Bill. At all other moments, I'd wanted to kill him.

In fact, when the sun had been up, I'd been of half a mind to break through the floorboards of the house we were in until I discovered Bill's dead body.

There were plenty of things in the house that could be used as stakes! Or I could have just dragged the douchebag out into the sun!

But Bob had stopped me—several times. Though only with a look. But that look had been enough to remind me that the "Bill" distraction would be needed to help with the de Castro situation.

According to tonight's "plan" (which had, hopefully, already been enacted with success), the fairy-
laced Royalty Blended was the main device to be used to ensure that Madden and his people were slain.

But de Castro would need something different—a different wrench in the machine.

And what better "tool" than Bill Compton?

As Bob assured Bill—for the fifth time—that the spell had gone flawlessly and that Sookie was now most assuredly not bonded to Eric anymore, a knock sounded at the door. Bill inhaled deeply and looked concerned as he slowly approached the door.

"Rasul?" Bill enquired.

"Yes," a male voice answered from outside. "Please. Will you let me in? I was ordered by Victor earlier to come here and consult with you if anything went wrong tonight!"

Bill opened the door cautiously, and a handsome vampire entered. I'd seen Rasul before in New Orleans when I used to hang out with Hadley. Of Middle Eastern decent originally, I knew that Rasul had been kind to both Hadley and Sookie. I also knew that he was in on at least part of "the plan."

"What is going on?" Bill demanded. "What has gone wrong?"

I noticed that Rasul was bloody. His clothing was also torn.

"Were blood?" Bill asked after he'd inhaled once more.

Rasul nodded. "Yes."

"What happened?" Bill asked.

"The night was progressing as planned and Victor was inside Fangtasia . . . ," Rasul began.

"And Sookie?" Bill interrupted.

"She was inside the club too," Rasul reported.

"And her punishment?" Bill seethed.

Rasul shook his head. "I am not certain, though I did get some secondhand reports that indicated her punishment was pretty mild."

Bill didn't necessarily look relieved. "What of the hunt for Sandra Pelt?"

"That is what I was trying to tell you about," Rasul said almost desperately—but without frustration.

He was a good actor. I would have been telling Bill to shut the fuck up!

Except that I'd been glamoured to stay calm.

"Then tell me! Now!" Bill demanded with irrational impatience, given the fact that he'd been the one to interrupt Rasul.

"Not long after 11:00 P.M.," Rasul reported, "a group of Weres and fairies stormed Fangtasia. Victor had stationed me and two others outside as watchmen; however, we entered the club soon
after the attackers did."

"Why didn't you stop them?" Bill accused.

"The attackers seemed to materialize out of thin air," Rasul responded with wide eyes. "They were between us and the door."

Bill gestured for Rasul to continue—rather impatiently, given the fact that the Confederate cocksucker had once again interrupted the other vampire.

"A fight had already broken out. I will never forget what I saw in that bar!" Rasul continued, his voice effectively "haunted."

"What did you see?" Bill rasped.

Bob and I displayed the proper levels of "surprise"—at least outwardly—as we listened to the narrative woven by Rasul.

Fae-blood-laced Royalty Blended, which had all but incapacitated the vampires inside the club!

Oh my!

An attack from a force led by Sandra Pelt and unknown fairies!

Oh dear!

The deaths of many Louisiana vampires.

Oh no!

The targeting of Sookie, who'd been "with" Victor at the time.

Oh the "humanity!"

At this point in Rasul's narrative, Bill was growling.

Oh boy!

"Eric just let Victor have Sookie?" Bill asked incredulously.

Rasul frowned. "I cannot be sure what Northman did because I was not in the club at the time, but it seemed that he did offer Sookie to Victor."

"What!?" Bill and I demanded angrily at the same time.

I had to make my reaction authentic, after all. And—if Eric had actually offered up Sookie to that slimy bastard, Victor—I would have wanted to stake the Viking!

"Regardless of what Northman did," Rasul quickly assured, "I am almost certain that Victor was just talking with Sookie in the sheriff's office when the attack began. I saw Sookie fully clothed right after the battle, and she did not," he paused and glanced at Bob and then me before looking back at Bill, "smell of sex. Moreover, I do not think that Victor would have taken Sookie against her will! Our Regent was too honorable for such a deplorable deed!"

Bill obviously was comforted by Rasul's defense of Victor. As for me? I thought Rasul was a very convincing storyteller! If I wouldn't have known better, I might have been swayed to believe that
Victor was Saint Vampire.

Eric clearly chose his allies well.

And Bill clearly didn't know his asshole from his elbow.

Bill should have known better; he should have known that Eric would have never intentionally hurt Sookie. Indeed, he'd been around them enough to know that fact without a doubt. But Bill was ruled by his own skewed narrative. And, in it, Eric was the villain and he was the hero.

"What was the outcome of the fight?" Bill asked—finally getting to what, in my opinion, should have been his first question.

How the Southern shithead had managed to survive for as long as he had was beyond me!

"Victor is dead," Rasul said as he looked down, his eyes full of sorrow.

That they didn't also look full of shit was yet another testament to his acting ability.

I was—impressed!

"What?" Bill asked pushing himself backwards into his chair enough that his movement caused the furniture to scrape the hardwood floor.

Another crime he was guilty of.

It was a beautiful floor! Worth more than twenty Bills—in my not-so-humble opinion.

"I must get to Sookeh!" Bill yelled out, standing up and rushing toward the door.

In that moment, I was glad that I was the picture of "zen"—thanks to Eric's glamour. Otherwise, I would have called Bill out on his horrific pronunciation of my friend's name! Seriously, how was "Sookie" so difficult? I mean—really—had Bill once asked his mother for "cookehs?"

God! Cookie's sounded good.

Maybe Eric's glamouring was like being stoned!

However, I was capable of recognizing that the last thing we needed was for Bill to run off half-cocked. Thankfully, Rasul knew exactly what to do.

"Bill," Rasul said in a soothing tone as he blocked the younger vampire's path to the door, "we should call the king and find out what to do now that our Regent is gone. I came here because Victor trusted that you would be the best person to contact King Felipe if something went wrong. The king knows you—respects you. I believe that he will not just want to count upon you during this trying time. But need to."

I could see the change in Bill's demeanor the moment that Rasul had stroked his ego.

"But Sookeh," Bill sighed, "she will need my protection even more now."

Rasul frowned. "Is that because Northman was injured by some kind of magic a little while ago? But how could you know about that? I have not told you that part yet."

At Rasul's comment, a fuse seemed to pop inside of Bill. "Explain everything that happened again! And leave nothing out this time!" the Confederate creep demanded—as if he were the fucking
Rasul nodded agreeably. "Of course. My companions and I were outside—guarding the perimeter and waiting for Victor's 'special hunt,'" he said, glancing discreetly in my direction as if to remind Bill to keep the nature of that hunt a secret from Bob and me. "It was as if the attackers just appeared at the doors of Fangtasia, and then they burst inside. As quickly as possible, my companions and I entered the club. A fight had already broken out. It seemed as if Northman and most of the vampires inside were drunk on Fae-laced blood. My companions and I aided as best we could, and—a few minutes—the Viking's people rallied. Otherwise, we would have all perished. Unfortunately, Victor was already dead by the time I got to him, but—by all accounts—he died protecting Sookie." Rasul paused for a moment as if grieving for his Regent. "Many of our comrades—Victor's people—were slain in the attack; thus, I made sure to keep a close eye on Northman after the battle. He instructed Thalia, his new second in command, to take Sookie to one of his safe homes. Not long after that, Northman succumbed to an invisible pain that could have only been sorcery," he added with a hint of fear in his tone. "After that, Eric was carried to his office, and a few of his long-time subjects converged around him—before expelling the rest of us from Fangtasia. And then I came here."

"The effects of the severing spell?" Bill asked Bob and me.

Bob nodded. "It had to have been."

"So the rumor that bonds can be broken is true?" Rasul asked with surprise.

If that surprise was feigned, it sure fooled me.

"Yes," Bob confirmed.

Rasul shook his head as if in disbelief. Meanwhile, Bill was dialing his phone.

His call was answered—but only after several rings.

"Sookeh!" Bill cried out. "Thank God!"

After a few seconds, Bill frowned. "Thalia? Why are you answering Sookie's phone?"

There was another pause.

"Is Sookie well?" he asked tentatively. "I heard that there was a battle at Fangtasia."

After a moment, Bill growled.

"I was not there because I was ordered elsewhere by our Regent!"

Another pause.

"Yes, I received Eric's summons, but the Regent's orders clearly superseded the request of a mere sheriff," he said haughtily.

Calm—I was glad that I was so calm.

In fact, the more Bill pissed me off, the more stoned I felt.

Cookies—that reminded me of cookies.

Or cookehs—if you were Bill.
"I am Sookeh's friend! Her health is my business!" Bill said insistently. "And it is my king's business, too!"

There was another pause, and Bill's posture became even more tense.

"I do not care whom Sookeh is supposedly bonded with!" he yelled into the phone. "Put her on. Let me talk to her now!"

As there was another pause, Bill's expression changed, likely because the dolt realized that the word "supposedly" could be used to implicate him in the bond-breaking spell, which had "supposedly" occurred.

Whether Thalia called out Bill on his misstep or not, I could not tell. For the vampiress had—apparently—hung up on the douchebag.

I envied her. She could turn off Bill's voice with the touch of a button. I was currently stuck with him.

Bill looked at his phone helplessly for a moment.

"We really should call King Felipe," Rasul urged.

Bill hesitated for a moment and then dialed.
Chapter 30: The Rat King 

TWENTY MINUTES EARLIER 

FELIPE DE CASTRO POV 

"I will take thirty vampires with me," I told Sandy Sechrest sternly. 

She looked at me with surprise. 

"So many?" she asked. 

I growled. "You know how much I dislike being questioned, Sandy. Yet you are doing so anyway."

"I am sorry, Sire," Sandy quickly replied, bowing her head and taking a step backward before bowing her whole body. "It is just that thirty might be difficult to muster on such short notice."

I growled again. "Are you trying to tell me that thirty loyal subjects will not jump whole-heartedly at the chance of helping their king?" I challenged.

"No. Not at all," she stammered. "I—uh—will have the vampires you require ready by first dark tomorrow night."

"See that you do," I warned my financial advisor and new second. "And see that you are among them."

"I will be honored," Sandy said before bowing again and rapidly exiting my office.

In truth, I had not liked hearing the doubt in Sandy's voice. She had served me—and served me well—for even longer than Victor had. And—if she'd had one-tenth of his viciousness—I would have made her my second long ago. But Sandy was actually quite "civilized" for a vampire, preferring accounting to holding others accountable.

However, because of Sandy's expertise with numbers, I was concerned. Quite concerned.

Getting thirty vampires to be in my entourage when I went to Louisiana should have been an easy task, but—despite my remonstrations to Sandy—I knew that finding that number of loyal vampires ready to travel at first dark the next night would not be an easy task. However—against the Viking—I felt that a large number might very well be needed.

I sighed. Northman was formidable. If he had killed Victor and/or intended me harm, then I would need many in order to effectively face him. Unfortunately, my numbers had been stretched thinner and thinner since the takeover of Louisiana, which had come with a "side dish" of Arkansas that I really would have preferred to have done without.

That state had practically devolved into anarchy by the time I took it over, for Sophie-Anne had neither the resources nor the inclination to see to it properly. Inconveniently, to make sure that my claim was solidified in Arkansas, I'd had to send quite a few strong vampires there.

And—as for Louisiana? Well—most of the "decent" vampires in Areas 1 through 4 had been killed during the takeover. I shook my head as I remembered slaying Sophie-Anne and claiming her throne. In truth, I had wanted for the takeover to be relatively bloodless.
But it had been the opposite of that.

It wasn't as if Northman was the only sheriff I had wanted to spare in the state! Indeed, three other sheriffs had been offered similar "deals" to the one Northman had been given: loyalty to me in exchange for their lives. They had opted to disrespect my claim to the throne by fighting on, and they had died for that.

Northman had been the only sheriff pragmatic enough to take the "deal" I offered.

I had often wondered—since the takeover—what Northman would have done if he had not been at his bonded's home when my forces had invaded Louisiana. Would he have fought? Could he have defeated Victor if he had?

I knew for certain that the Viking's child had been wreaking havoc upon my forces in Shreveport, systematically eliminating them one by one as if she were a fucking scalpel. Given her lethality, I could not help but to wonder what the Viking himself would have been like if he had participated in his child's guerrilla tactics.

I, for one, had been relieved that he had not—though Victor had expressed a clear preference for wanting Northman dead from the start. But Northman being killed would have led to most of Area 5's vampires being depleted too—just as the Louisiana vampires in other areas had been decimated along with their sheriffs. In fact, less than half of the Louisiana vampires in Areas 1-4 had survived my takeover of the state, for they had refused to stop fighting—despite the death of their queen!

I scoffed. I still did not understand how Sophie-Anne had managed to inspire that kind of loyalty among her people. But she had.

And that had meant less income for me, for there were fewer vampires "alive" to pay taxes!

Moreover, of the vampires who had not died for Sophie-Anne or for their sheriffs, quite a few had chosen to emigrate from Louisiana before I had even named Victor as the state's Regent. More had gone after I had done that.

The exception had been the vampires in Northman's Area 5.

Other than Area 1, which included New Orleans, Area 5 was—by far—the biggest income-generating area in Louisiana. After the takeover, I had counted upon that income to help me offset some of my losses. And—despite Victor's warnings about the Viking—I had determined that Eric would be loyal to me.

But, perhaps, Northman had been pushed too far.

I had known—from the very start—that Victor was micromanaging Northman more than he probably should have been. But I had trusted Victor's judgment. And it had been important that Victor "feel" like a true Regent so that he could do a good job, so I had not ordered him to change his ways—beyond giving him a subtle caution that the Viking ought not to be trifled with.

When Victor had opened a rival club in Area 5—instead of opening one in Area 1 where he was based—I had become even more concerned. But—by then—the fact that the Viking's attention was on Victor actually helped me. And the problem seemed as if it would be a finite one.

Because I had been certain that Eric's time in my kingdom was finite.

I opened my desk drawer and took out a copy of the contract Appius had negotiated with Queen Freyda of Oklahoma. I smirked.
Had Appius lived, I might have tried to get the Viking out of the contract. Eric benefitted me in Area 5, after all. But Appius had not lived; thus, as Eric's king, I was due the large amount of money that Freyda had agreed to pay for Eric.

I looked at the seven-figure sum.

Granted, Northman's Area would supply me with that amount—and more—given time. But I needed liquid assets sooner rather than later.

I had considered taking Eric up on his offer to pay me the amount that Freyda had promised. But there were ultimately too many positives to Eric becoming Freyda's consort to take him up on his offer.

In recognizing Freyda's claim, I would gain an ally in an up-and-coming monarch.

I had also seen the benefit in removing Northman from Louisiana, given the animosity Victor could not seem to drop in regards to the Viking.

And then there was Sookie Stackhouse. I had grown weary of Northman offering up excuse after excuse as to why she could not attend to the business of my kingdom by staying in Las Vegas for half of the year. Hell! Even offering her six months per year to stay where she wanted and promising Northman that she would not be fed upon or f*cked while she was in my territory had not convinced the Viking to share her!

And I could not simply take the telepath from him as I wanted to do because Eric and Sookie were bonded and pledged!

However, Freyda was my ace in the hole.

Given Freyda's inherent selfishness, I knew that she would not want to "share" her consort with someone he truly cared about. Thus, I knew that she would demand that Northman give up contact with Sookie, and he would be powerless to do anything else!

His and Sookie's pledge would soon be dissolved. And that would officially make Sookie a "claimable" being—as long as the one claiming was her king—even if the blood bond remained between Sookie and her M.I.A. bonded.

And I intended to do that claiming by bonding with Sookie—eventually supplanting the Viking's blood.

Better yet, I had begun to hope that the blood bond between Northman and Sookie could be broken by magic, eliminating many of the complications that would come with claiming her.

In that case, I would not have to bond with her myself—thus making myself vulnerable to her emotions. I could simply make sure that someone I controlled bonded with the telepath.

Before tonight, that someone would have been Victor Madden. In fact, Victor had always been my "backup plan" if the Freyda thing fell through.

I had not been blind to Victor's desire for Miss Stackhouse; in fact, I had already decided to "forgive" him—if possible—if he managed to slay Northman and forge a bond with Sookie. Oh—I would have censured him. I would have had to, but I had hoped that one week in silver as his punishment would have satisfied the Vampire Council. And—if that had not been enough—I would have been willing to sacrifice Victor if pushed hard enough by the fairies or the Council. But, regardless of the aftermath, Victor would have fucking alleviated many of my frustrations if
he had "rashly" acted to eliminate Northman and take the telepath!

Which was another reason why I had given him relatively free reign.

Plausible deniability was a good fucking thing!

In fact, the only thing I would have lost was the bounty that Freyda would have paid me for Northman—but I had planned to recoup most of that by requiring Victor to pay!

Yes. I knew about the Swiss accounts Victor had been left by his maker, and I would have welcomed those funds into my own coffers!

Moreover, I had already planned to make Northman's child his successor as sheriff, thus ensuring that I would not lose many profits from Area 5. As restitution to Pamela Ravenscroft, I was even planning to insist that Victor close down his club in Area 5 and confine all of his personal businesses to Area 1—thus ingratiating myself with Northman's child and the Viking's other followers.

I growled as I thought about the loss of Victor. Indeed, part of me had wanted him to solve the problem of Northman and his telepath.

"Victor, your letting yourself get killed has really put a wrench in my plans," I sneered.

Now I would be forced to count on Freyda to solve the Northman dilemma, and I no longer had a back-up plan.

At least—not yet.

I thought of Compton. Tool that he was, having him bond with Ms. Stackhouse would not be the end of the world. Bill was easily manipulated and controlled, and Sookie seemed to have some residual affection for him. Thus, his complacency would likely influence her to be complacent.

It was Northman who had stood in the way of my controlling Sookie up to that point. Well—him and Sookie's reputation as the "Angel of Rhodes."

Because of the bombing in Rhodes and Sookie's subsequent heroism, there had been additional impediments to my simply sweeping in and taking her from my subordinate. I did not want to risk the wrath of vampires like Russell Edgington, who had taken a liking to the telepath. And then there was her fairy family to consider. And—earlier that evening Northman had mentioned the demons!

I rolled my eyes. Maybe I should have just told the Viking to kill her when he had asked!

No—I wanted Sookie for my own. I just needed to manipulate her into believing that she was "choosing" to be in my service.

Perhaps, Freyda and Compton were the key to that.

I sighed.

The whole situation was too damned complicated!

"The telepath should be mine by right," I muttered to myself before forcing myself to be calm.

If Freyda forced Eric and Sookie apart, that would surely sway Sookie's preference in my favor.
And—if Compton was there to pick up the pieces of Sookie's heart—that would benefit me as well.

And—if the witches could eliminate the blood bond as they claimed? Well—that would be fucking ideal!

My private phone rang, and I looked down to see who was calling.

Bill Compton.

I quickly answered.

"Compton," I said.

"Your Majesty," he returned respectfully. "Have you heard about the events of this night?" he asked.

"I received a phone call from Northman," I responded.

"So you know Victor is gone?" he asked.

"Yes."

There was a pause.

"I have the eye witness account of one of Victor's must trusted people," Bill said. "It is possible that it is more accurate than Eric's. And I have additional news that you need to know about."

"Tell me," I commanded insistently.

I listened as Compton told me a similar story to the one Northman had conveyed. According to Victor's loyal guard, a group of Weres and fairies had—indeed—attacked Fangtasia.

Bill also confirmed—with a feral growl—that the Viking had allowed Victor to have "time alone" with Sookie. Surprisingly, according to Bill's source, Victor had conducted himself as a "gentleman" and had merely been speaking with the telepath when the attack had occurred. Honestly, I found it odd that Victor would not take advantage of Northman's "generosity." On the other hand, I could see how Victor might have wanted to ingratiate himself with the telepath by pretending to be much more kind than I knew he was.

By far, the most interesting piece of information Bill shared was about Victor's scheme to break Eric and Sookie's blood-bond—a scheme which had apparently worked.

I did not waste time being angry at Victor over the fact that he had not told me about his plan. Clearly, he had been hoping to claim the telepath for himself—and I could not blame him for that machination.

He had always preferred asking forgiveness over seeking permission. And—as long as his schemes had worked and brought me a profit—I had never punished him too much for "overstepping."

"So you are sure that the bond-breaking has worked?" I finally asked Bill—in order to stop his incessant prattling about "Sookeh."

I swear! When Compton was riled up, he couldn't properly pronounce anything—even the name of the woman he supposedly "loved."
"Yes. I am certain, Your Majesty," he responded. "I am sorry if you did not know of Regent Madden's plans," he added contritely.

"I know of everything in my kingdom," I lied.

"Of course," Compton quickly agreed. "I need your counsel, Your Majesty. I am not sure where Sookeh is. And I have no way of knowing just how damaged she was from the severing spell."

I contemplated for a moment. "You still have a blood tie with Miss Stackhouse—do you not? In that case, you could easily find her and assess her wellbeing."

Bill sighed. "I do have a blood tie with her, but I am afraid it has grown quite faint. It has been a while since she's had my blood. And then there was the silver poisoning," he reminded. "I have to be within a mile or two of her to feel her presence."

Useless—thy name is Bill Compton.

"Well—then," I said with an edge of warning, "that means that you will need to use your skills as Area 5's Investigator to track her down."

"Track her?" he asked—as if he had no idea where to begin.

The idiot!

"Do you know where Northman's safe houses are located?" I asked impatiently.

"Yes," he responded. "Some of them," he added.

I rolled my eyes. The supposed Area 5 Investigator seemed pretty fucking inept at investigating to me!

"Northman disclosed a list of addresses to me," I conveyed, "though it is unlikely complete. I will email it to you. I want you to check all of his known addresses and businesses to see if the telepath is at any of them. If she is—and if the situation is favorable—I want you to secure her and bring her unscathed to Fangtasia tomorrow night."

"Fangtasia?" he asked. "Why? That would just be taking her to Eric—if he doesn't already have her in his grasps again! And then there's Thalia to contend with!"

I sighed.

"If you are correct about the bond being broken, then Eric is weakened—maybe even incapacitated for the rest of the night. Once you track down Sookie—if you can manage that—assess the situation. If she is a prisoner of some kind, then report back to me. If she is not, then convince her to go with you."

"Why not just order Eric to make sure she's at Fangtasia tomorrow night?" Bill asked.

I sighed again. So. Fucking. Inept.

"I will if you fail in your task. But I'd rather not give Eric the chance to punish her for breaking the bond. Hell—he might even kill her for her defiance if he recovers enough before tomorrow night! Wouldn't you agree that it would be best for Miss Stackhouse to be in my custody as soon as possible?"

"Of course, Your Majesty," Bill said, finally agreeing to the task he should have never questioned.
"I will be at Fangtasia just after 11:30 P.M. tomorrow night," I clarified. "Bring Sookie to me after midnight if you get her."

"What of the witches?" Bill asked, at a volume so low that I realized that they had been present during our entire conversation.

The imbecile!

Still—beings capable of breaking bonds were not to be trifled with. Nor would I squander the witches' skill by having them executed.

I would prefer to put them on retainer.

"Do you know of a trustworthy vampire who can watch the witches while you look for Miss Stackhouse?" I asked. "Perhaps your informant about tonight's events?"

"Yes. He is still here," Bill said. I smirked when Bill did not mention the vampire's name. I knew that omission was a strategy that Bill was using. Victor had done the same thing at times. Not mentioning names meant that Bill would be able to take full credit for the information or for any successes that came of it.

Obviously—Bill felt that the situation would end in success for him. And, at least, that was positive news—for me.

"Have your associate keep watch over the witches and keep them safe. Northman may still be a danger to them—especially if they have, indeed, successfully severed the blood bond. Tell me—have they relayed how long the Viking will be weakened from the severing spell?"

I could hear a conversation occurring in the background as Compton spoke to a female—obviously the "lead" witch in the scenario, Amelia Broadway. The witch seemed to be confident that the Viking might "appear" normal by the next night, but that he would actually be quite weak, compared to his usual state.

The severing of the bond, according to Ms. Broadway, would have been extremely taxing for the Viking and for the telepath.

"Could Northman reestablish or heal the blood bond by forcing a single exchange with Miss Stackhouse?" I asked.

Bill growled out my query to the witch with clear desperation in his tone.

"No—Eric could start a new blood bond, but it would take at least three exchanges to complete it," the witch responded.

"Ask the witch if Northman could offset his physical symptoms by taking excess blood," I demanded into the phone.

Moments later, I heard Compton conveying my question.

"Only to a certain extent," Ms. Broadway responded. "Similar to a vampire losing his or her maker, there will be an emptiness in Eric, a painful ache. Even if he feeds a lot, he'll still be dealing with those effects."

I thought about the period of time right after my own maker had been slain. I had needed to protect myself by staying out of the public eye for several nights, for I had felt weak and easily distracted
I smiled to myself.

If Eric would be in a similar state the next night, that would work very well for me!

And—if he tried to protect himself by refusing to meet with me at Fangtasia the next night, I would call the Vampire Counsel and offer Northman's absence as proof that he had conspired against Victor. Whether the video footage backed that up or not, a sheriff refusing to greet his king on the night after his Regent had died would be extremely damning evidence against Northman.

Of course, even if Eric showed up, he would find himself in a catch-22 situation. If I questioned Northman about his "bond" and he lied, he would be guilty of treason and subject to punishment or death. If he admitted to the bond being broken, I would immediately claim the telepath as mine and provide the Vampire Council with clear evidence that Miss Stackhouse herself had been the one to set the bond-breaking scheme into motion. Eric's own words—from the calls I had recorded from him—would prove that. Of course, it would be essential that I was never implicated in the severing spell. Such a thing would be punishable by the Vampire Council.

However, Bill Compton was the perfect patsy. If necessary, I would bring him in to confirm that I knew nothing about the severing spell before it happened, thus exonerating me. Inconveniently—for Bill—the Council would likely punish him for colluding with Victor since they could no longer punish my dead Regent.

But, honestly, I was ambivalent about Compton's fate. He had already served his usefulness, and there were other tech-savvy vampires who could easily carry on his database project. Of course, if he lived through the next week, that would be fine too. With a little more training (a week in silver for questioning me would likely do the trick), he would be a good little minion.

"Make sure the witches are protected—and that they stay where they are for the time being," I told my underling. "And find Sookie Stackhouse."

"May I give her my blood if I find her—if I can get her away from Thalia?" Bill asked tentatively. "She was hurt by the severing spell."

"Only if her injuries threaten her life," I returned. "Otherwise, I want to assess the situation when I see her."

"Your Majesty," Bill said, even more hesitantly, "Victor had promised that Sookeh and I would be able to bond once Eric was out of the picture. As you know, there is great affection between Sookeh and myself."

"I had thought that her affection had cooled when she learned of your duplicity at your former queen's bidding," I smirked. I did so enjoy toying with Compton.

"It did. It had. Until the fairy war," Bill returned. "I believe that—since she is now free from her bond with Eric and his influence upon her blood—she will recognize my superiority as a suitor," he added in an accent so laced with Southern inflection that he might as well have been dressed in a gray Confederate uniform while sipping a mint julep under a weeping willow tree.

I rolled my eyes.

"Your candidacy to be her bonded will be considered," I said. And I would consider it—if Bill survived. As delectable as I figured the telepath's blood was—and as much as I intended to indulge in it—actually bonding with her did not appeal to me in the least. "In fact, you might be ideal for
"the job," I added.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Bill said with relief.

"But I want to assess her and the situation in person before making my final decision," I reminded. "Oh—and, Bill—I will be extremely disappointed if Northman damages the telepath in any way before I can take over her protection."

"Why not just order him not to?" Bill asked.

Again with the ridiculous questioning! Definitely a week in silver at the minimum would be required to break Billy boy of that annoying habit!

"Eric cannot know that I am aware of the severing spell," I indulged the underling—mostly so that he wouldn't run his mouth and give away the fact that I knew Eric was weakened. "Your trying to track Miss Stackhouse down makes sense and can be blamed on your personal concern for her—because of both the attack at Fangtasia and the punishment Eric gave her earlier. In fact, if you didn't try to rescue her," I said somewhat mockingly, "wouldn't that seem odd?"

"You are right," Compton said seriously, having not picked up on my sarcasm. "I will find her," he added, right as I hung up.

I wasn't about to deal with anymore inane questions from him.

I chuckled. Suddenly, I was genuinely looking forward to the next night. With the Viking at less than one-hundred percent, any takeover attempt he might have been scheming would be easily dealt with.

I dialed my phone.

"Felipe," Freyda purred as she answered after two rings.
"Freyda, dear," I said. "I was wondering if you might enjoy having your new consort available to you sooner rather than later."

"Eric would already be here if I had my way. But he is insisting upon dragging his feet," the Oklahoma queen pouted. "I think it's his silly affection for the human woman that is causing the delay."

"Well—I have it on good authority that the blood-bond between Northman and the telepath was severed by magic earlier tonight. And that will bring their pledging into question too, for—without blood—it means very little. Thus, when you next make your claim upon the Viking, he will have no valid argument against it. Plus, it seems that the telepath herself initiated the bond-breaking, so any affection for the woman felt by Northman likely evaporated with the spell itself."

"That is good news," Freyda responded, clearly elated.

"Of course, to push Northman's transfer from my retinue to yours through immediately, I require a favor of you," I said after a moment.

"What favor?" she asked hesitantly.

"Nothing too difficult, my dear. Just a bit of backup—in Shreveport. Tomorrow night," I said. "Just in case Eric is planning a coup against me."

"Eric wouldn't be so reckless," she returned.

"Perhaps, not generally, but," I paused, "he may be desperate. Victor died tonight."

"Really? Because of negligence on Eric's part? I doubt that very much!" Freyda defended. "How did Victor die?" Freyda asked with unfeigned surprise. Apparently, she was not "in the know" enough to have heard the gossip yet.

"Yes, Victor is dead," I responded. "He was at Fangtasia with Sookie Stackhouse in Northman's office when he was slain. According to Northman, a group of Weres and fairies attacked the club."

"Do you not believe Eric's account?" the queen asked, having sensed the doubt in my tone.

"I have no reason to doubt Northman—yet."

"But you do question his story."

"I have another source—one of Victor's people—who corroborates Eric's version of events. However, I am not fully convinced that Eric was not behind the fairy attack."

"Why would fairies help him?" she asked. Freyda was unaware, of course, that Miss Stackhouse was part-Fae. With Victor dead, yet another individual who knew about the telepath's heritage was gone, and that was a good thing. I didn't want her to be even more coveted.

"Northman once had a working relationship with Niall Brigant," I responded enigmatically. "And it
was no secret that Eric hated Victor. The animosity between the two of them grew exponentially after the takeover. And Victor further stirred the pot by opening a club in Eric's territory," I shared.

"Yes. I heard about that," Freyda commented. "I admit that I'd hoped that the opening of Victor's club would serve as yet another impetus for Eric to recognize that a life in Oklahoma would be superior to his existence in Louisiana. But I agree. It did seem unwise for Victor to run the risk of inflaming Eric's ire."

"Indeed."

"So Victor's death is suspicious because of where it happened?" she asked.

"Yes. Or—perhaps—things occurred as Northman described them. After all, like I said, one of Victor's own people has substantiated the sheriff's story."

"So—fairies and Weres united?" Freyda asked skeptically.

I shared her cynicism. Such a thing had never happened before—at least, not that I knew of. However, the intrigue that seemed to swell around the telepath added a certain level of credibility to the events.

"There is another thing, too," I shared. "Apparently, a part of the attackers' plan was to incapacitate the vampires in the club before they even entered it."

"But how?" she asked.

"They laced Royalty Blended with Fae blood that could not be detected. Based upon the accounts of Northman and the other informant, it seems a minor miracle that any vampires in the club survived—perhaps too much of a miracle," I added.

"What?" Freyda gasped. "Fae blood?"

I briefly explained what both Northman and Compton had told me about the attack and warned the Oklahoma Queen to beware of her artificial blood supply. Given the fact that both she and I fed from only live donors, we would not be in personal danger. But it was best that our subjects were warned just in case the fairies were moving to start a war.

After my explanation, Freyda agreed to send an entourage of ten to Fangtasia the next night.

"And will you not accompany them?" I asked—baiting her.

"I'll come to Shreveport," she granted, "but I will wait to come to Fangtasia until my people inform me that there is no danger."

I smirked. Freyda was not exactly known for being battle-worthy. "A wise plan," I complimented her—more-like patronized her.

Not that she would discern the difference.

By the end of our conversation, it was crystal clear that Freyda was hoping to swoop in and claim Northman. She also hoped to take him with her when she returned to Oklahoma. I hoped so too.

"Until tomorrow night," I said.

"Until then," she returned before hanging up.
I sighed. Unfortunately, losing Victor and Northman would leave me with two power voids in Louisiana, and Pamela Ravenscroft was no longer a viable option to replace her maker as sheriff.

I frowned and began contemplating successors for both Victor and the Viking.

A king's work was truly never done.

SANDY SECHREST POV

"Miss Sechrest, I am surprised to hear from you," the male voice said.

"I am a little surprised I called too," I agreed, looking around me. I had run to a deserted patch of the desert twenty miles outside of Vegas, but that did not mean that I intended to be any less cautious than I normally was.

It would mean the end for me if I were overheard.

"May I ask why you have called?" he asked. "The king's human secretary has already emailed his itinerary. Do you have additional instructions about the king's visit tomorrow night?"

"No. I mean—yes. I have information for you," I conveyed somewhat uncertainly.

"Information?" the man asked.

I was quiet for a few long minutes, though the person I had called did not seem impatient. I appreciated that. I had never betrayed Felipe. Hell—I had never even considered it before he had let his greed for territory and riches overrule his duty to his people.

Moreover, a part of me wondered if things would be better now that Victor was gone—if I should give Felipe time to "get over" any negative influence Victor had had over him, as a human might get over a nasty stomach virus.

But then I recalled just how difficult it had been to compose a list of vampires loyal to Felipe, and ten of them—the king's private guards—had been automatic choices! But coming up with another twenty vampires who respected Felipe enough to protect him from one such as the Viking? Well—that had not been possible.

Too many of the vampires in Nevada would want Eric Northman rewarded for doing away with Victor Madden.

I was one of them.

I looked toward Las Vegas, a city I truly loved, remembering a time when there had been far fewer lights. When I first met Felipe right after he was made king of the state, he had been arrogant—to be sure—but most vampire monarchs were arrogant. Arguably, they had to be.

Though certainly interested in profiting from his position, Felipe had been happy to "share the wealth" with his underlings. He had raked in profits from his casinos, but—in turn—he had spent much of those profits making Nevada one of the strongest kingdoms in the New World. After the possibility of synthetic blood became known to vampires, Felipe had been one of the first monarchs to embrace the idea of "coming out of the coffin." Moreover, he had established strict laws to ensure that humans were not mistreated by vampires—even before the Great Revelation. Of course, all of this was for his own profit too, but there had been a time when profit and progressiveness went hand-in-hand for Victor.
But during the past several years, Felipe had allowed Victor to burrow into his ear more and more.

And that burrowing had changed the once broadminded king.

Nowadays, Felipe taxed his subjects excessively so that he could pay for takeovers that had not helped Nevada in any tangible way.

And, recently, Felipe had begun talking about taking over Missouri—so that he could profit from the vampire-owned casinos along the Mississippi River in St. Louis! Hell! I had even heard him speaking with Victor about attempting takeovers all along the Mississippi River so that he could eventually own a fleet of riverboat casinos and create a "floating" Vegas.

I shook my head sadly, nostalgic for the days when Felipe de Castro had been too wise to covet an Empire. That time seemed long gone.

The king was now so focused upon the accumulation of territory, wealth, and power that he no longer acknowledged that true power arose from loyalty. He had once enjoyed that in spades, but—in the last few years—many of the older vampires had left the state.

I sighed, even as I acknowledged that Victor had not been the only thing that had changed Felipe. If anything, the king had enjoyed having Victor as a "yes man" for his own changing priorities. It had been around the time of Felipe's maker's true death that the king had begun to change; clearly, it had been his maker who had kept him grounded.

I closed my eyes tightly for a moment. It was time for me to accept the fact that Felipe had become a self-interested king who no longer served his people; thus, he no longer deserved my loyalty. It was time for me to place my loyalty in someone else.

Someone who deserved it.

"Do you wish to end this call?" that someone asked, breaking me from my musings.

"No," I said. "But I need another moment."

"Take the time you need," he responded almost comfortingly.

I appreciated his patience.

Though our association had never been "close," I had known the vampire on the phone for five centuries. I knew that he was well-regarded as a leader and warrior, and I had grown to respect his business acumen in the months since the takeover. He had been professional and precise in all of his dealings with the king and me. I also knew that he was loyal to his people, and I had argued vehemently against Victor's constant interference in Area 5.

I sighed. Indeed, Eric Northman had had good reason to be concerned about Victor. And better reason to be pissed off at Felipe!

Felipe's choice for Regent of Louisiana had been a poor one. With no provocation other than his own covetous nature, Victor had done his best to undermine Eric at every turn—personally and professionally.

And Felipe had done nothing to keep his regent in check! He should have shown Eric a lot more fucking respect!

But he'd done the opposite. Felipe had done nothing as Eric, the most respected vampire in any of
his states, was claimed by—more like "sold" to—Queen Freyda, an unworthy monarch to say the fucking least! And—although Felipe had not initiated Eric's "sale"—any worthy monarch would have stopped the transaction no matter the cost!

I scoffed. I had seen Felipe's finances. He had more wealth than he could ever go through, though he now refused to use his "own" considerable fortune to better his kingdoms. He counted on taxes and tributes for that. Of course, he was not shy about profiting personally from his kingdoms.

I sighed and I spoke into the disposable phone I had gotten.

"Thirty vampires will be coming with Felipe tomorrow night," I shared. "But—if you plan to act—eighteen of them will follow you."

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I selected the vampires. Not being able to find thirty in all of Nevada who would support the king against you was a deciding factor in my contacting you," I relayed.

"Will you be among the vampires who come with Felipe?" Eric asked me.

"Yes," I responded.

"And who will you fight with—should there be a fight?" he asked.

I paused for a moment.

"You. I will fight for you, so I suppose you can consider me number nineteen."

The line was silent for a minute as if Eric were contemplating my information and declaration.

"I have other news too," I said.

"What is that?" he asked.

"Felipe has called Freyda for reinforcements. He expects that you will either be dead or on your way to Oklahoma by the end of tomorrow night."

"Do you know how many the Oklahoma Queen will bring?" he asked.

"Ten is the number Felipe asked for," I said. "Freyda will not come to Fangtasia unless her people signal that all is well."

"How do you know this?" he asked me.

"Felipe has grown sloppy in his ambition. I have been listening to his phone calls in order to monitor his communications with Victor and to ensure that the king didn't fuck himself over," I answered honestly.

"But now you are fucking him over?" Eric asked.

"It was not an easy choice to be disloyal. Had Felipe not already broken covenant with his people through his actions, I would have never betrayed him," I shared.

The line fell silent for almost a minute.

"No matter what occurs," Eric finally said, "no one will ever learn of this conversation from me. If
you feel as if fighting with me will compromise you too much, I will understand if you cannot."

"Thank you," I said sincerely. "But I have made my decision and will stick by it."

"Thank you," he returned quickly. "Your help is—unexpected and welcome."

I sighed. "Felipe intends to steal your woman, Miss Stackhouse. He has learned information that your blood bond with her has been broken and that you are weakened because of it. But you should know that he has been contemplating ways to take Miss Stackhouse from you for many months."

I stood up straighter, even though no one was there to see me. "Such a thing is criminal among vampires. It goes against one of the tenants my maker taught me to hold dear," I shared, thinking of the one who had made me. A hundred years after Rina Marquez had turned me, she had found a human with whom she'd bonded. And—eventually—that human had died. My maker had followed her beloved by meeting the sun. But before that had happened, they had shared many beautiful years together.

A love like theirs was something I strove, one day, to find—though I intended to turn my beloved. An enduring love was something that I felt like my kind should nurture—not try to destroy.

"I will remember this act of friendship you have offered," Eric said.

I could tell that his words were a vow. And I appreciated the honor in them—the honor in him.

It had been a long time since I'd had a leader with honor.

"You knew my maker—did you not?" I asked.

"Yes. I met Rina," he confirmed.

"She held you in high regard," I commented.

"I heard about your maker's death—and how it occurred," he said gravely. "I am ashamed to say that I initially ridiculed her choice to meet the sun once her human mate died. I did not understand her actions at the time."

"Will your Sookie allow herself to be brought over?" I asked curiously.

"I think so. I am not certain," he said.

"You will not force her?" I asked.

There was a pause. I could not blame the Viking for not being completely forthcoming with me. Thus I spoke up, sharing more of myself in order to prove my trustworthiness just a little bit more. "My maker was weary of her life when she met her mate. She would have made him a vampire if that is what he had wanted, but he never made the request of her; I think that is how she preferred it. I know that she was content to live out his normal lifespan with him. She was extremely gratified during her years with him—happier than I'd ever felt her before." I paused for a moment. "She allowed me to know of her plans to meet the sun when he was gone, and I never doubted her contentment with that decision."

"Your maker was lucky if she found such happiness," he responded.

"She was lucky," I said sincerely. "Until tomorrow night, Sheriff."
"Until tomorrow night," he said.

I hung up and once more contemplated the twinkling lights of Las Vegas in the distance. I had always loved how the city rose from the desert—more like a taunt to nature than an oasis.

As a woman drawn to mathematics, I had sometimes had a difficult time gaining respect in some of the more rigidly patriarchal cultures I had lived in. Being of color only exacerbated the way I had been underestimated—undervalued. But I had enjoyed Vegas from the start. The old mobsters from the east coast had literally gone about bending the landscape to their desires.

And one of them, Meyer Lansky, had not been reticent about hiring a woman to help him increase his Vegas empire—though his involvement in the city was much more "behind the scenes" after his friend, Bugsy Siegel, was killed in 1947.

That being said, Meyer and I were both very good at "behind the scenes"—though that was not our only similarity.

As a Jewish man, Meyer had had to deal with his own share of prejudice, which was why he had not discounted me for being black or female. From our first association in Cuba, he had respected me for my talent and for the money I could make him. And Meyer had been one of the few humans before the Great Revelation who knew what I was, though I had glamoured him not to speak of it.

With the capability of being just as cruel towards his enemies as any vampire, Meyer did not have a problem with working with my kind. In fact, he and I taught each other a good deal about how to torture humans who tried to double cross us. His methods had been quite creative, and his "playground" had been the very patch of desert upon which I stood.

And—when de Castro became the King of Nevada (which had not warranted her own vampire monarch before Las Vegas rose from the desert)—I helped to grease the wheels between him and Meyer, as well as with many of the other human mob bosses. In turn, de Castro had not made a fuss when I chose to continue working primarily for Meyer until his death in 1983. After that, I had turned my attentions toward Felipe's interests, and I helped him increase his fortune on the burgeoning Vegas strip, which had been my brainchild when downtown Vegas became a bit stale.

I sighed, acknowledging that the world was all about evolution.

I had asked Meyer once if he wanted to be turned, but he declined. I had never asked his reason, but I think it had to do with guilt over how violent his human life had been. It was surprising that the cement of the desert city wasn't tinged in red! Indeed, much of Vegas's concrete contained the bodies of the enemies of the "old" mob bosses. I knew that well. I had put many of them there.

I sighed, feeling my great affection for the city in the distance. No matter how much it changed, the "numbers" of it stayed comfortably the same. Oh—more zeroes had gotten added to the end of those numbers over the years, but they were as consistently interesting to me as ever.

I recalled the last time I spoke with Meyer. He had always felt as if he had betrayed Bugsy because he had known that a hit was being put on him due to Bugsy's mismanagement of the Flamingo casino. Already working for Meyer at the time, I'd thought that Bugsy was a fucking tool. But Meyer was loyal—perhaps to a fault.

He had never completely forgiven himself for what happened to Bugsy. Maybe that was why he'd not thought he would make a good vampire.
On the contrary, I realized, as I began running back to the city, that I would not be losing any sleep—proverbially, of course—over betraying Felipe de Castro.

Maybe that's what made me a good vampire.
Chapter 32: Kept

SOOKIE POV

NINETY MINUTES LATER

"Hello, my lover," Eric said as he crawled into bed behind me.

"Hey," I mumbled, looking at the clock. It read 3:54 A.M., but I hadn't been asleep. Just in that stage between dozing and wakefulness.

Thalia had driven me part-way to one of Eric's safe houses before she'd flown me the rest of the way—just in case Eric's vehicle was being tracked.

Of course, the vampiress and I had stayed in Eric's car until Bill had—predictably—called after he'd spoken to Rasul. Thalia had been dismissive and vague—just as we'd planned.

Sadly, Thalia had ditched my old cellphone in the car—though Eric promised to get me a new one. I figured he'd try to get me a lot of new, fancy things before all was said and done. And I'd resolved to let him—as long as his gifts were within reason.

I'd always been so afraid of the notion of being a "kept woman" that I'd failed to recognize the irony of that label. "Kept women" weren't really "kept." They were ultimately disposable. At best, they were "maintained" by a lover so that they would "keep their distance."

What I'd realized—what I'd come to trust—was that Eric aimed to actually "keep me."

Keep me with him.

Keep me close.

Keep me for as long as I let him.

And I'd decided, in turn, to let him.

So—if buying me a new phone or even a new car pleased him, he would be "kept" happy.

Just as long as the silly vampire didn't go overboard.

But, honestly, I trusted him not to. Eric had never tried to adorn me in jewels or lavish me in furs—not that the latter would have been practical in the Louisiana heat. On the contrary, he'd bought me a driveway and a coat. I used to interpret that as Eric knowing that I wouldn't accept extravagant things from him. But now I recognized that Eric bought me practical things because he, too, was practical.

Yes—I was finally ready to be kept by my vampire. And I intended to keep him as well—with both hands gripped onto his fantastic ass if possible.

Speaking of that ass—I found it in my grips even as I continued to stir from my near-dozing state.

Eric chuckled.
"All went well? With your trip here?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah."

After Thalia and I had ditched any electronics that might have been used to track us, the vampiress had delivered me to a residence that Eric had bought and redecorated with me in mind—one he'd told me about only the night before. It wasn't too large, and it looked like a "real" house—rather than like a "cookie-cutter" had created it. The house was isolated and comfortable. No—"cozy" was a better word for it. The main floor had a kitchen, a dining room, and a living room. Upstairs was a large loft bedroom and bathroom. There was a light-tight bedroom below the living room—with a small bathroom attached.

However, the entire house could become light-tight at the touch of a few buttons.

Eric told me that the house would be our retreat—and that, even if he became king, the house would be a secret haven for us if I liked it.

I did like it—very much.

Currently, only three people knew about the safe house: me, Thalia, and Eric.

A glamoured human had delivered food and other human necessities like toilet paper—though he'd thought that the items were for an agoraphobic woman in her fifties. According to Eric, an all-human team had been used to do the renovations on the house, and then my bonded had glamoured them to forget about the nature of those innovations—especially the vampire-specific elements.

Though the home had all the "technological comforts" I could ask for, Eric had assured me that the house was "off the grid"—thanks to the designing of the home's security system by Molly, a vampire in Eric's retinue.

Even, Molly, however, had needed to talk Eric through the installation of the security system since he'd not allowed her to know the location of the home either.

After arriving at the house and looking around, I'd decided to lie down in the bedroom below ground. I knew I'd have to leave Eric at some point the next day when a glamoured human would come to collect me and take me to my home in Bon Temps, but I vowed to spend whatever time I could in my vampire's arms—even once he was dead for the day.

"Where's Thalia?" I asked my mate.

"Already on her way to Bon Temps."

I nodded. "You know—when I told her that she could rest for the day in the old cubby Bill built, she looked at me like I'd insulted her entire family."

Eric chuckled. "She will likely dig a hole to rest in."

"I just hope that she'll eventually make her own resting place inside the house," I sighed, "so that she's comfortable."

"She might, but—then again—I've always known Thalia to prefer the ground," he commented.

I chuckled, but didn't comment. Thalia was certainly "old school," but—then again—she knew what it took to survive. I was glad that she was on our side. "She agreed to be Plan B—by the way," I shared.
"I inferred that. And I'm glad of it," Eric sighed as he rubbed his nose against my neck.

"Your part of the bond is practically sizzling with whatever it is that you're thinkin' and plannin'," I commented as I leaned into his touch. "Care to share?"

He sighed and I could feel him nod in affirmation against my neck.

"We have more enemies coming tomorrow than I'd anticipated."

I tensed up.

"But we also have more allies." He paused. "It will be a coin flip."

"So that part hasn't changed," I commented after a moment.

"No."

"Who are the extra enemies?" I asked.

"Felipe called Freyda for back-up earlier tonight," he explained. "It seems that he intends either to kill me or to made sure that I return to Oklahoma with Freyda."

I felt a growl well up in me. "I knew I should have made my claiming of you official today," I practically snarled as I turned over and gripped Eric in my arms—likely digging into his body with my nails. But I couldn't help myself.

I felt . . . like a fairy.

"My vampire!" I cried emphatically.

"Yes. Yours," he returned, his eyes full of passion and amusement in equal parts.

"So—what will Freyda's presence do to the plan?" I asked after reining in my possessive feelings, at least to a certain extent.

Eric shrugged. "The queen will not actually be present at Fangtasia—unless her people give her the all-clear signal. Likely, she will go back to Oklahoma once she realizes that her people are lost and Felipe is dead."

"And if she doesn't?" I asked.

Eric smirked, his eyes twinkling with mischief and the promise of mayhem.

Mayhem.

Violence.

Eric was mine—but he was also my vampire. And—in that moment—something in me clicked. Perhaps, it was a new level of acceptance of his violent side.

Or a new level of trust in his honorable side—that it would always rule the rest of him.

I suppose it didn't matter.

"If Freyda tries to claim me, I believe that a fairy of my acquaintance will have something to say about that. Plus, Freyda will be powerless if we take down Felipe. The Council will make me king
or they will order my execution for treason. Either way, Freyda will soon become a non-issue."

"But?" I asked sensing a bit of hesitation in the bond.

"If Freyda were to be killed somehow, that would be very bad for me," he said.

"How so?" I asked. Truthfully, the thought of Freyda dying was appealing to me on many levels. It wasn't as if she'd done anything malicious; who wouldn't want Eric, after all!? But I still wanted her gone in the worst way possible because of the threat she posed.

Because she wanted to take Eric away from me.

"If Freyda were to die tomorrow night, my motives would be in question—more than they already will be," Eric relayed contemplatively. "If Freyda dies, my play against Felipe will likely be interpreted as a move to get out of the contract Appius made with Freyda—instead of an attempt to avenge Sophie-Anne."

"Felipe having Freyda in Shreveport is him covering his bases—isn't it?" I asked.

"Astute observation," Eric complimented. "And—yes. I believe that Felipe recognizes that Freyda being killed tomorrow night would benefit him in many ways, so I would not be surprised if he does not manufacture the situation so that she is 'unexpectedly' present at Fangtasia."

"How would Felipe benefit if she were killed and he wasn't?" I asked.

"For one, he would likely get her state—if she died fighting with him against me. Of course, Felipe is likely hoping that things are as I said they were so that there will be no further conflict. In that case, Freyda's appearance will serve only one purpose: to hurry along the enactment of Appius's contract. After all, Felipe now expects to receive a sizeable bounty from Freyda. And—now that Victor is dead—Felipe could never fully trust me again. Not that he ever did. And—because of that—he will want me in Oklahoma as soon as possible."

"Plus, if you were gone—and if our blood bond was no more like Felipe thinks—I'd be ripe for the picking," I sighed. "So we have to make sure that Freyda survives."

"Yes," Eric agreed. "Regrettably, but yes—for now."

"Then we will," I said confidently.

"On a more positive note, Sandy Sechrest reached out to me. She and most of the vampires Felipe is bringing with him tomorrow night will join us."

"You think you can trust her?" I asked with surprise.

"I do, but I'm not fully counting on her," he shared.

I smiled to myself. Eric was nothing if not a "pragmatist" (thank you word-of-the-day calendar). He wasn't about to put his complete trust in a vampire he didn't know very well.

"But you have a good feeling about her?" I asked. I'd met Sandy Sechrest before, and I'd always wondered why someone who seemed so intelligent would throw her lot in with the likes of Felipe and Victor.

"Yes. Her maker was like me," he whispered, even as he gently stroked my hair.

"Like you? How?" I asked.
"She fell in love and bonded with a human," he responded. "Not that you are fully human."

"What happened to her? To Sandy's maker?"

"Rina met the sun," Eric sighed. "From the accounts I heard, she was like Godfrey in some ways. You remember him from Dallas?"

"Yes," I responded softly. Godfrey had been suicidal because of having to endure an incredibly long life. A part of me had understood why he'd been weary of his existence, but I would never understand why he would help the Fellowship of the Sun capture another of his kind.

"Rina was certainly not a danger to other vampires," Eric clarified. Sometimes I really thought he could read my mind!

"But she wanted to die?" I asked.

I felt Eric nodding against my neck. "Rina was a good maker by all accounts. But Sandy was not her first child—just her youngest. Rina had lost her other children and had lived a very long life by the time she met her human beloved. She made the choice to bond with him and live out his human life with him."

"He didn't want to become a vampire?" I asked.

Eric stiffened a little. "I do not know," he responded. "From what I have heard about the situation, Rina's human was aware of her nature, but the inner workings of their relationship were between them—and, perhaps, Sandy to a lesser extent. In truth, the vampire who told me what became of Rina ridiculed her choice to bond with a human. I did too," he added, his tone full of regret. "I did not—then—know what a bond could mean."

We were silent for a few moments as we simply looked into each other's eyes. I wasn't angry that Eric had once been less than charitable in his thoughts for a bonded couple. Indeed, if anything, I was impressed by how far he'd come.

How much he'd evolved.

We'd both evolved a lot since meeting one another. And I knew that we'd change even more before all was said and done.

"Change is a good thing," I said into my bonded's chest.

"Yes," he agreed.

"You'll change me one day," I whispered significantly.

"If you want," he said, tensing again.

"Do you want?" I asked.

"More than anything."

"Then you will," I said with an assuredness and certainty I'd not felt before about the topic of becoming a vampire. "We'll decided on the right time together. Or—more likely than not—you'll have to save my life by changing me," I added quietly.

He pulled me impossibly closer to him, and—through the bond—I felt relief swell inside of him like a large wave making its way slowly but surely through the ocean.
That was Eric in a nutshell, I thought, as I snuggled against him. Strong. Assured. Inevitable. Yet calming and evolving at the same time.

"So—Sandy has a reason to be on our side?" I asked.

"Yes. She loved her maker very much, but—by the time Rina turned Sandy—she was already lamenting the length of her existence and the losses she'd had to endure. If I interpreted Sandy's words correctly tonight, the only time she felt her maker truly content was when Rina was with her beloved human."

I enjoyed the feeling of Eric's caresses as I took in what he'd told me.

"So Sandy and her people are most likely with us," I observed.

"Yes. If they aid us, they will easily counteract Oklahoma's number, leaving only Felipe and his loyal guards for the rest of us. Plus, I have called in every local ally I know I can trust. And then there are the demons. And the witches."

"Oh—how are Bob and Amelia?" I asked.

"Rasul has removed them from the home they were in and taken them to an apartment that cannot be traced to me. They are safe; Amelia has been given a disposable phone. Feel free to call her tomorrow if you wish."

I nodded against him. "Thanks."

"Your witches will meet up with Octavia tomorrow afternoon, and Molly will join them after sunset—as planned. Molly will use the surveillance system in Fangtasia to help them work their magic."

"How?" I asked curiously.

Eric responded matter-of-factly. "Having the witches in the middle of the action would be dangerous for them and for us. But—we will station them a block away from Fangtasia after the king and his forces arrive. That should be well within their casting range. By watching the surveillance feeds, which Molly will supply to them, they will be able to use their magic to protect you, me, and our allies from things like stakes."

"Really?" I asked incredulously. "They don't have to actually be there to—uh—do the hocus pocus stuff?"

"No," Eric returned, a smile in his voice.

I sighed with relief. "Okay. Well—that's good."

"Yes. It is good," he agreed.

"So—as soon as Felipe and his people are dead, what will happen?" I asked.

"It depends on Freyda. Hopefully, she will remain alive and well. If she returns to Oklahoma without a word, she will likely disavow any involvement in the takeover. And we will just wait for the Council to decide our fate."

"What if Freyda doesn't just leave?" I asked.

"If she comes to Fangtasia—if you are still willing—you can claim me right then and there. Of
course you will have to claim your Fae heritage at the same time," he said somewhat hesitantly. "Desmond has agreed to substantiate the claim."

"If?" I asked playfully as I ran a fingernail down his sculpted chest. Conveniently, he'd stripped before getting into bed.

"If," he said, his eyes intent upon mine. "It is not too late for you to back out."

I stopped the "naughty" passage of my finger down his body and brought my hand up to cup his cheek.

"It was too late not to fall in love with you the first night I saw you, Eric Northman. And I've already waited way too long to claim you!"

Whether it was the passion in my voice or the fervor from my side of the bond that convinced him, he was on top of me the next second, taking my breath away with a kiss that seemed to grip my lips almost violently.

I wasn't complaining—until I needed to breath. Thankfully, Eric seemed to sense that need before I did, and he moved to lavish my chin and neck with kisses.

"Is this what your bloodlust feels like?" I panted.

"What it feels like when I've stifled it all night," he practically growled.

I should have been afraid when his feral eyes and sharp fangs met my view. I should have recoiled when he hissed to signal that he was more animal—monster—than man in that moment.

"My monster," I whispered.

My head tilted back by instinct—in order to offer him the best "biting" angle. And bite Eric did.

And he drew my blood and made it his own—hard.

Though unstimulated by his fingers, tongue, or cock, my walls pulsed as Eric took me into himself, and then he put his wrist before my mouth.

I looked from the wound to his eyes. They were pools of pleading blue as he drew again of my blood. I grabbed his wrist and bit hard—as hard as I could.

Certainly, there was one aspect of vampirism I knew I would be able to handle once Eric changed me over: biting and taking blood.

And—yes—I did intend to let him change me. My mate had too much joie de vivre to become depressed like Rina—let alone Godfrey—but I worried about what he'd do if I died on him. Indeed, as soon as I realized that I wouldn't want to live without him, I knew that I wasn't about to make him live without me.

However, despite my decision, I hoped that my time as a human would stretch out as long as possible. Indeed, I was hoping for another decade or so of sun and "human" food before I graduated to stars and blood—and whatever other enhancements vampirism brought my way.

Thinking of blood, I bit harder into Eric's flesh and sucked his rich life-force into my mouth. Before the wound I'd made in his wrist had closed, he'd sealed the bite he'd made in me and had positioned himself above me. He didn't need to check to see that I was wet and ready for him; I'm
sure that he smelled my arousal.

He sank into me, even as I greedily nipped at his healing wound.

The lust now barreling into me through the bond I shared with Eric was almost too much to take, but I did take it—just as I took every inch of him as he stretched me.

And then I sent my own desire and pleasure back to him.

He grunted and pistoned into me hard—and fast.

Impossibly fast!

How he didn't break me in two was beyond me! How I kept up with him? Well that was a miracle. And then I added fuel to the fire by asking for more.

His fangs, still glistening pink with my blood, would have scared most people in the world—especially since his eyes were animalistic and his hair was hanging wildly about his shoulders. I realized, then, that I was truly seeing my mate in not just a lust-filled state, but also a bloodlust-filled state. As he'd said, he'd suppressed that bloodlust after the battle—even during the battle because he needed to be just as tactical as he was lethal. And then he'd suppressed his bloodlust again—with Jannalynn and Sandra Pelt.

I felt my love hitting against and then swirling with his bloodlust in our bond, and he shuddered above me. But before his eyes could soften, I ratcheted up my own lust.

"Harder, Eric," I gasped. "Keep fucking me harder!"

He yelled out several curses in his native language, as I wrapped my legs tightly around his thighs and began to lift my body more forcefully against his.

I said a quick thank you to Amelia for introducing me to Pilates, even as Eric's darkened eyes rolled back in his head. I smiled to myself with satisfaction. Getting him to break eye contact during sex meant that I was driving him wild.

And right now, I was happy for wild. I was happy to accept his "wild."

"More!" I yelled out.

"I'll hurt you," he growled, clearly trying to control himself.

"I'm not even close to being hurt," I growled back.

I could practically feel him assessing me through the bond before he began to take me a little harder. I wasn't naïve. I knew that Eric could "break" me during sex if he truly lost control, but I still wanted more. Maybe it was the fairy in me—or the fact that I was finally accepting that I was "more" than human that welcomed knowing more of the "beast" in him.

Whatever it was, I liked it.

And, clearly, he did too.

I could tell the exact moment when he freed himself to test both of our limits. The bed buckled a little and squeaked out a mild protest. But I was not protesting.

"Yes!" I yelled out as I bit at him—scratching at him and drawing his blood with both teeth and
"Cum! Cum right now!" Eric yelled almost angrily, though with a hint of desperation in his tone. He was never one to let himself finish before I did, and it was clear that he wouldn't be able to hold off for much longer. He needn't have worried. I was so close to cumming that I felt as if I was in the front car of a roller coaster—just dangling over the edge until the last car cleared the top.

And then it did in the form of Eric making his strokes shallower and moving so fast that his cock literally vibrated right against my G-spot.

But it was his forehead against mine that pushed me over the edge. It was the tenderest of touches, contrasting with what was happening below the waist. Indeed, his head practically rubbed against mine like a cat might rub against the leg of an "owned" human.

Intense possessiveness. He was marking me.

Intense pleasure. He was enjoying me.

Intense need. He was aching for me.

Overwhelming love. He was cherishing me.

He was trusting me with the knowledge that I owned him as much as he owned me.

Eric—and everything about him—was all that I could sense in my world at that moment.

My scream of passion and pleasure was soundless as my body began to contract.

I felt him thicken, grunt, and then spill into me several times before I lost myself for a moment.

I didn't black out—not exactly. But I got darned close.

I knew I didn't lose consciousness, however, because I continued to feel pleasure in both my body and the bond.

His pleasure. My pleasure.

I was pretty sure that it was all the same now.

"Are you well, min kära?" Eric all but purred, reminding me again of a cat.

I half-chuckled and half-panted. "You can feel how I feel, and you know that I am very well," I emphasized. "That was amazing," I added as I opened my eyes and cupped his cheek. "You are amazing."

"As are you," he said with a contented rumble. His forehead was still against mine, though we'd changed positions to be lying on our sides and facing one another. "You are happy. It is nice to feel you so happy," he added.

"You too," I said, frowning. "Eric, I'm so sorry that I . . . ."

He stopped my apology with a kiss that took away my ability to form words—as well as my breath—for a moment.

"No regrets, min kära," he said, his eyes leaving no room for argument.
Still, I tried to protest, but he kissed me breathless and speechless again.

"I can keep this up perpetually," he grinned boyishly.

"Until you die for the day," I reminded with a pant.

He shrugged. "It will not matter then. I will not hear you."

I couldn't help but to laugh.

"Just be happy, Sookie," he said sincerely. "The lives we are being forced to take on will not be easy. I will be a king and you will be my queen, but we will always face struggles—personally, politically, and professionally."

"That's just life?" I asked with a little smirk.

"Yes. And it is un-life too. But now we will be together for it."

"Yeah," I agreed, snuggling close to my vampire. "Together."
Ancient Interest

Chapter 33: Ancient Interest

THE ANCIENT PYTHONESS POV

It would have been "cheating" to help the Viking and the young telepath too much—or too directly—so I had not done so.

I would not do so.

After all, if they could not help themselves out of most of their scrapes . . . .

Why should I bother?

Plus, I did not like to cheat too much when it came to the future. Moreover, I believed in the Fates too much to piss them off—though I had never had the pleasure of actually meeting them.

But—like all things—I figured even that was just a matter of time.

Ironically, my attitude about noninterference made me a very unlikely individual to be a seer; indeed, the Fates had a sense of humor.

During my human days, not using my gift had been more difficult than it was now. Once my ability was discovered by my human people—the Spartans—I was isolated by them and named their Oracle. However, that did not mean my life was a comfortable one. On the contrary, when I resisted telling them all that I saw (for their own fucking good, I might add), they decided to keep me mildly to moderately drugged all the time in order to "encourage" my compliance.

In my constant state of "tipsiness," I would mindlessly share my visions with them, though most of them did not even apply to them! In retrospect, I was glad that my visions of faraway places and future times sometimes led them to fuck up.

Though the Spartans publicly claimed that my virginity added to my "sacredness," I was certainly no virgin!

At least not for long after I became the Oracle.

Plenty of the so-called powerful took me sexually. And why would they not? I was beautiful and alluring—mysterious and forbidden. During my younger years, I was considered very beautiful indeed! I had jet-black hair, and my eyes were bluer than the Mediterranean. Not to boast or anything, but I also had a body that any Siren would have killed for (and I had met a couple of them during my travels).

Yes—many Spartans "could not stop themselves" from sneaking private time with the "virginal" Oracle, and their attentions certainly did not take away from my gift. In fact, several of the Spartan men hoped to be able to father a child with me—one that inherited my abilities—but I never did become a mother.

At least not in the human fashion.

Despite not having many choices in my "life," I actually enjoyed the sexual aspect of it. Perhaps, being drugged all the time was why I was receptive to my lovers' attentions; I would never know
for sure. However, given the way my life had "evolved," any bitterness I had for the Spartans would have been a wasted emotion. They were all dead-dead, after all. And I was not. I had an existence that eventually allowed me to view them as ancient history.

I had not been turned in the prime of my beauty, but I could not be bitter about that either. Most other vampires were already intimidated by my gift—at least to an extent. That gift in a beautiful package would have created variables that would have been inconvenient for me.

With both fairy and elven blood flowing through my veins, I had already lived a long mortal life—of 125 years—by the time human age began to afflict me. My body wrinkled, and my joints became weathered, leading to my inability to walk quickly. Of course, my main "visible" affliction from others' points of view was, ironically, something I could not see. Humans called the affliction cataracts these days, and they took away my ability to see with my eyes.

Sadly, though vampirism eliminated the pain that "human" aging brought with it, none of the marks of that aging went away after I was turned. I still had wrinkles. I still limped—unless I hovered (which I only ever did when I needed to move quickly). And I still could not see with my eyes the way a "normal" vampire would. I saw the "real world" only with my "second sight"; I "saw" only the future.

Never the now.

But, of course, it had been my "second sight" which had shown me my maker.

My maker found me because I found him. Beginning in my 120th year, I'd had visions of him—and visions of what my existence would be like as a vampiress. The Fates, in the end, allowed me the choice of whether or not to become a vampiress or to die as a quasi-human. Indeed, if I had not influenced one of my loyal handmaidens to find my maker in the city and give him a message for me, he would have never come to me.

But I did choose him, and—in turn—he offered me a freedom I had never known. Without the drugs I had been taking almost my entire life, my mind became clearer than ever before. And sharing my visions with others became my choice.

Indeed, my maker never forced me to use my gift—even for him—though I volunteered information that would help us in our travels together. In fact, my maker only ever gave me one command regarding my "sight": to never tell him if I had a vision regarding his own true death.

Thankfully, the Fates had not been unkind to me when it came to that command. I never foresaw my maker's demise. Thus, I did not have to experience the torture of not telling him; I simply rose one night knowing that he was gone.

On the other hand, the Fates had chosen to offer me glimpses of what my life could be like after my maker died, but—again—it was my choice what to become from there. I could have simply disappeared to a small Greek Isle, existing on blood from the natives of that land and never telling anyone of my visions. I could have "lived" through those visions—witnessing the world like a voyeur.

But what was the fun in that? My human life had been too claustrophobic as it was. Thus, I gathered a new group of handmaidens around me—some Were, some human, and some vampires that I chose to make (after offering them their own choices)—and eventually, I made myself "known" to the vampire population at large.

My first order of business had been to seek out those who established the first Supernatural
Counsel in the Old World, for I had foreseen the good that they could do together. In turn, they asked me to become the arbiter for their most difficult cases. That role had always challenged and excited me, for my visions did not necessarily "help" me to know the whole truth. However, those whom I judged did not know that, and I learned to find the truth in a variety of ways. I also learned that the truly guilty always gave themselves away.

In one way or another.

Of course, being a one-person judge and jury—and being a seer—might have made me a target. But it was soon clear to all vampires that I was not one to air random dirty laundry—unless another dared to be a "real" threat to me. And—in the few cases when someone did—even the Fates could not protect him or her from my wrath.

I would use all that I knew and all of my craft to kill them and their progeny before they could move a single finger against me. Needless to say, word got around, and few had been tempted to act against me after my first century as a "known entity."

Yes. For the most part, I was revered and valued—not unlike I was by the Spartans—yet there was a big difference in my current existence. I was free.

Free to do whatever the hell I wanted to do.

Free.

Free and trusted.

What rankled me the most about my human days was that I had—ironically—never been trusted by my own "human" people. I had been born to Spartan parents, who had been unaware of their Supernatural relatives. I had grown up being a Spartan—feeling national pride and loyalty. If I had been trusted—accepted—I would have chosen to use my gift to aid my people voluntarily. I scoffed at the ignorance of those who had quite literally held me captive. I was a future teller, and they had used my visions to plan battles and crops and governments—yet they had so little trust in me as a person.

"Hypocritical bastards," I said aloud.

Indeed, to "protect" their secrets and the secrets of their little, temporary empire, the leader of Sparta even refused to allow a doctor to come to me when my actual vision first became blurry. My people had herbs that could have helped the problem—at least, slowing the progress of the cataracts. But I was not treated by doctors; my eyes were left to rot. Thus, by the end of my human life, I could see only shadows and a little light—like the dwellers in Plato's cave allegory. Perhaps, that had always been the Fates' intention, however. Indeed, sometimes the shadows that "real" beings emitted were more authentic than the beings themselves.

Thankfully, my other senses had grown since I had been turned; in fact, according to my maker, their unnaturally rapid growth was likely my vampire gift. Indeed, my ears and fingers and nose and tongue told me more about the world than my eyes had ever told me when I had been a human. And—my psychic visions added "sight" to the other senses in a way that probed far deeper than even a vampire's eyes could.

Yes—the Fates had been kind to me in many ways.

In turn, I had certainly limited the number of times that I had fucked with any of their plans.

As I said—I did not "cheat" often.
But I did cheat when something out in the larger world truly interested me.

And—simply put—the fairy and the vampire who fell in love and bonded interested me. I had lived a very long time and witnessed many, many things—both through experience and through my visions. One thing that I never thought I would see, however, was genuine love between a vampire and a fairy. Of course, Sookie Stackhouse was not all fairy; had she been, Compton would have certainly killed her. The Gods knew, he had almost killed her as it was!

But she had survived him. Sookie was just enough fairy to "match" Northman—to make their match interesting. And—then—there was her telepathy. It made me feel connected to her. Had she been alive during my human time, she may very well have been treated and used as I was. Indeed, during certain points of Sookie's life, it was only the Fates themselves that had prevented her from being exploited by her own government.

Perhaps, they had helped because Sookie, too, innately knew that she should not use her gift to cheat the Fates out of their own fun.

Though the future of the fairy and her vampire was coming more and more into focus with each vision I had of them, it was not quite yet set—even as it pertained to the de Castro issue. But the pair of lovers had a better than average chance of surviving that conflict. And, if they did survive the next week, there would be years of relative peace for them. And, by the time strife visited itself upon them again, I had "seen" that Miss Stackhouse would be a formidable vampire by her maker's side.

I smiled to myself. Yes—Sookie's "fairy nature" and her demon blood would make her a very interesting vampire, indeed! She would be stronger than most young vampires—and in much more control of herself than even I had been when a "young" vampiress. But in my defense, neither elves nor fairies (let alone humans) were known for their impulse control. Demons, on the other hand, were nothing if not disciplined. If they were not, the whole world would be perpetually ablaze—given the fact that most demons had the ability to shoot fire from their hands.

It was a pity that Sookie had not inherited that skill from her godfather's blood, and it was a blessing that the one Stackhouse descendent who had inherited that power would never have the chance to develop it. Luckily—for all of society—Jason Stackhouse had become a bitten Were, thereby stifling his demon genes, before he had reached an age that would allow him to develop his "fire ability!"

Like I said, the world would not have been ready for Jason Stackhouse with a demon ability—despite how amused I would have been.

From afar.

As for Sookie, she was destined to remain relatable to humans even once she became a vampire—even though she had, ironically enough, been mostly ostracized during her younger years for not being "human" enough.

Of course, what made Sookie most unique was not her mixed heritage. It was that she resisted prejudice, even though she still suffered from it. Her flaw was her difficulty accepting the fact that she did not deserve the prejudice she received. For many years, she had felt as though accepting love from another would ultimately "harm" that other. Thankfully, that fear had finally been put aside in regards to the Viking.

I smiled to myself as I recalled one of my more recent visions of the not-so-distant future. It would be Sookie's relatability combined with her mate's physical "charms" which would discourage others
from fucking with them. His becoming king would ultimately work out well for them. Within a few years, the nature of their "mixed" couple-hood would become known to humans. It would be the stuff of fairy tales—excuse the pun. They would be forced to be in the limelight to a certain extent, but that publicity would only help them to remain safe. Indeed, no one would want to risk the wrath of the Viking and the public who "adored" him and his mate! I had seen Eric and Sookie on the cover of People—after all.

People!

As if vampires were people. As if a fairy-demon-human hybrid was!

I smirked, but then frowned.

Sadly, I had also had visions where Sookie and Eric died at the hands of de Castro.

My frown deepened. A future without them in it was much less colorful and entertaining to me. For one, I knew that they would bring a certain richness to vampire summits that had been missing. Northman had the potential to be a truly visionary king, given his lovely mixture of practicality, self-interest, business acumen, and—most of all—playfulness. With his maker gone and the Freyda nonsense solved, the "lighter" side of the Viking would be able to come out more, especially as fostered by his pledged one. And—as for Sookie? Well—in time, I saw that she and I would become good friends, commiserating about our "extra" gifts—even before the night (decades from now) when her vampire would make her un-dead.

Oh—I did not see them or myself as agents of the Fates or anything lofty like that. I'd had my fill of being around those with such haughty—godly—aspirations during my human years. In the grand scheme of things, I knew that I could affect very little in a way that would effect sweeping change. I believed that the Fates controlled what I was able to "see," after all.

And I was glad of that.

So, again, I did not often risk fucking with those Fates.

I smiled to myself. The Viking and his fairy might have been just blobs of light and shadow when I had met them in Rhodes, but they lived vividly in my visions; in fact, one never knew that those two would be up to!

Certainly, the future was never just one thing. That was what most vampires did not understand about my gift. Choice (either bad or good) and will (either free or constricted) were variables that were always changing the future—and, therefore, my visions of it.

But, then again, there were certain events that seemed set into stone—no matter what future came. To say the truth, it was only those "fixed" events which truly caught my eye and my imagination.

Had Eric Northman and Sookie Stackhouse not shown up in one of those stone-like visions, I would not have taken much notice of either of them. However, the fact that they had now turned up in three of my invariable premonitions made them incredibly "special" to me.

Special enough for me to tempt the Fates—at least a little.

The first of the visions starring the practically star-crossed pair had been of their bonding in Rhodes. I specified "practically" because the two did not—as it turned out—have to die to be together. Or, at least, they had not met the true death yet.

I sighed as I thought about how things might have progressed after Eric and Sookie's bonding had
been completed.

They could have spoken honestly with one another in Rhodes—and saved themselves much trouble. But they were both stubborn, though I felt that Eric really should have grown out of some of his obstinacy by now.

One thousand years of existence left him with few excuses beyond the old "ingrained habits" story. Of course, the Viking had shown that he could evolve in a myriad of ways.

Eventually.

Still . . . .

Men!

It almost always took them longer to accept certain truths when it came to matters of the heart. I blamed the Y chromosome.

Of course, regardless of Sookie and Eric's actions after their bond was made "permanent," they had bonded in all of the visions I'd had about them before Rhodes.

That meant that they had been fated to bond.

And—when they meant business—the Fates were never to be denied (or cheated).

Only "helped."

The second invariable vision I had involving the pair of lovers involved their escape from Rhodes. Oh—there were many ways that they could have escaped, but it always did happen. And Sookie was always the one who saved Eric—though in some visions his progeny perished.

For my part, I had been glad to see Pamela survive.

She was entertaining as well.

In some of my visions, the bombing in Rhodes had led to the Viking immediately going to Sookie and initiating a discussion that led to their becoming a solid couple. Of course, what had actually happened had been more doubts and delays as both the Viking and the telepath allowed their fears (though they had not—at the time—admitted that they were fears) to drown out their desire to be together.

I shrugged. At least the two would now have time to get through all of their emotional obstacles; or—at least—I hoped that they would have the time.

I sighed.

The third constant vision I had of the couple involved the killing of Victor Madden. It did not always occur in the same way or under the same circumstances, but it always did occur. To be frank, I was pleased that Madden had been eradicated from the earth.

His presence had been annoying—even if I had never met him in person.

Thankfully.

But seeing him in my visions had been enough.
Few had made me feel the need to bathe after appearing in a vision. Victor had been one of those few. Of course, my various visions had allowed me to watch him die in a variety of ways; overall, it was a good trade-off.

Speaking of my visions.

Again, even knowing the future, I knew better than to use my knowledge for foolish things (though I had made a pretty penny in the world's stock markets). Over the years, several foolish vampire "leaders" had resolved to try to coerce me into using my gift for their own selfish motives; like those who resolved that I would be better "dead" than "alive," they almost always found themselves at the sharp end of a stake before they even made an offer to me.

Perhaps that was why I was inclined to like the telepath so much. She understood that to use her talents wholesale would be to sell her soul to the devil.

Not the literal one, of course. He was, ironically enough, honorable in his own way—though his arrogance tended to cover up that aspect of his personality.

Speaking of the devil . . . .

"Pythia," the male voice said from behind me.
A Deal with the Devil

Chapter 34: A Deal with the Devil

THE ANCIENT PYTHONESS POV, CONTINUED

I smirked and turned to face the fallen angel, for that was—quite literally—what Lucifer was. That part—the humans had gotten right.

Once a fairy who had ascended to the status of angel, Lucifer had ultimately decided that it would be "better to reign in hell" than to follow the strict rules that angels were given—namely the rule to be benevolent.

And never violent.

Not that the fallen angel had ever been directly violent against the truly innocent, despite the warped reputation he had gotten among the humans. No—Lucifer simply got bored at times, and—when he did—he enjoyed causing trouble. The fact that he had been the one to originate all those "anti-Christian-fallen-angel" rumors was evidence that he'd had way too much time on his hands since he had "fallen."

Perhaps, it would have been better if he'd had a "real" hell to reign over. But, alas, that fiery pit was a myth—though I had heard that Lucifer had spent a bit of time in the daemon realm, which was fraught with seismic action in the form of volcanoes.

"Lucifer," I greeted, "I saw that you had an appointment with a human later tonight. Naughty, naughty boy."

"Saw?" he taunted. "Tsk. Tsk. Pythia, you and I both know that you cannot see."

"Saw?" he taunted. "Tsk. Tsk. Pythia, you and I both know that you cannot see."

I chuckled. "I see better than most," I returned.

Lucifer was still an angel—at least when it came to the powers and magic granted to one of them; those could not be taken away. But he had been "officially" expelled from the angelic ranks—along with a few others he had managed to corrupt. The arrogant fool—and, yes, that was what I thought of him as most of the time—now was relegated to stirring up problems among humans who were weak-minded and Supernaturals who were power-hungry.

"So—what brings you to this neck of the woods on this fine night?" Lucifer asked me, affecting the accent and the phraseology of the locals of New Orleans.

"I knew that you would be here and thought I would visit with you for a while," I responded.

"A visit?" he asked. "I remember a very carnal visit that you and I once had before you became a vampire," he purred.

"Hmm," I sounded noncommittally. "In Sparta? When I was forty or so? It is so difficult to remember the details of my more nondescript lovers. Were not you a 'real' angel at the time? With wings and everything?"

He chuckled. "You are an amusing creature, Pythia. It was a pity that I could not influence you to help me kill your human masters back then. They did deserve it, after all."
I shrugged. "Some of them likely did. But I am a Spartan—as were they."

He scoffed. "They used you, Pythia. A natural death was too good for them."

"Hmm...most people are used in one way or another. Plus, would have their 'unnatural' deaths been for the greater good?" I asked him.

Lucifer scoffed and likely rolled his eyes. "You have always been too hung up on the 'good.' Why not join me? You are still a beautiful woman. With your," he paused and I could feel him looking me up and down lasciviously, "talents, we could have much fun together."

I smirked. "Flattery? Really?" I chuckled. "And—I am sorry to be the one to tell you this, but the orgasms you give out are not that good, Lucifer."

He laughed loudly. "So—you are just here to remind me of my shortcomings?" he asked, even as I heard a zip and then a sound that could only have been his hand running along his perfectly adequate—even more than adequate—cock.

I rolled my cloudy eyes.

Men!

"You owe me a favor, Lucifer," I said instead of commenting on what I heard and smelled from his general direction.

"A favor? I don't remember owing you one of those. And you should call me Luke?"


I could feel the air stir around his shrug. "I thought a more modern and less," he paused, "ominous name might serve me well."

"Does little Luke agree?" I asked, looking down toward where I heard his hand still stroking his cock.

He laughed and I heard another zipping noise as he put "himself" away. "Oh—he and I are always in agreement, and we both want you, my dear Pythia."

"So—about 1815," I smirked. "And that favor you owe me."

"Napoleon never should have gone into Russia in 1812. I made that explicitly clear in the deal he and I made!" Lucifer said petulantly.

"And yet humans have free will—even after you make one of your deals with them." I chuckled. "As I recall, you almost had your ass handed to you when you tried to help Mr. Bonaparte in Russia during the Battle of Borodino."


I shook my head. "A victory-less victory. And I am still trying to figure out why you chose to help Mr. Bonaparte in the first place. You do not generally work on such a large scale, nor does your fuckery tend to involve so much death."

Again, I could hear a swish of air as he shrugged. "The war—and, therefore, the deaths—would have occurred with or without my influence. And Boney was so arrogant and ambitious that he was fun to be around."
"Remind you of yourself then?" I asked with a smirk.

"Ah—there will only ever be one of me," Lucifer purred. "But Boney did amuse the hell out of me."

"The hell—out of you?" I smirked. "Impossible!"

He chuckled. "I've always loved your wit, Pythia. Why not join me?" he added alluringly.

If I had been a "lesser" being, I would have been tempted by Lucifer's tone of voice alone. He was the very definition of a seducer. But I was not a "lesser" being, and I was aware of all of his tricks. I shrugged. "Oh, no. I know better than to let you influence me. After all, what did poor Boney ultimately get from his dealings with you? You spent the years following Waterloo convincing humans that the man's ineffectiveness was caused by his height. And you and I both know that he was not considered short by his peers."

Lucifer chuckled. "And yet there is now a whole 'complex' named after him."

"Named after what you concocted about him," I corrected.

"He deserved it. I left him with clear instructions about Russia," he said with a pout.

"Back to that again?" I chuckled.

"Yes—back to that again! Had Boney listened, he would have been unstoppable! But no! He had to take advantage of that free will you mentioned. And what did he get for that? I had to arrange things so that he was exiled to Elba in order to punish him for his disobedience."

"Had to?" I chuckled.

"Yes. Definitely!" he insisted.

"But then you helped him to escape and reform his army," I said, shaking my head.

"Well—yes. Of course!" Lucifer said offhandedly. "He and I had a deal, after all."

I chuckled. "So you only betrayed your friend, Boney, for a little while then?"

"Precisely!" he thundered. "And we would have won at Waterloo too—if those fucking angels hadn't interfered. The only good thing to come out of that whole clusterfuck was the song!"

I snorted out my laugh. "ABBA?!"

"Don't pretend that you don't like ABBA," he said with a challenge in his voice before singing a verse from "Waterloo":

My my

At Waterloo, Napoleon did surrender

Oh yeah

And I have met my destiny in quite a similar way

The history book on the shelf
Is always repeating itself

Waterloo I was defeated, you won the war

Waterloo promise to love you for ever more

Waterloo couldn't escape if I wanted to

Waterloo knowing my fate is to be with you

Waterloo finally facing my Waterloo

I could not help but to laugh at his antics—and his impression of ABBA (complete with a feminine voice).

"Well—it is a good thing that Mr. Bonaparte's Waterloo was not yours too."

Lucifer chuckled. "It almost was. It did turn out to be quite the clusterfuck—didn't it!" he recalled, good-naturedly, as though the outcome no longer bothered him. Ultimately, it probably did not. Lucifer always loved havoc, whether he was the source of it or not.

"Now—why was Waterloo not your Waterloo?" I teased.

"Yes. Yes. I remember. You helped me out of my difficulty so that I wouldn't be captured by those evil angels," he said with a fake pout. "Out of curiosity, how did you get those angels to back off?" he asked. "You never told me. More importantly, why did you help me? It's because you adore me—isn't it?" he declared, sounding very pleased with himself.

Lucifer had always been entirely too pleased with himself in my opinion.

"I am the one who alerted the angels to curb Mr. Bonaparte in Waterloo in the first place; otherwise, he would have slaughtered too many innocents. Even you would have cut your friend loose if you had seen the future that was to come if he won in Waterloo."

"And what future was that?" Lucifer asked with curiosity.

"Because of his deal with the devil," I smirked, "Mr. Bonaparte's overall interest in the occult would have grown. Had he not been stopped, he would have collected nefarious witch and Were friends."

"And why would have that been so bad?"

"Because your friend was becoming reckless. You are right about people dying in war no matter what you or I might do, but Napoleon already had a screw loose. And he would have eventually become unhinged. A whole community of Dae would have died because of a grudge held by one of his 'future' witch friends. And those witches would have remained a nightmare long after Bonaparte himself died." I shook my head. "It was best to permanently curb him and be done with it."

"Then you should have told me," Lucifer chided. "I would have left him on Elba."

I shook my head. "But what about your deal with Boney? I know you; you would have wanted to honor it regardless. Despite your reputation, you have your honor."

"You really do care about me!" Lucifer chuckled.
"Do I?" I asked.

"Wait! You were the reason the angels were at Waterloo!" Lucifer yelled out. I chuckled. "I wondered when you would catch up to that. Yes. I was."

"You wound me, Pythia!" Lucifer seemed to lament, though I could hear a grin in his tone.

"And you should have left your buddy's side as soon as you noticed the first angel on the battlefield. If you had, you would not have needed my help."

Lucifer scoffed. "As if those second-rate angels could have killed me."

"Maybe not," I chuckled. "But they did intend to cut certain parts off of you."

Of course, like vampires, angels could heal themselves, but the process took time and caused pain.

"And you have a certain affinity for my parts," he said smoothly.

The flirt.

"And—they would have imprisoned you," I went on, ignoring his suggestive remark. "I know that you would have eventually escaped them." I chuckled. "You always do. But you also always turn into an even bigger dick following one of your 'vacations' from your normal fuckery."

"An even bigger dick?" Lucifer asked as if affronted by my words. "Impossible!"

"I know; it is difficult to fathom," I returned flatly, pretending to ignore the double-meaning of both his words and mine.

"You enjoy fathoming my dick—don't you?" Lucifer asked knowingly.

"Perhaps because I can see the future?" I responded coyly.

"And what do you see for my dick's future?" he asked suggestively.


"I'd prefer if you targeted it," he responded. "Now that you don't have to breathe . . . ."

I laughed a little louder, knowing that I could never win a battle of suggestive comments with Lucifer; likely, no one could.

Still, indulging the fallen angel's shenanigans—or his shameless flirting—was generally quite fun.

I shook my head. In the face of any benevolent god (or goddess), Lucifer was nothing too frightening. Though some humans had turned him into a figure worse than any horror movie villain—reigning in a hell of fire, brimstone, fear, and death—he was simply an overgrown child. Of course, he liked to use humans as his toys. But—contrary to popular belief—he really did not have any dominion over the afterlife.

Of course, he enjoyed pretending that he did—offering his "deals with the devil" so that he could enjoy watching humans squirm as they approached their deaths and began to worry about "paying the piper."

"So about that favor you owe me," I reminded—again.
"Ah—yes. Your saving my ass after you were the reason why it was in danger to begin with!"

"Oh—but I did save it."

"Yeah. Yeah. What could the great vampire seer want of little old me?" he asked with mirth.

"Skip your meeting tonight," I said evenly.

"With Copley Carmichael?" he asked. "Surely one so inconsequential as he is of no interest to you. I had thought to have fun with him. He is willing—anxious even—to sell his soul to me for a bit of spiteful revenge."

I scoffed. "Spiteful indeed. And completely ridiculous."

"But that is the best kind of revenge!" Lucifer commented wryly.

"Yet you will not be pursuing that revenge with him," I returned seriously.

There was a moment of silence between us, and I felt Lucifer's mood shift as if the wind had suddenly begun to blow from the opposite direction.

I felt "the devil" step toward me. "No. Since you asked, my dear Pythia, I will not pursue my business deal with Mr. Carmichael," he offered sincerely.

Lucifer meant his words; even if he could have tricked me, he could not have tricked my visions. I had known what Lucifer would do as soon as I began my meeting with the fallen angel.

Like I said, I did not like to cheat when it came to the future—but sometimes it was necessary to stack the deck a little.

Or at least to take out the joker.

"Thank you, old friend," I said.

"You think of me as a friend?" he asked with an odd mixture of surprise and arrogance. "Pythia, I'm touched! And you can touch me too—if you like," he added lasciviously.

I chuckled. "I am friends with all kinds of creatures—including those who would prefer to see you skewered. So do not let my labeling of you go to your head." I paused and cackled. "Either of your heads."

I felt Lucifer's hand take mine, and then I felt his lips upon the back of my hand. "I will always owe you a favor, my dear Pythia—as long as you never ask for me to change my ways."

"Why would I ask fire to stop burning?" I asked with a sincere smile. "But you could try being less," I paused, "unkind to innocents."

He leaned in and planted a brief, gentle kiss on my lips. When he leaned away, he laughed merrily. "If they were truly innocent, you and I both know that I'd never make any inroads with them!"


"Be well, seer," he said before smacking my ass and disappearing in a way that was not unlike a fairy "pop." Of course, that made sense—given the fact that he had been a fairy before he ascended. I chuckled. Whoever was on the "committee" that had allowed Lucifer to ascend to an angel to begin with needed to have their heads examined!
That—or they had a good sense of humor.

I closed my milky eyes and let the future take a more solid shape before me. Lucifer was now—thankfully—out of the picture I was looking at. He was the last thing Sookie and Eric needed in their lives! Copley Carmichael would now be inconsequential to them. Instead of causing a ruckus in Sookie's life, he would turn his attentions toward a young woman of twenty-nine (the woman who would be serving him coffee all night as he waited for a meeting with Lucifer that would never come). The two would start up a conversation, which would lead to much more. Eventually, the two would marry and make a child together: a son. Amelia Broadway would not begrudge her father's relationship with a much younger woman. In turn, Copley's new heir would take the pressure off of Amelia, especially when that child expressed an interest in taking over the family business.

Yes—Amelia Broadway's relationship with her father would be better within the year. And Copley would not die because of a foolish notion of revenge—or a deal with the devil.

Eventually, Amelia and Bob would become very powerful witches.

So would the daughter they would have in ten months.

I smiled to myself, thinking about how unlikely it was that I would be helping out Amelia Broadway.

In many—if not most—of the futures I had seen in my visions, Amelia was a petty person.

Petty—at best!

In fact, her dominant qualities were usually selfishness and bitterness.

However, what had actually come to pass was a one-in-a-hundred outcome: the Amelia who emerged from all of the possibilities was a woman who was willing to forgive any flaws in her friends just as she recognized her own flaws. In the end, Amelia had proven—and would now continue to prove—to be a good friend to Sookie Stackhouse. And—given the positive choices Amelia had made—she did not deserve to have an insane, devil-deal-making father fucking with her life.

Thus my little meeting with Lucifer.

Of course, that was not the extent to my helping the Viking and telepath. Insuring that Copley Carmichael was not an issue would cause—has already caused—a "ripple" in the future.

The actions I took—though rare—always did.

But the little witch deserved to keep her father—such as he was. And, given time, he would reform completely.

Notwithstanding my influence, the "ripple" would have always been a problem in some ways; however, now that the "ripple" would no longer have Copley available to manipulate, he was a more immediate problem.

So I intended to kill that ripple.

I rarely had reason enough to kill nowadays. And—even if there was reason—my inclination was often lacking.
It was not lacking this time.

And I figured that even the Fates would agree with my reasoning.
Chapter 35: Guard Duty, Part 1

ERIC POV

70 MINUTES BEFORE SUNRISE

"Mmmm," Sookie sighed as I caressed her arm gently. She'd slung it possessively—incandescently possessively—over my chest after we'd made love, and her fingers were swirling lazily around my pecs as they unconsciously told the story of her contentment.

I, too, was content.

Incandescently.

More than I thought would have ever been possible for me.

But, despite the surprise of that feeling, there was nothing I would not do to keep hold of it—to keep hold of the woman next to me.

Which reminded me.

"Mustapha," I said.

"Mustapha?" she asked.

"And Warren," I responded.

"Warren?"

"Yes."

"Who's that?" she queried, raising her head slightly to catch my eye.

"He's Mustapha's boyfriend."

"Mustapha's gay?" she asked with surprise, though there was no judgment in her tone. One of the things that set Sookie apart from other humans, especially in our region of the country, was that she did not seem to have any foundational prejudices.

"I truly would have liked to have met your grandmother," I remarked tangentially.

"Huh?" Sookie asked, not quite following my train of thought. I suppose I couldn't blame her.

I tried to explain my non-sequitur. "You are surprised to hear my day-man is gay, but you do not think any less of him for being so. Similarly, when you saw that he was black, your metabolic rates didn't change either."

"Why would they?" she asked, somewhat offended.

"Ahhh. Your heartbeat and respiration rates changed because of my words just now," I smirked.

"Well—that's because you said something asinine—as if Mustapha's bein' black would have bugged me."
I chuckled. "Even humans without overt racist tendencies often have involuntary metabolic reactions."

"Huh?" she asked.

I shrugged as I began my explanation. "Say a white woman sees a group of young black men at a convenient store at night; she might inadvertently experience a moment of fear before she reigns in her baser reaction. Then, she might struggle between the practical idea that she should remain vigilant about her own security and the guilt she experiences because she knows she wouldn't have viewed a group of white young men as being as dangerous—despite the fact that she is statistically more likely to be harmed by one of her own race."

Sookie frowned, so I continued. "Vampires are too—you know."

"Huh?" she asked.

"Statistically more likely to be harmed by one of their own kind than by—say—a Fellowship member.

Sookie's frown deepened, so I offered another "human" example. "Say a progressive person truly believes in gay rights. Despite that, he or she still might have a momentary cringe when seeing two men kissing on the sidewalk."

"Maybe," Sookie said, her frown still apparent as she processed my words and their underlying meaning. "But I think it's admirable when people are willing to fight off the biases that sneak into their heads. People can't help what they think sometimes, but they can choose what they do with those thoughts. They can choose to overcome them."

I smiled at her. "You see things in amazing ways, my lover. And that is why I mentioned your grandmother earlier. As your primary teacher, she clearly had a great effect upon you."

Sookie's eyebrows furrowed and her eyes brightened. I hurried my caresses, trying to stop her threatening tears.

I hated them.

"Yeah. Gran didn't have a prejudiced bone in her body—except for against people with bad manners," she chuckled, thankfully stifling her tears. "Plus, being so different myself, it would've been hypocritical for me to judge other folks just because they were different. And I got to 'hear' a lot of other people working to overcome their prejudices." She grinned. "You should have 'heard' what people used to think about my friend Lafayette. You never got to meet him, but he was black and flamboyantly gay! But quite a lot of people—even in Bon Temps—fought to show him acceptance or, at least, begrudging politeness. And every time they made the effort to change their attitude or behavior toward him, they evolved as people. Telepathically verified," she smiled. "That kind of thing made my telepathy survivable, especially before my shields got strong."

I smiled at my bonded. "You don't give yourself enough credit for how good you are, min kära."

She shrugged and—unsurprisingly—changed the subject. I vowed that—very soon—I would make sure that my bonded fully understood her worth.

And—even if I had to praise her every minute of every day—she would get used to compliments! Eventually.
Now that she'd agreed to stay with me as a vampire—though I hoped it would be many years before I'd have to make her one—I could be patient.

And I'd enjoy the task.

"So—uh—Mustapha has a boyfriend named Warren?" she asked, returning us to our original topic.

"Yes. Warren Rodriguez. I intend for him to become my new day-man."

"What about Mustapha?" she asked with a frown. "Isn't he working out?"

"Yes. He's fine. More than fine—actually. Unbeknownst to him, Mustapha will be getting a promotion and a pay raise if he agrees to become head of my day security team once I am king—if I become king. Warren, despite having a business degree and being a decorated ex-Army Special Forces soldier, has had trouble finding full-time, permanent work. And he is human, which makes him even more qualified—in my opinion—to be my day-man since the person in that role spends most of his or her time dealing with humans."

"Warren was Army Special Forces!" Sookie exclaimed, clearly impressed.

I nodded. "Yes. He was a sniper, so it would be handy to have him around for just that reason. The fact that he is qualified for much more than that is an immeasurable windfall."

"But will—uh—Warren even want the job? I mean—with a business degree and his military background—isn't he," she paused, "a lot overqualified to be an errand boy?"

I chuckled. Clearly, she was thinking about Bobby and his apparent limitations; however, the role of day-person was changing now that vampires were out of the coffin. Before the Great Revelation, such humans were chosen partially because they were nondescript, and they were tasked—except in cases of emergency—with conducting only errands that vampires could not complete because of their "solar limitations." Day-people had been merely a necessary evil in many ways.

Indeed, Bobby Burnham had been just that in my eyes—a necessary evil that I'd been loath to deal with, though Pam had often amused herself with her minute tortures of him. Indeed, I'd spared no thoughts of grief over the loss of him or most of the others who'd "served" me over the years. Of course, in Bobby's case, my apathy over his slaying had a lot to do with his being an insufferable ass.

Moreover, he was rude to my bonded on more than one occasion. And—in truth—I had already been contemplating a replacement for him because he'd been glamoured to the point that he could no longer remember his tasks without writing them down.

Indeed, nowadays, vampires had started to look for much more in a day-person than innocuous expendability.

"Of course, Mustapha seems overqualified too," Sookie commented, breaking me from my thoughts.

"Yes. And I am certain that he will appreciate the promotion. I am also certain that Warren will accept the position."

"How can you be so sure?" she asked curiously.

"I will make it worth his while monetarily," I told my bonded. "Plus, as king, I'll have plenty of people to run the menial kinds of errands that Bobby used to run for me. Warren will find great
challenge and, therefore, reward in his work—I think. In actuality, he will be second-in-charge of my day-time operations."

"Who'll be first-in-charge?" she asked.

"You, of course," I responded.


"Do not worry, my lover," I purred. "I am hoping that our existence will be peaceful enough that you can spend your days next to me in bed or lie out in the sun as you so love doing. But I trust no one so much as you to handle an emergency should it arise during the day."

She looked shocked for a moment. "Thanks," she said after a moment, a slight smile forming on her lips. "Thanks for trusting me."

I simply nodded. The days and nights of mistrust between us were gone forever.

"So—uh—why did Warren decide to leave the army? I mean—I guess I've always sort of assumed that Special Forces people stayed in the army until they retired. Was he hurt in Afghanistan? Or Iraq?" she asked with worry.

Leave it to my bonded to be concerned about someone she'd yet to meet.

"No," I responded. "He was not injured, and he did not quit either. He was kicked out because of the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy."

"Really?" Sookie asked, apparently horrified by the thought.

"Yes. An asinine policy—in my opinion," I shared. "Why a nation always in need of soldiers doesn't hold onto the ones who volunteer and prove themselves worthy is beyond me. And—from my research on Warren—I know that he was highly-skilled and instrumental to the success of over a dozen missions in Afghanistan. His one mistake was that he couldn't stomach lying to his friends. It didn't matter that his brothers-in-arms didn't have a problem with his sexuality. What mattered was that his superior officer got wind of the fact that Warren had 'told' others that he was gay, and—for that—he was unceremoniously kicked out."

"That's horrible!" Sookie cried.

I nodded my agreement. "Mustapha, too, has faced much prejudice—violence even—because of his sexual orientation."

Recognition dawned on Sookie's face. "Was that why he was kicked out of his pack?"

"Yes. And why he changed his name. His pack-mates abjured him—and then beat him almost to death—when they found out why he didn't want to marry a woman and breed."

Sookie frowned and shook her head.

"How did Bubba meet Mustapha?" she asked, recalling that it had been Bubba who'd suggested that I hire Mustapha after Bobby was killed.

"On the night his former pack-mates beat him, Mustapha was dumped in the woods—left to die. Bubba was hunting in the area and smelled Were blood."

Sookie cringed. I was not sure whether it was because she was thinking about Mustapha's injuries
or Bubba's hunting practices.

"Bubba could tell that Mustapha had been beaten by many people and that he was about to die. He gave Mustapha enough blood to keep him alive."

"Wow!" Sookie exclaimed. "I can't imagine Bubba giving a stranger his blood. I wasn't even sure that Bubba would know how to do that."

I shrugged. "I stopped trying to decipher what Bubba knows and what he does not years ago. That being said, his loyalty—once given—is immeasurable. And his instincts as a vampire—blood-preference notwithstanding—are good."

"And—as long as fairies aren't involved—he makes a good guard," she added.

"Ah—yes! We should get back to the subject of guards," I segued. "Mustapha is going to be at your house in Bon Temps shortly after dawn. Warren will be there too, but watching from a distance with his rifle at the ready. However, I want at least one other of the two-natured variety there in case de Castro sends Weres to try to enter your home during the day."

"But wouldn't Amelia's magic stop them?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes. It should. But I have used enough torches in my day to know that they can be thrown," I emphasized. "And a magic spell cannot stop your house from burning."

Sookie trembled a bit, and I held her a little tighter. "I just want to cover all the bases, min kära," I assured gently.

She nodded.

"I no longer trust Alcide enough to go to him for guards," I observed.

She sighed, but nodded in agreement. "So who will you get?"

"It is too late to arrange for guards from an out-of-state pack at this point. And the remaining lone-wolves in the area aren't trustworthy enough. Would you find Calvin Norris and those he deems acceptable from his pack to be agreeable?" I asked my bonded, knowing that there had been some strain between her and Norris since Jason and Crystal's actions had led to Sookie having to break the elder werepanther's hand with a brick.

"You're asking me? Not just deciding on your own?" she asked, a little surprised.

I chuckled. "I know that I have been a little high-handed in such matters in the past, but . . . ." "A little!" she interrupted.

"But," I continued, ignoring her playful jab, "you and I are now true partners in the life we are carving for ourselves. And, since Norris and his people could very well become a fixture in that life as permanent guards, I want your input before decisions are made."

She looked at me with a little surprise before a smile formed on her delectable lips. "True partners—huh? I like the sound of that very much."

"Pledged partners," I growled, even as I bent down to kiss her.

"I like the sound of that even better," she panted when I regretfully broke the kiss before another round of lovemaking began. Unfortunately, there were still matters to deal with that didn't involve
my having my way with my wife.

Yet.

"So—Norris?" I asked her.

It took Sookie a moment to focus on my eyes and what I was saying, as opposed to my lips and what she clearly wanted them to do to her. I was smirking by the time she finally accomplished this task and offered me a mock-glare for my expression.

"Well," she began her response contemplatively, "I know that Calvin has always respected me. There was a time when he even viewed me as a . . . ."

She stopped midsentence.

"As a?"

"Potential mate," she said, gauging my reaction. "But don't kill him for that."

I chuckled. "If I killed everyone interested in claiming you, I would have had to kill Pam years ago. And, for the record, I couldn't blame anyone for wanting you," I added with a leer.

"Anyway," she said, rolling her eyes, "a lot of the werepanthers I've met are kind of scary; I mean—Calvin has done his best in Hotshot, and God knows that town was messed up long before he took its twisty reigns. Plus—according to Jason—Calvin's been trying to add new blood where his predecessors strongly advocated inbreeding."

"Yes," I agreed with her assessment. It was taking Norris a while to change the culture of his community, but things were getting better in Hotshot.

"And—despite the 'complications' between Jason and Crystal—and the fact that Calvin was the one left with a shattered hand because of them—he has worked hard to do right by my brother," Sookie added.

"Yes," I concurred again. "As a made-werepanther, Jason would have been executed by most two-natured communities."

Sookie shuddered. Despite her current estrangement from Jason Stackhouse, her love for him had not abated.

"I trust Calvin," she said with surety. "I wouldn't have a problem with him being my guard or working for us at all. The only issue I can think of would be whether or not there are enough reliable members of his pack to help out."

I nodded. "I have considered that, too, and have something in mind," I said enigmatically. "For now, as long as Calvin and a few others can be counted on, that will be enough. We can reassess the arrangement as needed."

Sookie looked at me with questions in her eyes, but nodded. "Okay. You should call Calvin now, though—to see if he's even available for tomorrow."

"There is one other thing to consider: Norris's wife? Will she be a problem?"

Sookie sighed, and I could tell that she was heavily weighing my query.

Norris's mate and new wife, Tanya Grissom Norris, was related to Debbie Pelt by blood and had
In truth, I did not view the hiring of Norris and his pack as optimal because of the deficits with his pack and his choice of wife. However, there simply wasn’t a better option than the werepanthers at this time. Under Colonel Flood, Long Tooth had been a strong, reliable group, and—on the rare occasions when I’d needed Were help—I’d trusted the packmaster to ensure the quality of his Weres’ work. Now, Long Tooth was useless. During Flood’s tenure, no other pack would have dared to encroach upon his pack’s territories; however, I’d heard rumors that Long Tooth was no longer seen as untouchable. However, quickly displacing Long Tooth and establishing a better pack in its place was not something that I had the power to do within the timeframe I needed.

Unfortunately.

But I had set a few wheels in motion.

Still—for the time being—the werepanthers of Hotshot were the only other large group of two-natured beings in Area 5. Though officially residing on Long Tooth territory, the panthers had been left alone for several reasons. First, they were established before the Long Tooths settled in the area. Also, they weren’t Weres. Had they been, a war for the territory would have been waged. Finally—and most importantly—the Long Tooths had always considered the werepanthers to be weak.

In other words, not a threat to them at all. I was rather hoping that I could do something to change that.

Sookie sighed deeply, drawing my attention back to hear her response about Tanya Norris.

"When you take the Pelts out of the equation," she said meditatively, "Tanya's not really a bad person. In fact, her worst crime was naivety because she believed Sandra's version of what happened to Debbie. But, even then, Tanya didn't agree to do anything beyond a little spying—until Sandra had her put under the magic spell."

"Magic spell?" I asked, not having heard anything about Tanya Norris and a spell before. I forced down my frustration that Sookie had not told me of the event, reminding myself that there had been times when I’d not been 100% forthcoming with her.

And reminding myself that I wasn’t going to allow such past errors to taint Sookie and my current and future lives.

"Yeah. Uh—sorry I didn't tell you about it. We were—uh—having issues at the time, and it was taken care of almost as soon as it became a problem."

I nodded. "Will you tell me what happened now?"

"Sure," she said before placing a tender kiss to my chest as an added apology. I could feel her guilt and contrition through our bond.

"There is no need to waste energy on our regrets," I said gently.

She nodded and took a deep breath, exhaling it onto my chest. I luxuriated in the warmth of it and of her entire body resting next to mine as she began her story.

"Sandra got Tanya to spy on me when we were both working at Merlotte's. I told you that part—right?"
I nodded. "And you indicated that the spying stopped when Tanya became involved with Norris."

"Yeah. But, apparently, Sandra got mad when Tanya was no longer willing to do what she wanted since, by then, Tanya knew that I wasn't the Wicked Witch of the West like Sandra had told her I was. So—um—when Tanya stopped cooperating, Sandra had her placed under some kind of spell so that she could keep influencing her. Sandra used the spell to make Tanya cause trouble between Crystal and Jason. Of course, there were already plenty of rifts in their marriage, but Tanya added fuel to the fire."

"Why target your brother?" I asked.

Sookie shrugged. "I don't know for sure, but it seems logical that Sandra wanted to hurt anyone connected to me, and Jason was an easy target."

"Anyway," she continued, "Calvin somehow found out about the spell and begged Octavia and Amelia to break it. After that, Tanya cut all ties with Sandra."

"You are certain?" I asked.

"Telepathically verified." She tapped her head and took a deep breath, once again warming me with her exhalation. "Despite what Tanya did—why she started working at Merlotte's—she's good for Calvin. I don't know if she and I will ever be friends, but I do know that she's not our enemy. And she wouldn't interfere with Calvin and his people guarding us."

"That's good enough for me," I said as I grabbed a disposable phone from the nightstand without displacing my bonded from her comfortable position.

Long arms came in very handy at times.

As I dialed, Sookie looked at me warningly. "Remember to be polite. You're probably gonna be waking him up."

I chuckled, but nodded at my insistent mate. In truth, if she were given free reign, I figured that Sookie could find a way to solve most problems between Supernaturals—if only by making us all be polite to one another.

"Norris," a gruff, groggy voice answered the phone. I activated the speaker so that Sookie could hear the call.

"I have been ordered to apologize for the time of my call," I opened, eliciting a slap on my chest from Sookie.

"What do you want?" he demanded—impolitely I might add. I looked at Sookie with a raised eyebrow, challenging her to chastise the werepanther. Instead, she stuck out her tongue at me.

Oh—the things I wanted to do with that tongue! I had to forcefully stop myself from doing them—business be damned.
Instead, I responded to Norris's question. "I am calling to request your services," I relayed—politely, I might add.

I could hear sounds indicating that Calvin was getting out of bed and walking to another room, probably so that he would not wake up his wife, whom I could hear softly snoring in the background until a door had opened and closed. Once another door had opened and closed, Calvin spoke. "What services?"
"I need guards for Sookie's property tomorrow," I said flatly.

"Don't you usually go to Long Tooth for things like that?" he asked.

"My association with them has come to an end due to their ineptness."

Calvin exhaled loudly. "I heard that you punished Sookie in public tonight. Is that why the Long Tooth pack won't help you anymore? You know what?" he added quickly. "It doesn't matter. I'm not inclined to do anything for you, vampire. Sookie's good people, and my pack and I aren't about to help anyone who has mistreated that girl."

"Thanks, Calvin," Sookie spoke up. "But I'm fine."

"Sookie?" the werepanther asked with surprise.

"Are you somewhere private?" I inquired.

"My office," he replied, still seemingly flabbergasted at hearing Sookie's voice. "The walls in here are pretty sound-proof, and I don't sense anyone in range of hearing."

"Good," I said, before launching into a shortened version of what was occurring, including the facts that Sookie's punishment had been a ruse and that de Castro's nights among the undead were about to end.

"It's all true," Sookie confirmed when I was done.

"Whew!" Calvin exclaimed after a few moments of silence as he took everything in. "So you're plannin' on bein' king, Northman?"

"It is the best way I know to keep Sookie safe at this point," I responded honestly. "But, given the fact that Herveaux's second was helping Sandra Pelt—and for other reasons I'm not willing to go into at the time—I no longer trust Long Tooth. And that has led me to you."

"And I trust you," Sookie spoke up with emphasis. "And Eric will pay you and your people really well," she added. "And—no offense—but I know you could use the money in Hotshot."

Calvin sighed deeply. "No offense taken, Sook. And you're right. Norcross—you know, the lumber mill where I work—just went through a round of lay-offs. Two of my people got laid off, and even my hours were cut from forty to thirty-five a week."

"So you won't be full-time," Sookie sighed out a lament for her friend.

"Yeah, and I'm losing my benefits too," he said glumly.

"I'm sorry Calvin. That's dirty business on their part, given the years you've put in at the mill."

With that information in hand, I figured that my proposition would likely be well-received, so I jumped right into it. "To start, I will offer you and three of your worthiest people full-time guard
positions. Your contract will be guaranteed for at least a year, and I'll arrange for your salary to be wired to your bank account even if I fail tomorrow night and am slain. As for your people: I will hire them on a trial basis for a month. If they prove competent, I'll give them all annual contracts and hire more of your people."

Calvin was silent for a moment.

"Salary?" he finally asked.

"For you—one-hundred thousand for the first year. And a benefits package. We can negotiate beyond that. For your people—Three thousand for the trial month. And then sixty thousand annually."

He choked up a little. "And benefits?"

"Of course," I said. "It is bad business, after all, for someone in my employ to be injured and not be taken care of. And, of course, Ludwig will be the doctor used if need be."

"Fuck," he muttered.

"Do you agree?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied quickly. "When and where do you need us?"

"At Sookie's home—five minutes after sunrise. You will partner with Mustapha Khan, my dayman. He is a Were; you don't have a problem with deferring to him—do you?"

"No," he responded. "I work with a few Weres at the plant. Never had a problem with doing it."

"Good. Your people should patrol the woods, but not get too close to the house unless called for. There will be a human sniper in position to offer covering fire if needed. And Mustapha will make sure your people are aware of his position so that he's left unbothered."

"You expect trouble?" Calvin asked.

"No—not really. Not today. But I like to be prepared for every eventuality."

"I've heard," he muttered, still obviously surprised about the sudden turn to his life.

"In that vein, I have some news for you—news that I believe will be beneficial for us all eventually."

"What news?" he and Sookie asked simultaneously.

"The number of shifting members in your pack is dwindling—correct?" I asked him.

He sighed. "That depends on your perspective. Hotshot was originally settled with forty-three families—all full-blooded. But that was over three hundred and fifty years back. Now, we're down to fewer than thirty-five people who can shift. And—of those—about a third of them are . . . ." His voice trailed off. "Well—uh—they need help functioning in day-to-day life."

I frowned. "That is worse than I thought."

Calvin was silent for a moment. "It used to be even worse. When I took over the pack a dozen years back, there were only eighteen of us that could shift. But we rebounded, and now we've got quite a few real promising kids." He paused again. "But you should know, there are only six adults—
besides me—that I would trust being guards for Sookie and you. If that changes your mind about hiring us on, I'll understand."

"My mind is not changed. In fact, I believe that I can help you with those numbers."

"Help? How?"

I looked closely at my bonded, ready to gauge her reaction. "Anticipating that I might be in need of the services of a pack other than Long Tooth, I started a little research project last year."

"Research project?" Sookie asked.

I nodded in affirmation for her benefit, though I knew that Norris wouldn't be able to see the gesture.

"What project?" the packmaster asked.

"I have found two groups of werepanthers who are willing to relocate: one in Appalachia and one in Oregon. The Oregon pack could be here within the month. The other—within three months."

"What? What did you say?" Calvin gasped.

I went on with my explanation. "Unlike your group, the two packs I am speaking of have not been 'lessened' through inbreeding. No offense," I added, recalling Sookie's mandate to be polite.

"But why would they move here?" Sookie asked.

"For different reasons," I responded. "Since they resisted the practice of inbreeding, the Appalachia group is down to fifteen adult members that can shift and only six first-borns who will be able to shift. The problem is that it is becoming difficult for them to breed without . . . ."

"Without it involving cousins or closer," Calvin finished with a sigh.

"Yes," I responded. "And—like I said—they have been trying to avoid that."

Calvin cleared his throat. "So what about the other group? From Oregon?"

"Similar to what you and yours are facing at the lumber plant, many of them have lost their livelihoods due to the bad economy. A fishery in northern Oregon, where whole families of werepanthers had worked for generations, was all but shut down last year. In addition, another chunk of that werepanther population had owned and operated a large wheat farm. That property was also where the pack would run safely during the full moon. Unfortunately, a couple of bad crops led to the panthers having to sell their land to a large corporate farm. As it stands, more than three-quarters of the pack are either underemployed or unemployed, and most live in a rundown apartment complex. They have no territory of their own in which to run now since the area Weres have no pity for their plight."

"How—uh—how many of them?" Calvin asked.


"Seventy! Jesus," Calvin sputtered.

"In addition, I have found a small group of wereleopards in India that is looking for documentation to come to the United States. Apparently, the group is facing extinction because they are hunted like all other leopards when they run during the full moon. There are only three shifting adults—"
one male and two females—and one shifting child in that group though. But—as you may know—
panthers and leopards have no difficulty producing children, and," I winked at Sookie, "seeing a
few spots now and then would be a nice change—don't you think?"

Sookie sniffled and her eyes brightened again as she absorbed the plights of the various were-cats
I'd told her and Norris about. Wanting to avoid her tears—again—I kept speaking, "I know this is
overwhelming, Mr. Norris." (See, I could be very polite when needed.) "But the fact is that I will
soon be king if the Fates are on my side. I will need guards that I trust. There is an adequate pack in
New Orleans, but Sookie and I wish to headquarter in Area 5."

Again my bonded sniffled. Only this time, a tear fell from her beautiful blue eyes. Fucking
unacceptable!

"You know," I continued in a gentler tone as if reading an old fable, "once upon a time,
werepanthers thrived to a greater degree than even werewolves in many parts of the world. In fact,
many years ago—centuries actually—I preferred working with werepanthers—I even sought them
out—when I needed help of the two-natured variety. Panthers, though smaller than Weres, are
fiercer in battle. Did you know that, min kära?"

Sookie shook her head, but her tears had stopped. I neither knew what Norris was doing nor did I
care that he was overhearing an affectionate moment between me and my bonded. As one of our
main guards, he'd have to get used to those kinds of moments anyway.

"A full-grown werepanther is an amazing thing to behold in battle; trust me. And they can also
achieve a level of stealth that Weres cannot. In this country, werewolves were merely more
plentiful, and then they became arrogant and got it into their heads that they were superior, even
insisting upon the whole 'Were' with a capital 'W' thing and the extra emphasis. Were!" I chuckled,
emphasizing the "W" exaggeratedly. "You know—now that I'm thinking of it—I'd rather have the
help of werepanthers, compared to even tigers," I commented, certain that I'd scoffed out the word
"tigers."

"You just don't like Quinn," Sookie said with a hint of a smirk.

"True. But tigers are filled with too much bravado. Give me a werepanther any day of the week
over a weretiger. Plus, as Pam might say, the outfits those tigers choose are God-awful and gaudy,"
I added with a smirk of my own.

"But you said you liked spots," she grinned.

"Pam has taught me that stripes are what can make one look fat—as far as fur goes. I think that
spots are okay," I said, making an effort to keep a straight face.

My bonded laughed, her sadness over the troubles of the various packs I'd mentioned forgotten for
the time being.

Calvin took the momentary silence as his opportunity to speak out his concerns. "As nice as it is to
hear that you appreciate my kind, Mr. Northman, moving three packs of cats to Hotshot won't be
easy. And—as I'm sure you know—panthers tend to be solitary in the wild. Hell! There isn't even a
name for a collective of animal panthers or leopards since they don't form prides like other large
cats. That's why we've taken to calling ourselves a 'pack.' What I'm sayin' is that it takes a lot of
effort for a group of us to get along. And several groups coming together? Well—that seems like a
disaster waiting to happen."

"I understand your worries," I assured. "But the groups I told you about have been vetted carefully
and have been made aware that one of the conditions of my help is that they will defer to you as their leader. I am not saying that there won't be power struggles and growing pains, but the leaders of each group seem reasonable, and I believe you could work with them to come to some kind of arrangement, perhaps even appointing them as your lieutenants. But, make no mistake, they have all been forewarned that any challenge to you will be met with extreme repercussions by me," I added, my voice reverberating a promise of danger and violence.

"When did you arrange all this?" a flabbergasted Sookie asked me.

"It has been in the works since Herveaux took you to Colonel Flood's funeral—since he used you to further his father's candidacy to become packmaster of Long Tooth," I responded.

Sookie's mouth opened in surprise. "That long?"

I nodded unapologetically. "Given the inadequacies of Flood's potential replacements as well as Alcide's flagrant disregard for your safety, it was clear that the Long Tooth pack had all but outlived its usefulness.

Sookie sat up. I didn't like the distance her movement created between us, but I kept my side of the bond calm.

"Why didn't you tell me your plans?" she asked.

"Or me?" Calvin echoed.

Eyebrow raised, I looked at my bonded and ignored the man on the phone. "You know why."

"You were waiting until you needed them," she commented.

I nodded. "Yes. That. Plus, negotiations took a while. Believe it or not, there were six other interested groups of were-cats, but none of those groups fit my most important criterion."

"And what was that?" Sookie asked.

"That they were not the type to betray and kill your friend and his people—including your brother," I said evenly. "When I said that I vetted the groups I'm proposing to add to Hotshot, I did not do so without considering you, min kära."

My bonded sniffled and nodded in understanding, but still smacked my leg. "You are a high-handed vampire!" she said loudly before snuggling beside me once more. High-handed—I could take. The lack of snuggling—not so much.

Norris took the opportunity to speak. "You are high-handed, vampire. But thanks."

"My motives are not unselfish," I said evenly, even as I caressed my bonded's back. "In the end, what I want most is a pack that is beholden to me. But I will, in turn, treat you well in business."

"Oh—believe me—I know your own motives are at the root of all of this," Norris laughed. "Still. This could be the making of my pack."

"I know," I said, trying not to sound arrogant; I didn't want Sookie to stop snuggling again for any reason.

Calvin chuckled. "Not that I don't appreciate the idea of new blood in my pack or the fact that you've worked to make sure I stay Hotshot's leader, but I don't know how I'm gonna fit all those
people into my town."

"Once you agree with meshing them with your group, I will be subsidizing the relocation of the packs I told you about. The Oregon and Indian groups will move as soon as possible."

"Subsidize?" Calvin asked.

"Yes. I am offering moving expenses as well as the funds to build a set number of new homes; several businesses, including a gas station, a small grocery store, a diner, and—perhaps—an apartment complex; and a new school."

"Teachers?" Calvin gasped.

"Both the Oregon and Appalachia groups have members of that profession. My lawyers are already working on the paperwork to get the school publicly funded once it's built."


"I know. You've never had one," I stated. "But—with the influx of population, one will be justified by government standards. Oh—and I have contacts that will help with infrastructure issues."

"Infrastructure?" Sookie asked. "That word's never been on my word-of-the-day calendar," she admitted in a whisper.

I smiled at my bonded. "Powerlines, plumbing systems, water lines, telephone lines—you know, things like that. Most of it will be taken care of by the utility companies themselves—if the proper hoops are jumped through. My lawyers will make sure that they are."

"Jesus Christ," Calvin said.

"You know that I'm not altruistic. I will own the grocery store, gas station, and apartments if I build them, and—though I will employ your people—I expect to be profiting from the businesses sooner rather than later," I stated matter-of-factly.

There was a pause. "What will Long Tooth think about all of this?"

I looked at my bonded as she gauged me questioningly.

"Do you want the short or the long answer?" I asked.


"I don't give a fuck what those mongrels think, and neither should you. I will have your back, and if Long Tooth becomes an issue for you, it will not be for long," I said darkly.

Sookie took in a long breath and then took a while to let it out.

"How about the long answer?" Calvin asked.

He was a smart panther for asking for both of my responses.

"Long Tooth may very well feel threatened, especially when all the business that vampires once offered their companies will be transferred to your people."

"We cannot withstand a war with them—even with more people," Calvin said with trepidation.
"Oh—but Long Tooth will very likely be focused on other matters," I responded.

"What matters?" Sookie asked.

I took a long, unneeded breath. "There are rumors that a pack in Texas, one that has outgrown its own territory and is friendly to vampires, is considering a move."

Sookie frowned, obviously contemplating whether or not Herveaux should be told that information. "Alcide—if he is worth his salt at all—has access to the same rumors that I do," I said softly. "What he does with them is his concern. But I will not help his pack remain solvent—not anymore."

Sookie bit her lower lip nervously (unintentionally enticing the hell out of me), but I didn't attack her. Because I was being polite.

"Alcide will either prove his worth as a leader or not," Calvin said helpfully. Given Sookie's continual lip-nibbling, I'd almost forgotten that he was still on the phone.

"Will Alcide be killed?" Sookie asked in a whisper.

"Not by me—not unless he threatens me and mine specifically," I told her.

"He's made his bed?" she asked.

"Fuck yeah," Calvin commented. Maybe the panther was worth more than I thought. "Northman," he said gruffly, "what's your subsidizing gonna cost my people?"

"Just loyalty," I said without pause. "I want a pack I can trust in my domain once I am king, and I'll need that loyalty for generations if I'm a successful king."

Calvin took a long, loud breath. "You're buying a pack."

"Investing in one," I corrected. "An influx of new bloodlines and jobs. An opportunity for your young to become educated—to meet the highest potential they can meet. I will be using your people for my own protection and gain; I'm not trying to hide that fact. I will count on your allegiance to me and mine. Actually, I will require that allegiance. In turn, your community with thrive. Your people will be tasked with work from a vampire king. Your pack will become greater than you could have ever imagined. And this continent will finally understand that cats are much more efficient than dogs!"

He chuckled.

"Just say the word, and the arrangements will begin," I finished.

"I'm saying it," Calvin said. "Whatever word you are looking for—I'm saying it."

I smiled. "Good. Tomorrow, the head of the Oregon group will contact you. Several of his people are adept at construction. You're about to become a city planner, Mr. Norris."

"Oh shit. Uh—oh. Okay," the werepanther stammered. "And—Sookie?"

"Yeah?" my bonded answered.
"You know I would've protected you for nothing."

She giggled. "I know. But—this way's better. I'll see you tomorrow."

At that, I hung up the phone, much to Sookie's consternation.

"You need to learn to say goodbye, at least," she schooled me.

I chuckled and gripped her tighter.

"Maybe—one day."

"Why?" she asked. "Why help the werepanthers so much?"

"Besides the reasons I already gave?" I chuckled. "The fact that I cannot trust Long Tooth? The fact that your brother is tied to Norris's pack? The fact that I prefer working with werepanthers to werewolves? The fact that I want a loyal pack that owes me their allegiance indefinitely?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "I think there's more."

I sighed and caressed her hair, enjoying her soft moan as I did so. "Before you and I reconciled—when it seemed like I might be required to go to Oklahoma. . . ." I stopped for a moment.

"Please. Tell me," Sookie requested—insisted.

"I thought I might have to leave you and Pam here—alone. I don't trust Alcide—as you know. The shifter isn't strong enough to protect you on his own. So I expedited matters so that the Hotshot pack would be as strong as I could make them."

"For me and Pam," Sookie sighed.

"For the most important people in my world," I responded sincerely. "And don't cry!" I added quickly—firmly. "Every time I say something nice, you cry."

Sookie, thankfully, responded with a giggle before looking up at me, her eyes bright, but not filled with cursed tears.

"How much money are you gonna have to spend to help the werepanthers?" she asked.

"Six million or so," I replied, "for my initial investment and not counting salaries. If I decide to add an apartment complex to my list of improvements in Hotshot, I'll have to add another 1.5 million, but such a place would create two new jobs—a manager and a maintenance person. Of course, even with rental income, small apartment complexes barely break even," I commented as Sookie looked at me with her mouth wide open.

I took the liberty of lifting her chin before an insect flew into her mouth. After all, I'd heard that humans could "catch flies" that way, and the thought of kissing my bonded after she'd swallowed an insect didn't sit well with me.

"Fuck! 7.5 million!" she gasped.

"A drop in a very large bucket. Indeed, that amount doesn't even compare to what I was willing to give Freyda to get out of the marriage contract. I offered de Castro the same amount, but neither would accept my money."

Sookie exhaled as if she were blowing out birthday candles.
"I'm gonna need time to get over the you bein' so rich thing," she said.

I chuckled. "You know—you and I don't have to live as if we have more money than we need. I
don't expect you to become a shoe connoisseur like Pam, and—once I am king—I can run things
however I fucking want to. If we want casual, that's what we'll do," I added. "Oh—there will be the
occasional summit or ball or state meeting that we'll have to get dolled up for. But, otherwise, we
can dress as we do now."

"So you won't be ashamed if I keep dressing in Target gear?"

"If Le Target is the store you enjoy, I will ensure that one be opened nearer to our home, and you
can cut the ribbon," I said dramatically.

My bonded laughed at me.

One thing was for certain: I enjoyed her laughter much more than her tears.
Who was the main character in the story? 

What was the main conflict in the story? 

What were the main events that led to the main conflict? 

What was the resolution of the main conflict? 

What was the underlying message or theme of the story?
even when Sookie and I were in the same room together.

I hoped that that inconvenience would change very soon.

The abandoned car had been almost exactly equidistant between Shreveport and Bon Temps. And Sookie's phone itself offered me no clues. It had been crushed. So had its SIM card.

With nowhere else to search, I decided to go to Sookie's home.

I parked at my own home and then ran to Sookie's. As soon as I was at the tree-line, I was reminded of the potency of the witches' warding. In fact, it seemed even more potent than before, and as soon as I stepped foot onto the mowed grass, I felt extremely uncomfortable. I quickly dialed Amelia Broadway, who answered on the first ring.

"Bill? Have you found her?" she asked, sounding upset and concerned. "Please say that you've got her and that she's safe!"

I was impressed that the witch seemed to care so much about my soon-to-be bonded. "No," I told Sookie's friend. "I have searched tirelessly since I left you, but Northman knew better than to hide her in any of his publically known safe-houses. I am at Sookie's home now. Tell me: is there a way to breech your spell? It is difficult for me to even take a step onto Stackhouse property."

"Oh—um—the spell wasn't mature last night," Amelia offered. "It would have gained power during the day. I would invite you through the spell, but it won't recognize me as living there anymore. Only Sookie can invite you through. Or—uh—her fairy relatives—since they are officially living there."

"There is little chance of them inviting me in," I said with some disgust. Sookie's fairy relatives—though they smelled delicious—had outstayed their welcome in my view. Many a night, I had been forced to postpone a visit to Sookie because her fairy relatives were there and would have "been uncomfortable because of my presence!"

As if being silver-poisoned by fairies had not made me uncomfortable around their kind too!

I shook my head. Sookie's devotion to her family was admirable, but I was looking forward to her getting her priorities straight.

In truth, I was looking forward to being Sookie's primary priority again.

As she had remained mine.

As the witch continued hemming and hawing (and then practically bragging) about her security spell and how it was designed to make people uncomfortable on Sookie's property—more and more so as they approached the house—I did just that. I took one uncomfortable, angst-filled step after another until I was about ten feet from the porch. And then I could go no farther.

"I cannot smell anything beyond the porch steps now!" I grunted with frustration, making the witch stop her prattling. Finally! "Not even the scent of full-blooded fairies!"

"Oh—that's the spell too!" she said with an odd mixture of triumph and apology. "She—uh—Sookie was—uh—hoping to cover up any traces of her fairy kin from outsiders—you know strange Supes? On account of the fact that some vampires are—uh—less civilized and all. And her kin—uh—smell, for lack of a better word."

I sighed. As if the witch needed to tell me that the scent of Fae was intoxicating for vampires and
—to a lesser extent—other Supernaturals. "There is a light on inside the house. I am going to hang up and call the house phone. Eric made sure that Sookie's cell phone was destroyed."

"Please. Please call me if you find Sookie! Please let me know she's safe!" Amelia entreated.

"If I have time before sunrise," I said gruffly before hanging up the phone and lamenting the fact that the witch had not been able to help me at all. I had been hoping that there would be a way to counteract the spell. Sookie might have been right in asking the witches for a better protection and privacy mechanism around her home—especially given what she had suffered—but, at this point, the spell was working against me.

And, therefore, it was working against Sookie too.

I called the house phone and could not even hear it ringing! Clearly, the witches' spell was designed to impede all senses except sight!

I focused on the light coming from the living room, trying my best to see anything through the window. But nothing but a shadow moving at the far end of the room had been visible to me for the five minutes since I had stepped onto the property.

And then—suddenly—the door opened.

"Sookie!" I yelled out. "Invite me in!"

Unfortunately, the voice that greeted me was not my beloved, and the individual who walked onto the porch was much shorter than Sookie.

"Thalia?" I asked.

The enigmatic and extremely unpleasant vampiress cackled. "For as long as I remember. And that is a very long time, Billy boy. Tell me—what are you doing here?"

"I am here for Sookeh!" I said insistently.

"Sookeh?" Thalia smirked. "I do not happen to know a Sookeh."

I scoffed. "Sookie!" I exaggerated the "correct" pronunciation with some difficulty. Why people made fun of the way I enunciated my former and future woman's name was beyond me! After all, vowels were pronounced differently in various regions of the country. And I happened to think that the "traditional" Southern style of speaking was lovely. Moreover, I was sure that Sookie agreed.

"So you can say her name properly," Thalia chuckled. "What a surprise!"

"Where is she?" I demanded.

"Unavailable for a visit," Thalia remarked.

"Is she in there?" I asked.

"This is her home," the vampiress said as if the answer to my question were obvious.

"Why are you allowed in there?" I asked.

"She invited me. In fact, I am Miss Stackhouse's new tenant."

"What about the fairies?" I demanded.
"What about them?" she asked with a smirk.

I glared at her, but she answered with only an eye roll.

"Where are they?" I follow-up.

"Fine," she said as if placating a child, "if you most know, they decided to move away for their own good."

"What do you mean?"

She rolled her eyes again.

"If you were a fairy, would you want to live here if the Northman was angry enough at the owner of the house to punish her in public?" She paused almost dramatically. "And/or to kill her?"

"Kill her?" I asked with concern.

"I have heard talk of Miss Stackhouse being turned," Thalia said offhandedly.

My fangs clicked into place, but Thalia only laughed.

"I want to see Sookeh! Immediately!" I yelled.

"And yet I am certain that you are used to disappointment, Billy boy," the elder vampiress grinned.

"I demand it!"

"Oh—do you?" she asked, her own fangs popping down, though her grin did not go away.

"In the name of King Felipe!" I tried.

"Oh really?" she sneered. "Care to call the king and confirm that?"

I recoiled a bit, realizing I had overplayed my hand.

"So Eric has made you Sookeh's watchdog?" I mocked, deflecting to a slightly different topic.

"And here I thought you had made a breakthrough on your pronunciation." She sighed loudly, even as she smirked. "But you have clearly regressed to calling 'Sookie'—'Sookeh.' Seriously, Billy boy, more than a century and a half old, yet you still have not figured out the vowels in your own birth country? Please promise me that you will never—ever—try Chinese!"

"Sookie!" I yelled out—both to "correct" my pronunciation for Thalia's benefit and to try to draw out my beloved. Even if I could only see her at her window, I would be comforted, given the fact that the witches' damnable spell was so effective!

"Better!" Thalia chuckled. "But you might just want to call her 'Miss Stackhouse'—so that you do not risk errors in the future."

I growled at the petite vampiress. "Get her for me now! She cares for me. And I care for her!"

"Clearly," she said, rolling her eyes yet again, making me wonder if she were channeling Pam. "But you will have to do your caring another night. Sookie," she emphasized the pronunciation, "is under the weather."

"What? You will do what? Yell ineffectively into the night?" Thalia asked, gesturing toward the yard and then the sky. "Bill, go home before you stop amusing me. Miss Stackhouse is not yours. She belongs to the sheriff."

I sneered. "He caused her harm tonight. And he will cause her only more harm in the future."

"Not my business," she said casually. "And certainly not yours."

"Tell her I am here. I am sure she would want to see me," I tried.

Thalia shook her head. "Miss Stackhouse is asleep, and I will not be waking her. She is tired from the events of the night—as you yourself intimated that she would be. My sheriff has charged me with seeing to her safety and comfort. Waking her up would be counterproductive to at least half of that charge—do you not think?" she added sarcastically.

"I want to see her tomorrow night then," I insisted. "I have the right to . . . ."

Thalia's eyebrow rose almost comically. "You have no rights here, Compton."

I glared at her. "As Sookeh's—Sookie's—friend, I have every right to make sure she is safe."

"I will pass your request along to Sheriff Northman—when I next see him."

"Sookeh should be able to determine whom she sees!" I argued with passion.

Thalia glanced over my shoulder toward the east. "Your argument is going to have to wait, isn't it, Billy boy?" she asked condescendingly.

Unfortunately, the bitch was right. Even as she reminded me that sunrise was approaching quickly, I felt the orb's encroachment like a tap on the back.

"The king," I said, even as I took a step back, a step toward the safety of my home and my resting place.

"What about the caped clusterfuck?" Thalia asked with challenge in her tone.

"You should show His Royal Highness respect," I growled.

"Respect is earned," Thalia said simply. "I had hoped that he would be more worthy than Sophie-Anne, but . . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"You are the king's subject," I seethed.

"I am subject to myself," she said definitively.

"What about Northman? You are now his second!" I declared, glaring at the vampiress. Very little made me as angry as a lack of respect toward a superior. That was why I disliked Northman so much. He had never shown proper reverence for the chain of command.

Ironically, because Northman was my immediate superior, my giving information to Victor and Felipe might have been seen as a betrayal of my sheriff. However, a king and his appointed regent most certainly trumped any allegiance I might have had to Northman. One would have thought that a vampiress of Thalia's age would have learned how to choose her loyalties more wisely. Sadly, some vampires simply never figured out that tact and political dexterity were the keys to
civilization.
For her sake, I hoped that Thalia quickly—and finally—learned that lesson. Aligning with Northman at this point was not wise, given the fact that he would soon be going to Oklahoma.

"Your king," I emphasized, "will be in Louisiana tomorrow night to investigate Victor's murder. He will expect his telepath to be present when he does. In fact," I paused, wondering how far I should push Thalia and then deciding that—given the situation—I should push a little harder, "he wanted me to check on Sookeh—Sookie. Indeed, he wanted me to escort her to Fangtasia tomorrow night."

"I wonder that Felipe would ask you to make sure that Miss Stackhouse is in audience, rather than her bonded, pledged master," Thalia responded tauntingly.

"Thalia, you would do well to help me complete the king's task. You must know that the winds of change are already blowing in Area 5. That was true even before Victor died. Eric will soon be in Oklahoma, and there will be new leadership in both Area 1 and Area 5. If you help me, I will make sure that King Felipe knows of your cooperation. With your age, you could be integral in the revised power structure of Louisiana. Or it could be insured that you were left alone by that power," I added, gauging Thalia's reaction to my words.

Her face was inscrutable. However, since her previous scorn was no longer to be seen, I took that as a good sign.

"It is almost sunrise, Bill," she said. "You had best get to ground."

She turned to go inside, but paused at the door.

"I have been told to keep Sookie here," she said in almost a whisper. "Were will be doing the same tomorrow." She glanced over her shoulder, and I thought I saw something akin to pity in her eyes for a moment. "In truth, I fear for the woman. And I have never been one to sit on my hands as a woman was abused. Come back tomorrow at sunset. I will make sure that Sookie knows you want to see her. But whether or not she does see you will be her choice."

"Thank you," I told the ancient as she disappeared into the house.

I was dialing the king even before I arrived home.

"Compton, you had better have good news for me," Felipe said.

"I do," I stated. "I know where Sookie is. She is not with me yet, but I will be seeing her at sunset tomorrow night. I am sure that I will have her in custody not long after that."

"Good," the king said. "Contact me as soon as she is secure and you can confirm the status of her and Northman's bond."

"Yes sir," I said right before Felipe hung up.

I quickly climbed down into what Sookie had always called my "cubby" and locked the hatch so that I would be secure during the day.

As dawn took me, I was thinking about how the next night would change everything.
Friends Lost and Gained, Part 1

Chapter 38: Friends Lost & Gained, Part 1

THE NEXT DAY, EARLY AFTERNOON

SOOKIE POV

It was surprising to me how fast my world had changed; actually, maybe the world hadn't changed. Maybe it had simply been my perception of that world which had altered.

I made a note to ask Pam what her beloved Dear Abby would say about my evolving situation.

From a waitress to a king's pledged partner—which was Eric's new label for me.

A label that I'd already grown to love.

From trying to hide the things that made me "other" to fully embracing them.

An effort that was still taking quite a lot of—effort.

From denying my heart's desire out of fear to risking my life to be with my heart's desire.

The best choice I'd ever made.

Even if that choice led to my death.

Surprisingly, I was okay with that.

Yes—my perception change had truly destroyed the "normal" life I'd once clung to so zealously.

Surprisingly, I was okay with that, too.

In honor of Pam—who was, I supposed, now my new daughter-in-law, at least in a sense—I passed the time on my way from the small house where I'd spent the last twelve hours with Eric to my soon-to-be ex-home in Bon Temps by mentally constructing a fictional note to Abby.

Dear Abby,

I grew up in a small town where I never fit in because of a "disability" I perceived myself to have. Although I had a loving grandmother who raised me, everyone I came into contact with—including her—thought that it would be best for me to pretend to be normal—to pretend that my "disability" didn't exist.

But I wasn't normal and it did exist.

Still, I wanted to be accepted and loved by those around me so much that I stubbornly stifled what made me different—what made me "me."

But—despite that—no one really ever accepted me, not even the "fake" version of me.

No matter how much I practiced my fake smile in the mirror.

When the first person who seemed to love me—despite my "handicap"—turned out to be a liar, I became even more stubborn about wanting a "normal life."
A fake life.

A fake life with fake emotions couldn't hurt me, after all.

Because of the lying douchebag (as a warning to others out there, his name is Bill Compton) who butchered my name, my virginity, and my confidence in myself for way too long, I assumed that the next guy that seemed to accept me for myself wasn't sincere or that he would eventually discard me—no matter what he did to try to convince me otherwise. It didn't help that both he and I were new to romantic relationships—clueless really. It also didn't help that our first days as a couple were spent while he had amnesia. And once, he was cured, he didn't remember anything about what we'd shared. After that—in an attempt to preserve what was left of my fragile self-confidence—I acted indifferently toward him a lot of the time. Or I straight-up pushed him away. And he stayed away, not knowing how to deal with his own emotions.

Meanwhile, I was trying to cling to my "normal" life even though I'd never been accepted into that life by the others around me.

But I'm done with all that, Abby.

I've finally come to accept that the current guy in my life loves me and will have my back through thick and thin. (And—for the record—he's very thick in all the ways that matter, if you know what I mean.) More importantly, he doesn't even think about what makes me different from humans. He simply loves all that I am as if it was never a possibility to do otherwise.

Right now I'm thinking about how weird it is that my feelings about my old life and my childhood home, which has always symbolized that life, have done a complete 180 in what seems to be only a few hours. Why is it that the home I was clinging to so voraciously (yes, I have a word-of-the-day calendar) only a week ago now seems like just random wood and nails? Why is it that the very concept of home in my heart has shifted from a place to a person? Should I be worried that my perception has changed so quickly? Or should I just be grateful that it has?

Sincerely,

Ms. Stubborn.

P.S. Actually, those were rhetorical questions. I have finally found the courage to do the things that I know will make me happy. The drop-dead gorgeous (bad pun intended) vampirific (I know that's not a word, but it should be) "pledged partner" and "lover" that I've found is just a 6'5" bonus.

I chuckled as I imagined Abby's response.

Dear Ms. Stubborn,

Congratulations on finally pulling your head out of your ass.

Try to avoid future holes—as well as people who want to push you into them (unless your "vampirific" lover has just turned you).

Affectionately,

Abby

I chuckled again at the fact that Abby's voice in my head sounded an awfully lot like Pam's.

Of course, then again, my letter might—more accurately—be something like the following:
Dear Abby,

Why was I so stupid as to think that finding acceptance in a small-minded town—from people who mostly didn't want me around and thought I was a freak—would be better than accepting an invitation to cohabit from a vampire who truly loves me? Should I have an MRI to see if I have a brain tumor?

Sincerely,

Finally Seeing Things Clearly

P.S. No answer needed this time either because my vampire will just turn me if I turn out to have a brain tumor.

I could only imagine Pam's reaction to that letter!

I laughed loudly, this time not so much because my "letter construction" amused me, but out of unrestrainable happiness. Indeed, I was happy for both Eric and myself and for Pam and her new child/mate. Pam had "mellowed" since finding Miriam, and I could tell—even from my limited interactions with the two of them together—that they made each other quite content.

The human driving me to Bon Temps looked at me in the rearview mirror, and I heard from his thoughts that he wondered what was making me laugh.

Loudly.

He wondered if I might be a little "touched in the head."

He had no idea . . . .

Of course, his thoughts were also pretty garbled at the moment—not surprising, given the fact that Eric had chosen him randomly, glamoured him to pick me up at a particular time and to drive me to Bon Temps, and then further glamoured him to "forget the details of his trip" as soon he left my property.

And that's why I hadn't bothered to talk to my "taxi driver," nor was I worried about any thoughts he might be having about my arbitrary laughing fits.

In the end, Eric and I had agreed that glamouring a random human to give me a ride would be preferable to letting anyone who knew me—anyone who was "alive for the day"—know about the location of the isolated safe-house we'd stayed the night in. After all, even Weres could be glamourd by some vampires.

Of course, I could have simply driven myself to Bon Temps, but Eric didn't have a car at the safe-house. Plus, I didn't want to have to explain the presence of a strange car, one that might carry my "true" scent—the one that still included Eric—past sundown.

Thinking of scent, I asked my "cabbie" to pull up as close as he could to the back of my house since Bill always used the front door if he was making a "formal call."

I thanked my driver once the car door was literally a foot away from the first step leading to the screened-in back porch/laundry room. Amelia had assured me that her spell (which would cover my Eric-enhanced scent) extended a bit beyond the actual physical structure of my house, but I didn't want to take any chances that my "trail" would be sniffed out later. I tossed an envelope into the passenger seat and quickly got out of the car, making sure that I was squarely on the porch step.
before sighing with relief.

And with a little bit of victory too.

The envelope I'd given to my "cabbie" contained five hundred dollars—certainly enough to cover the man's time and expenses. I noted again that the man had a nice car and probably an important job. But Eric had insisted that I ride in what he termed "comfort"—as if I couldn't have ridden in something that didn't have heated seats (in Louisiana, no less)! In turn, I'd insisted upon the payment for my driver. My vampire and I had indulged each other's little insistences.

In other words, we'd compromised because it was too close to sun-up for us to have a dust up, followed by hot make-up sex.

Too bad.

That blush-inducing thought aside, I considered how Eric and I were learning to pick our battles, just as I had learned to surrender in the war to hold onto my "normalcy." After all, that war would have left me as the biggest loser—especially if I'd won it.

What would've normal really meant for me?

Staying a waitress my whole life?

Marrying someone like Sam?

I shuddered at that thought. Normal just didn't seem that appealing—compared to the path I was now taking.

As I watched the random driver (whose name was Jay) turn his car around and drive along my still wonderfully paved driveway, I followed his thoughts until he'd "forgotten" all about his excursion to Bon Temps. By the time he'd turned onto Hummingbird Lane, he was beginning to wonder how he'd managed to get so lost, and—as Eric's glamour had "instructed"—he was resolving not to tell anyone about it because he didn't want to be embarrassed.

I was not surprised when Mustapha Khan and Calvin Norris emerged from the tree-line. However, I was a little surprised that the two were laughing together like old friends. Of course, I was also pleased by this. If Mustapha and Calvin worked well together, that would bode well for Eric and my future security.

If we had a future after the night.

"Any issues?" I asked them, leaning against the back door—just in case Amelia and Bob's spell needed for me to be in physical contact with my house.

"Herveaux came by at around noon—tried to enter the house," Mustapha smirked. "When the guards he assigned didn't check in with him, he got worried," Eric's day-man continued, rolling his eyes. "And then the inept male guard called him."

"You mean the guard that was partnered with Jannalynn yesterday? The one that was glamoured last night to believe that it was fairies and Sandra Pelt that attacked Fangtasia and killed Victor?" I asked to clarify.

"The very one," Mustapha responded.

"Alcide didn't bother to keep the call private. The guard told Herveaux what happened to Victor—
and then relayed that both Jannalynn and Sandra Pelt were killed. At that point, Alcide rushed toward the house as if he were intending to break down the door," Calvin said with amusement.

"We did try to warn him not to do it," Mustapha added with false contrition.

"What happened?" I asked the two grown men, who looked suspiciously like misbehaving toddlers at the moment.

"The Were bounced off of the wards," Calvin chuckled loudly, even as he clapped his hands together hard—as if to demonstrate the impact.

I worked hard to hide my own snicker.

"Did he leave then?" I asked.

Mustapha laughed loudly, snorting as he did so, something that drew more laughter from Calvin. Mustapha hit Calvin on the arm—pretty hard in my opinion. But the werepanther didn't seem to notice the blow.

I couldn't help but to laugh at the two. I really was glad that they were so clearly getting along.

"Care to share what's so funny with the rest of the class?" I asked.

"Besides the fact that this wolf snorts like a hyena when he laughs?" Calvin asked, wiping his eyes and pointing at Mustapha. The Were hit him again.

Even harder.

But—again—Calvin didn't seem to mind.

I shook my head, knowing that I would likely never understand men.

"The funny part is that Alcide did try again," Mustapha reported.

"Three more times," Calvin added emphatically.

"He huffed and he puffed, but he couldn't get inside," Mustapha pouted, eliciting another laughing fit from both men.

I giggled a little too.

"And then he shifted and tried again!" Calvin managed as he and Mustapha practically doubled over as they continued laughing—or, in the Were's case, half-laughing and half-snorting.

Of course, while I was amused, I also felt a little bad. Alcide had probably been trying to get inside the house because he thought I was there and might need help. That thought sobered me up quickly, something that both of my new guards noticed.

"You know," Calvin said, "we told him that you were safe inside the house. And Alcide knows me—knows that I wouldn't fuck around with your safety."

"And we really did warn him about the witches' spell—several times," Mustapha assured, though he was snickering as he did so.

"Sook, I know that Alcide is your friend—or, at least, used to be—but the truth is that he's not the sharpest tool in the shed when he gets upset," Calvin commented.
"What set him off was hearing that Sandra Pelt had been killed," Mustapha informed, all traces of laughter leaving his tone. In fact, he suddenly sounded downright deadly. "He wasn't upset at all when he was told that Sandra led an attack on Fangtasia—where you were at the time," he growled.

"Where you were the late Ms. Pelt's likeliest target," Calvin added, his own tone now as cold as Mustapha's.

"Sandra really got her claws into him," I said with a combination of distaste and pity.

"Seems like it," Calvin agreed.

"Fucking idiot," Mustapha muttered.

I sighed. "Was Alcide hurt?" I asked.

"Mostly just his pride, though he was limping a little bit," Calvin informed. "That magic's no fucking joke!"

"He's right," Mustapha said, now all-business. "I can't get within five feet of the house," he added, scratching his arm and looking somewhat nervously at the screened-in porch—as if there were a den of rattlers on it.

"I haven't tried to get closer than I am right now," Calvin admitted with a nervous chuckle. I noticed that he and Mustapha had stayed about fifteen feet away from me and the house during our conversation.

"Those witches have some wicked juju," Mustapha commented with a shake of his head.

"That they do," I agreed. "And, by the way, you are both welcome inside."

The men in front of me relaxed immediately, as if they'd been fighting Amelia and Bob's magic just to be as close as they were.

Good to know.

"Thanks," Mustapha said with a grin. "Much better."

"Anyone else come by other than Alcide?" I asked.

Calvin shook his head. "Not a soul. The guards I brought with me from Hotshot have established a perimeter in the woods and have been patrolling since just after dawn."

"And Warren's found a perch about a hundred yards over that way," Mustapha said, pointing toward the tree-line, something he actually didn't need to do since I'd kept my shields down and had been doing my own kind of "patrolling" since I'd arrived at the house. I could tell that Warren was watching over us and eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Blackberry jelly.

And I could pinpoint where Calvin's people were too. Two were men and one was a woman. They were all a little bored, but doing their jobs as vigilantly as they could. One of the men, a nephew of Calvin's, was thinking about how the three-thousand dollars he'd already been paid by Eric would help him to buy his wife the oven she'd been wanting.

"Y'all have everything you need?" I asked the men. "I could cook you something."
Mustapha shook his head. "No thanks. We're good."

"But if you make something for yourself and there's extra, we wouldn't complain," Calvin said with a boyish grin.

Mustapha gave his new partner a sideways glance as if to scold him for the request.

"What?" Calvin asked unapologetically. "Her brother talks, and I know she's a good cook!"

I chuckled. "I need to make myself something filling anyway. Who knows when I'll get the chance to eat again after the action gets rolling tonight. I'll yell when it's ready."

"Thanks, Sook!" Calvin said triumphantly, as he and Mustapha walked back toward the tree-line. I heard Calvin raise the idea that Mustapha should run with the Hotshot werepanthers at the next full moon as I unlocked the back door and went inside the house.

After a quick inventory of the food in my kitchen, I decided to make breakfast for an early dinner since it was easy to prepare for a lot of people. As I went through the motions of preparing ingredients, I thought again about Alcide.

Sadly, it had become difficult for me to drum up any positive thoughts about him.

After all, he'd been seeing Sandra Pelt, despite the fact that he'd known she despised me enough to harm me. He'd once done something similar with another Pelt sister too. Still—I didn't want harm to come to Alcide, and Eric clearly accepted that, but between the Were's association with the Pelts and the crazy Shaman thing, Alcide had turned out to be a shitty friend—plain and simple.

Maybe I had been a bad friend to him too, and I found myself wishing that things could have been different—but our friendship seemed as doomed as any romantic entanglement we might have ever had.

"Bad timing"—I'd called it when Eric and I had spoken about my crumbling association with Alcide.

Eric had muttered "bad dog" as his theory.

I'd ignored his snide comment. Yep. I was learning to pick my battles, and—as depressed as it made me—Alcide Herveaux wasn't worth a fight with my bonded.

My pledged partner.

Looking out the window, I noticed that Calvin and Mustapha were checking in with one of the other werepanthers. I telepathically dipped into their conversation long enough to know that everything was fine, but was surprised to "hear" from Calvin's head that Tanya was pregnant, though still only a couple of months along. He and his wife were waiting until she passed her first trimester to make that information public.

I smiled to myself, happy for both expectant parents. I stayed in Calvin's brain for a few seconds longer and picked up that he was very proud, but worried. His first wife had lost more than one child, but he had great hope that Tanya would carry their child to term because of her young age and strength. Apparently, shifting was dangerous during the first few months of a pregnancy, and Tanya was stressed out over stifling her shifts two months in a row, but she was excited to become a mother. As for Calvin—I could tell that he didn't give a damn if their child turned out to be a panther or a fox (or something in between) as long as he or she was healthy, and he was looking forward to the added benefit of Dr. Ludwig overseeing Tanya's care—now that he and his wife
were on the medical plan Eric was providing.

I exited Calvin's thoughts as I finished putting together two big batches of egg, sausage, and cheese casserole.

After putting those in the oven, I took out ingredients for biscuits, and then I decided to bite the proverbial bullet and play the twelve messages that the beeping red light on my answering machine was telling me that I had.

As expected, most of them—eleven out of the twelve, in fact—were from Bill, who had become more and more agitated with each call he made.

Not that I listened to them fully.

Indeed, after hearing the first one, I simply hit the delete button as soon as I heard his voice on each subsequent message her left.

The last message on the machine, however, was not from Bill. It was from Sam.

It began with a sigh, and I sat down on Gran's old kitchen stool, which had miraculously survived the fire (though it was a little more worse for wear), to listen.

"Uh, hey, Sook," Sam's weary voice said, "about our talk earlier. I—uh—said things in anger that I probably shouldn't have. But I'm worried about," he paused, "everything. And you just won't listen," he continued, a little anger creeping into his tone. "And I just can't do it anymore. I was angry when the vamp made you quit, but maybe it's for the best that you're out of my life," he said with frustration. "Finally out," he added so softly that I could barely hear him. "If you ever . . . ."

There was a pause long enough that I thought that the machine might have cut him off. But then he continued. "If you ever wizen up and cut vamps out of your life completely, look me up. But—if I find someone else in the meantime—well . . . ." He sighed again. "I can't wait for you to get your head out. I can't wait for something that might never happen, Sook. So goodbye."

I scoffed. "My head is finally out, Sam!" I voiced toward the machine. "And it's gonna stay out!"
Friends Lost and Gained, Part 2

Chapter 39: Friends Lost & Gained, Part 2

SOOKIE POV, CONTINUED

The answering machine announced there were "no new messages" as I moved to delete Sam's message.

I probably pushed the delete button too hard.

And I may have unplugged the machine—forcefully.

But I was angry at Sam for his judgment of me. Who was Sam Merlotte to judge my romantic choices!

"For fuck's sake! Fuckin' Maenad anyone? Or crazy fuckin' Were women?" I muttered (before mentally apologizing to Gran)—despite the fact that cursing seemed appropriate at that moment. After all, Sam's latest squeeze, Jannalynn, had been prepared to help Sandra Pelt kill me! As violent as Eric might have been in some cases, he would have never killed Sam in such a premeditated fashion! Oh—I bet that Eric had imagined flaying the shifter, but he wouldn't actually do it.

Because he wouldn't have had just cause!

And he wasn't a homicidal maniac!

"Because my beloved has a kind of honor that men like Sam will never know,“ I said with a shake of my head.

Tired (both from good sex and bad stress) and still stewing over Sam's judgment of me, I put the biscuits in the oven with the casseroles and set the timer before going to my bathroom to shower.

Even as I tried to wash away my worries, however, I couldn't help but to recall the phone conversation I'd had with Sam that morning—a conversation which had clearly led to his message. Given the sensitive situation—as well as Sam's complicated feelings about me—I'd bent the truth (okay, I'd broken it) about his girlfriend's death. I'd told Sam the "official story"—that Sandra Pelt and a group of fairies attacked Fangtasia and killed several vampires, Victor included. But my biggest lie was when I told him that Jannalynn had been trying to protect me when she was killed by Sandra Pelt.

Of course, from one perspective, Sandra Pelt had caused Jannalynn's death. Had Jannalynn not succumbed to her jealousy of me and Sandra's manipulation, she might have been curled up with Sam even then.

I'd hated lying to Sam—though the story I'd spun had been a lot kinder than the truth—a truth I realized I didn't trust him with, a fact which made me sad.

But, even if I had trusted Sam, I knew that my lie was a kindness. It was better that he didn't know that he was partly to blame for what happened to his girlfriend. After all, his actions had been the cause of a lot of Jannalynn's jealousy—and, therefore, her hatred of me.
When I'd gone with Sam to his brother's wedding, I'd seen it as fulfilling an earlier promise to a friend, a commitment that had been made a long time before, given the fact that the wedding had been postponed due to the fallout from two-natured folks revealing themselves. Still—I'd found it strange that Sam had still insisted upon taking me, even though he'd been dating Jannalynn by the wedding date.

I couldn't even begin to speculate about how Jannalynn would have interpreted Sam's choice, and I knew that the event had caused something of a rift between the couple.

Of course, Sam had an excuse for his girlfriend—and me. Jannalynn was a proud Were, and her presence might have disrupted the wedding, given that some of Sam's family members were still having trouble accepting the fact that "two natures" were already in their DNA—whether they could shift or not.

In hindsight, I knew that my boss had wanted me to play the role of his girlfriend at the wedding and to like that role.

To want to keep it.

And—yes—I'd gotten that desire straight out of his head more than once during the event, though I'd tried to overlook that fact.

But my days of overlooking were over.

It had been disconcerting to "hear" Sam fantasizing about me—rather than Jannalynn—in a white dress. But—because of wanting to cling to my "normal" life (and my job)—I'd ignored his musings. Needless to say, I now wondered how many stray comments about me had fallen from Sam's lips when he was around Jannalynn.

It was no surprise that Jannalynn's jealousy had been encouraged by the torch that Sam had continued to hold for me—despite the fact that our brief romance (if a single date could be called a romance) years before had barely produced a hot ember.

Was I bitter about the Sam situation?

Yes. I could admit that.

Not long after I'd met Sam, I'd trusted him with the secret of my "otherness," and that was when I'd truly thought that I was the only one of my kind—well before vampires came out to show me that there were other "oddities" in the world.

Moreover, when I'd disclosed my "disability" to Sam, I'd told him that his mind was different from other people's minds. I'd told him that I was thankful for that, and—significantly—I'd asked him if he knew why I couldn't hear him as well as other folks.

He'd just shrugged his shoulders.

A shrug.

A shrug when the truth would have taken away the isolation that had—by that time—stifled almost every part of me.

When the truth about his nature came to light, it hadn't even been because Sam wanted to tell me. And then he'd shrugged away his omission of the truth by telling me that the secret of the two-natured hadn't been his to tell. And I'd accepted that shrugged explanation, forcing myself not to
dwell on the fact that I'd never given him a reason to distrust me.

I wondered sometimes what might have happened if Sam had been honest with me from the start—or, at least, almost the start—of our friendship. What if he'd simply taken a chance on me and told me that I wasn't the only "different" creature in the world.

In all honesty, we might have become a real couple if that had happened. We might have even gotten married and had children. But—by not trusting me—Sam had shattered the possibility of an "us." The fact that he still harbored the notion that we might still get together—that somehow we "were meant to be"—had become tedious.

And dangerous, given Jannalynn's reaction to Sam's ambivalence.

Still—despite my recognition of Sam's shortcomings—I had listened patiently earlier that day as he'd reacted to the story I'd told him about his girlfriend's death. That reaction had begun with him blaming and berating first Eric and then me.

According to Sam, being with Eric had necessitated that I required protection, which had led Alcide to put Jannalynn on my guard detail, which had led to her death.

Never mind that it had been a threat from Sandra Pelt, a Were, which had been the "official" catalyst for my needing Were guards. Never mind that Eric had nothing to do with Sandra Pelt. Never mind that Sam had witnessed the gnawing of Tray's death upon me—the death of the guard who had truly died saving my life.

Never mind that he seemed to want me to feel the same kind of destructive guilt over Jannalynn's demise.

Never mind that I'd never forget his words to me: "It seems like all your guards are murdered, Sookie, not that you give a damn since you go right on being a stupid fucking idiot!"

Never mind.

Instead of hanging up on Sam, however, I'd closed my eyes and taken the venom of his grief, telling myself that he didn't really mean what he was saying.

Telling myself that, despite the negatives Sam spewed about me and Eric—and his cluelessness when it came to women in general—he was still a good man at heart.

Reminding myself that he'd once given me a job when no one else in Bon Temps would.

As Sam had shifted his tirade back to Eric, I will admit that I tuned him out, having heard his arguments against my bonded before.

Instead, to drum up some good feelings about my ex-boss, I'd forced myself to recall what my life had felt like during the weeks right before Sam had hired me. By then, I'd been fired from or quit nine jobs in the Bon Temps area. Those who had fired me had done so because they couldn't take my "craziness" or "strangeness." Those jobs that I'd quit—I'd done so because I couldn't take the perversions within my bosses' thoughts.

The last had been a week-long temp job that I'd worked in Monroe—as a clerk for an accountant named Mike Clark. His thoughts had literally assaulted me as I'd tried to alphabetize files or answer calls. Still—I'd pretended as if I didn't "hear" him. I'd wanted the job to become a permanent thing, so I'd tried to convince myself that Mr. Clark's thoughts didn't matter.
But then Mr. Clark cornered me, and his immediate thoughts evolved into the actions he had fantasized about. And then those thoughts became an internal resolution that he could do whatever he wanted to me because no one would take the word of "crazy Sookie" over the word of a respected businessman.

I'd pretended to be docile until Mr. Clark's thoughts showed me an opening; then I'd kicked him in the balls and run.

But "quitting" that job hadn't helped Gran pay the bills.

Moreover, the temp agency that had arranged for the job wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole after that.

More than ten applications later, and I still hadn't found anyone who would take me on. It was when I was at the courthouse applying for food stamps for Gran and me—unbeknownst to Gran—that I saw the flyer for Merlotte's.

Sam had hired me, despite the fact that the only reference I could put down on my application was Gran—despite the fact that it looked like I couldn't keep a job to save my life.

And then a miracle had happened; Sam had been different from my other employers—not just in what I couldn't "hear" well, but also in the few things that I could hear from him.

For example, I could "hear" that he was attracted to me, but not in a way that made me feel dirty. And, importantly, Sam never equated his attraction with how I did my job—or whether he'd let me keep that job.

I sighed as I stepped out of the shower and toweled off. Indeed, there had been a time—more accurately, a brief window of time—when I would have said "yes" if Sam had asked me out for a real date. After I'd worked for him for a while, it was clear that he appreciated the effort I put into my job. We'd become true friends by then; in other words, Sam wasn't just being nice to me in order to get into my pants—as Jason sometimes did with women back then. And I had found Sam attractive; heck, I still did! So—yes—we might have worked out if he'd told me about his "secret identity" back then—before years of omitted secrets (on his part) had passed.

Before his omissions became a lack of trust in me.

I also couldn't ignore the fact that it had taken Bill's interest in me to spur Sam into what little action he had taken to "court" me. Sam's sudden "courage" had been more about territorialism than finally trusting me enough to pursue me as a potential partner.

Nonetheless, because of what Sam had done for me, I would always feel a certain amount of loyalty towards him—despite what his lingering fantasies about me entailed.

And that was why I'd patiently listened to his spewed condemnation of Eric (and all vampires). I'd listened to his "concern" that I was a prisoner. By the end of the call, Sam had sunk to patronizing me, calling me a "naïve little girl" and a variety of synonyms for "stupid."

Indeed, in his anger, he'd yelled that now that Jannalynn was gone, I should be with him because somebody needed to protect me "from both that fucking vampire and my own fucked-up choices."

And it was those words and the possessiveness that had tinged them that had finally "felt" like closure when it came to Sam and my friendship. I guess the message he later left on my machine was closure for him.
Sadly, our friendship had become too toxic for the life I wanted to lead. There would be a part of Sam that would always believe that I'd "see the error of my ways about vamps" and come running to him. There would be a part of him that would always hope that my relationship with Eric would fail miserably—regardless of my happiness—a part of him that would always believe that Eric would hurt me as badly as Bill had.

In fact, that part of Sam would be counting on my being hurt.

And—having that realization—I was truly glad that I'd finally moved on from Merlotte's, just as Sam had agreed in his message. Oh—Sam's putting me into a box in his imagination wasn't nearly as damaging as the box I'd put myself into for so long in my quest for a "normal life," but it was a box nonetheless.

And—finally—I refused to remain trapped, whether because of my own choices or someone else's ideas about how I should behave or what I should feel.

I found it ironic—exhilarating actually—that Eric had been most frustrated with me when I'd insisted upon putting myself into a box, though he'd never torn apart that enclosure; he'd waited for me to do it myself—counted on the fact that I would.

Eventually.

Meanwhile, he'd been willing to "live" with it—even live in it with me.

After Sam's rant had finally ended that morning, he'd hung up on me. And—now—having received his message, I acknowledged that my friendship with him had likely come to an end—just as my friendship with Alcide had run its course.

I was ashamed to admit that—in the past—I would have suspected that Eric had somehow manufactured the endings of those friendships with his "rivals." But I wasn't living in the past, and I knew that Eric wasn't the villain in the story.

I also knew that Eric Northman wouldn't see them as true rivals.

For the Viking had no rivals.

At least not in my heart.

"Or his arrogant brain," I muttered with an amused smirk.

As I dressed for comfort and then double-tied my shoe laces, I found myself hoping that—in time—Sam would find happiness; maybe then, he could be happy that I'd found the same. And, perhaps—one day—we could sit down for lunch without Sam's unrequited feelings jostling against my disappointment in him.

Or perhaps not—given Sam's message.

Either way, I was moving on and away from the two two-natured men who hadn't respected me and my choices because I didn't pick them.

I'd made Calvin and Mustapha deliver food to the others before I'd invited them to my table. With the tension building as we all anticipated the night ahead, we didn't talk much. Still—I took a moment to enjoy the meal and my company.

"You know—if things go as planned, this will probably be the last meal I have here for the
foreseeable future," I observed as I made a little sandwich with a biscuit and a few spoonfuls of the casserole I'd made.

Mustapha and Calvin only looked at me; maybe they didn't know what to say, given the fact that if things didn't go my and Eric's way, my future meals would be occurring in Las Vegas.

If I wasn't dead (finally dead).

I smiled at them both. "You know—I appreciate the fact that I'm sharin' this meal with good company."

"The very best of company." Calvin concurred, raising his glass of orange juice. I could hear into the minds of the men at my table and knew that they would have Eric's and my backs that night. I could also hear that they would do whatever it took to ensure that I would never have to step one foot into Las Vegas. What I didn't hear from either of them was judgement about my choice of mate.

And that "silence" was golden.

Take that Alcide! Take that Sam!

I raised my glass and saluted my guests.

Good company—indeed.

"It's nearing sundown, and we'll have to go soon," Mustapha said after he'd cleaned his plate and rinsed it in the sink.

"We'll be in position when you need us," Calvin assured.

I hugged both men before they left. "Be safe. And thank you," I said simply. After all, there wasn't much more to say. Both of them were being paid handsomely for their work, but there was a lot more to their allegiance to my husband and me than money. I couldn't help but to be impressed with the Were and the werepanther.

As they left, I looked at the clock. It was approximately forty minutes until sunset. I took out one of the burner phones Eric had given to me. He said that I could safely use each phone twice before throwing it away. Honestly, the disposal seemed like a waste to me, but I'd promised Eric, myself, my Gran's spirit, and anyone else who was listening that I'd follow Eric's lead when it came to security from then on.

In turn, Eric had promised to command Pam to stop immediately if she ever had the inclination to overhaul my wardrobe—with lighter fluid.

It seemed like a good tradeoff to me.

I dialed the number of another "disposable" phone, a number I'd memorized before leaving Eric's safe-house.

"Sook?" Amelia answered.

"Hey, Ames."

"Hey yourself. Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. Are you and Bob safe?"
"Yep. And we're all set up. Rasul is the bomb, by the way. And Indira is gorgeous! Anyway, they have us somewhere safe. Octavia got here this afternoon, and she brought some of our coven!" Amelia conveyed excitedly.

"All trustworthy?" I asked.

"Yes," Amelia responded immediately. "If you trust me, trust them."

"I do trust you," I said to my witchy friend. Despite everything, I felt closer to Amelia than I ever had before. I'd worried that—after she left Bon Temps following Tray's death—we'd never be close again. I'd even feared that our relationship might become full of more antagonism than affection.

But—during the last several days—I'd felt a shift in both Amelia and our friendship. There had always been something a little selfish about her. Or maybe "thoughtless" was a better term for it.

Oh—I knew that Amelia couldn't control her thoughts any more than she could control the volume of them. But—at times in the past—those thoughts had been centered upon herself to the point that she really didn't care about what happened to anyone else. For example, when she'd wanted to re-ingratiate herself to Octavia after the whole Bob-cat fiasco, she'd invited the elder witch to stay in my house (without consulting with me first) even though she'd sensed that I wouldn't be favorable to the idea.

Back then, Amelia's mind had unwittingly "told" me that she had planned out her "Octavia-pitch" carefully so that I would accept the elder witch as a tenant.

"Manipulating me to do as she wanted" was another way to label what she'd done.

Of course, I'd been the one to agree; I'd allowed myself to be manipulated because I didn't want to lose Amelia. By then, I'd loved her, and I was starved for friends—as Amelia knew very well.

And then Amelia had been the opposite of supportive about anything Eric-related—until very recently. Two nights before, her mind had "confessed" that she'd been jealous that I'd found someone who might truly be transformative in my life. She'd initially hooked up with Tray partly to "match" my relationship with one of her own and had felt guilty when her sorrow wasn't as intense as it should have been when he died. That guilt had turned to anger and bitterness toward me.

But, when she'd come back, I'd felt only contrition, acceptance, and true affection from her.

Telepathically verified.

I liked to think that we'd both grown up a lot during the past several months.

"Thank you, Ames," I said after I'd listened to all that she had to tell me regarding the witches' plans. "And make sure you thank Octavia too. And Bob. And the others."

"You never need to thank me for protecting my family," she returned softly.

"Yes," I agreed with a smile on my face. "Family."

"You okay?" she asked. "It's a lot. I mean—after tonight—nothing will be the same. No matter what happens."

Indeed, after tonight, my world would shift.
The best case scenario would have Eric as King of Louisiana, and I would be his partner in that "profession." And Amelia and Bob would be our "court witches"—or something to that effect.

The worst case scenario would have both Eric and me dead.

And Bob and Amelia would be on the run.

In between, there was a mountain of possibilities, ranging from Eric being stuck in Oklahoma to me being trapped in Las Vegas.

And—maybe Bob and Amelia could hold off Felipe and his thugs by scaring them with all the possibilities of their witchery?

Maybe. Hopefully.

Heck—even if everything went perfectly with Felipe's takedown, that didn't guarantee anything. If the Vampire Council decided to execute Eric for treason, rather than to support his claim to the throne, he'd be killed, and I'd be left vulnerable to a line of vampires who would want to claim me, which meant that I would become Thalia's charge and go on the run.

"Sook? You okay?" Amelia asked again.

"Just anxious. Anxious to get everything over with—to see where the chips fall."

"I can't blame you for that," she said sincerely.

We were silent for a few seconds. I knew that neither of us was ready to hang up. After all, if something went wrong that night, we would likely never speak again.

"You're really happy with Eric—right?" Amelia finally asked.

"Yes. Happier than I ever thought I would be. I'm scared as hell because I have so much more to lose now, but I'm done letting my fear stop me from being with Eric—from finding a good life—from believing I deserve one," I added with a nod of my head.

That nod—which Amelia obviously couldn't see—had been just for me.

And maybe for the universe too. Maybe I wanted any unseen forces or gods or goddesses out there to know that I had found some faith in them—and in myself.

"I'm glad for you," Amelia said, and I could tell that she meant it.

"And you and Bob?" I asked her.

There was a pause as if Amelia was moving to somewhere that she could speak privately.

"I love him," she said after I'd heard a door close. "But I think I could survive without him. "I'm worried about you for that reason," she whispered.

"Huh?" I asked.

She sighed. "I—uh. Look, Sookie, even right after I met you, I worried that—if you ever really got in deep with Eric—you wouldn't want to survive without him. And you were always so sure that you'd never be enough for him. I just worry that I might have. . . ."

"That you might have?" I prompted after she'd paused for several moments.
"That I might have affected your being with Eric before—because of my worry. Because I didn't support you like I should have," she said softly. "And," she paused again, "because I was jealous of what you had with him. I've always wanted to be a part of an epic love story. But I wasn't. Maybe that's just not in the cards for me. But it's in your cards, Sook. And—even though I'm late telling you this—I'm really glad for you—and Eric." She paused again. "Epically glad!"

"You'll find your epic, Ames," I said. "Who knows? Maybe your epic will turn out to be Bob? I mean—it's kind of epic that he forgave you for the whole cat thing—right?"

She chuckled. "You know? You're right. And the way you see things?" She paused. "Well—let's just say that having you in my life is a good, good thing. So—uh—we're good?"

"Yeah," I assured. "Better than good."

"And you promise to go on? Even if Eric is . . . ."

She didn't need to finish her sentence. And I didn't want her to.

"I promised him," I stated. He'd not done the same, but Amelia didn't need to know that.

She breathed a sigh of relief that I could hear clearly over the phone. "Thank God he made you promise! You know, Sook, your friendship is the most important relationship of my life." She chuckled. "I don't mean to sound creepy or anything, but I've rarely been accepted. And, even when I was, I've almost never felt as if I could just be me—instead of the over-the-top, super happy me—around another person. You taught me that I could be Amelia and that—even if I was being a bitch—you could still love me. Would still love me."

I smiled to myself. "You know—you loved me at my bitchiest times too."

"Maybe," she said seriously, "but I would have never felt confident enough to get serious with anyone—either Tray or Bob—if you hadn't helped me believe that someone could love me despite my flaws. Thanks for that, Sook."

We were silent again—this time for almost a minute, still not wanting to end our call. I found it odd—and sad—that it was impending danger that could cause one to appreciate things with clarity when safety seemed to encourage taking things for granted.

Taking people for granted.

"Ames? Will you make sure Jason's okay? If things go wrong tonight? I mean—Calvin is gonna protect him physically, but he'll need someone to lean on emotionally—if the worst happens."

"Yeah—I will," she responded. "But I won't need to. Things are gonna go right."

"From your lips to God's ears," I whispered. "But I'm glad you'll be around for Jase nonetheless."

"Sook, I love you," Amelia said, her voice coated with a sob that she was clearly trying to suppress. I could imagine the tears in her eyes. "And we're gonna do everything we can to make sure you and your man get out of this alive—or, uh, undead."

I chuckled, even as I wiped away a tear of my own. "I know. But you and Bob know what to do if we lose."

"We know," she said somberly. "Just promise me that you won't lose."
"I couldn't guarantee that promise," I said softly, "so I can't make it."

I heard Amelia take a deep breath. "Love you, Sook. If I could pick anyone in the world to be my sister, it would be you."

I swallowed my emotion—my love and my fear—with an uncomfortable gulp. "Love you too, sis," I returned before we hung up the call.

I closed my eyes.

Eric would make sure our vampire allies were in place.

Desmond would make sure our demon allies were in place.

Our witch friends were already ready.

And our two-natured friends would be ready soon.

As the sun moved ever-closer to the horizon, I knew that it was time to begin my own part.
Of Dae Blood, Part 1

Chapter 40: Of Dae Blood, Part 1

NARGAL POV

I enjoyed "sneaking up" on my brother. Of course, "sneaking," in my case, was unexpectedly teleporting to wherever Desmond was. I’d learned—through practice—how to teleport so accurately that I could appear only a foot behind him.

Indeed, it was Desmond's own blood that enabled me to do this. Not surprisingly, since the Fae and the Dae shared a common magical ancestor, the power to teleport to someone of one's own blood was a trait that some of the Dae possessed.

Though the skill was becoming rarer and rarer among my kind.

The Fae tended to task people who possessed the ability to "pop" to their kin as guardians. Demons didn't follow this kind of practice, for we did not share a Fae's talent for knowing instinctively when one of our blood was in danger. That ability had evolved separately in the Fae race.

Many—many times—I had wished that the Dae enjoyed that trait.

I had wished it after I discovered that my beloved daughter, Gladiola, had been slain.

And—before that—I had wished the power when I found out that my younger sister had been killed as a witch by humans. Esmeralda—or Ezzy, as Desmond and I had called her—had been a magical being, of course. In fact, she had been a practicing witch and had been living with a coven in the Welsh countryside at the time of her demise.

The humans who killed her did so out of fear—not because she or her fellows had harmed anyone in their closeminded village.

Sadly, though a full-blooded Dae, Ezzy had only limited offensive skills, and when she used them, she became quickly tired. Our own mother had been ashamed of Ezzy's lack of skill, all but banishing her to the human realm so that she would not "disgrace the family." That action by my mother had led to my father seeking comfort in the arms of any other woman but my mother, so they never had another child after Ezzy.

I had been torn between my mother and my sister. I had loved both.

Because of my love for my mother, I had—for longer than I should have—resented Desmond for being the product of one of my father's affairs. I'd resented my half-brother for being half-blood. Moreover, I'd resented Desmond for having more power than my own full-blooded sister.

Of course, Ezzy had loved Dezzy, as she'd called him. And—because of her—I began to spend time with my half-brother when I was in the human realm. It took him a long time to trust me fully, but the event of Ezzy's murder ultimately brought us together in a way that little else could have. Before that, I'd merely tolerated his presence. And I'd had to try to like him. After that, I no longer had to try.

I just did.

Perhaps my change of heart was selfish, rooted in the fact that Desmond was the only sibling I had
left after Ezzy perished. Perhaps, my changing feelings came about because I could tell that we shared the same kind of unrelenting grief at her loss.

Or, more likely, it had been Fintan who had made Desmond and I see the best in one another.

I sighed as I closed my eyes and remembered Ezzy's beautiful face.

Her red hair had flamed. Her eyes had been a green meadow and the blue sky all at once. Her soft features had made her look like a child for much longer than she should have.

And she was not untalented. But her magic had been more organic—a recessive Dae strain that included the natural ability to "know" the properties of plants and animals, no matter what realm she was in. She would have been revered as a healer in other families. But my mother, who was from a proud—too proud—family of warriors, found Ezzy to be an unacceptable offspring.

Thus, when our mother told Ezzy that leaving the Dae realm would be "best for our family," my sister had merely bowed, issued me an open invitation to visit her, and then teleported to the human realm forever.

Happily, Ezzy had preferred the human realm, and the sisterhood of witches she found there had suited her.

I sighed.

Ezzy generally stayed away from humans, for the more "aware" among them would have been able to tell that she did not age as they did. She was mostly content inside the confines of her coven; indeed, even the "human" witches within her group, who aged as other humans, rarely made contact with other villages.

Yes—my sister's "earthly" people stayed away from the problems of humans, except when they needed to seek them out for the trading of resources. For almost a century, my sister's group had no problems. When necessary, they traded the excesses of their crops and their talents with the human villages around them for more livestock. My sister—on very rare occasions (perhaps once a decade)—would venture out to function as a midwife to an important human who was struggling abnormally with her pregnancy. Indeed, in one village in particular, Ezzy became known as an "angel" because she'd saved the chieftain's wife and infant son.

But neither of these facts saved Ezzy from the humans of that same village.

On the contrary, those humans—spurred on by the fear of the "other"—became stirred into a frenzy by a religious zealot, who could not afford passage to the New World and, therefore, decided to spew his hate-laced diatribe to unsuspecting villagers in Wales. How he'd chosen the village nearest my sister's sanctuary was beyond me—unless he already knew that there was a group of "odd women" nearby and already anticipated that they would be easy targets.

Up until the arrival of that fanatic, the human villagers had called the witches "wise women." After the zealot came amongst them, the label of the women darkened.

To "devil's spawn."

To "cursed ones."

Forgotten were the times when the witches had helped to cure their sick.

Forgotten were the times when the witches had helped their crops thrive.
Forgotten was the time when the witches had given the villagers safety from marauders.

What was not forgotten was the location of their settlement.

Ezzy had fully damned herself in the humans’ eyes when she used up all of her energy to try to save her compatriots instead of getting away during the attack upon her coven. I later learned—when Desmond, Fintan, and I decimated that human village—that Ezzy had managed to get off three blasts of fire before she’d tired and been taken by the humans.

With her blasts, she’d ensured that several of her sisters could escape into the Cambrian Mountains and she’d killed three humans.

After discovering what had happened to Ezzy, Desmond, Fintan, and I had killed three hundred in her name.

I took a moment to meditate upon my memories of my sister. The Dae had their own version of the Summerlands, though it was called by a name that had no translation in the human tongue. In fact, the word could not even be said with the sounds of any human language.

That Dae "heaven," like the Summerlands, was not completely separate from the other realms, and when I meditated with Ezzy in mind, I could always feel that she was as near as she could be to me—that she still loved me as always.

I loved her too—with my greatest regret being that she’d not met my daughters Gladiola and Diantha. Thinking of Gladdy, I concentrated upon her as well and smiled to myself when I felt her "answering" me as her aunt always did.

"I suppose you have met Gladdy," I smiled at the thought before clearing my mind of those whom I'd lost. After all, my goal for the upcoming night was to make sure that I lost no one else—to make sure that Desmond didn't get himself killed because of some foolish alliance to a vampire!

I focused on those who shared my blood. Most strongly felt was Diantha, who was close to the one I felt almost as much: Desmond.

I smile wickedly to myself and then teleported to my brother, knowing that I would "pop" in one foot behind him and scare the "devil" out of him!

DESMOND POV

"Dammit!" I yelled out as a burst of energy brought with it my brother. I quickly spun around and glared at Nargal's laughing face.

"I told you not to do that!" I yelled; only Nargal could make me lose my cool. But—then again—he'd perfected his little tortures of me since I'd been a child. He'd called such things his "brotherly duty."

Of course, when I was a child, Nargal's "brotherly duty" had been completed in order to torture me. Back then, Nargal had resented me; he'd tormented me relentlessly for being only a half-blood—and for dividing the affections of our father. But our sister Ezzy had made sure that Nargal never did anything too violent to me.

I sighed as Ezzy's face flew vividly into my mind, and memories of her flooded my thoughts. Ezzy had always played peacekeeper between my brother and me. And, ultimately, Nargal and I had made peace.
So much so that now—rather than calling his little "startlings" of me "torture"—I called them (and him) merely a pain in the ass.

But not an unwelcome one.

After all, the "pain in the ass" I was looking at was someone I now loved and trusted more than any other—any other who was alive in my current plane of existence, that is.

Indeed, the only individual I'd ever trusted more had been Fintan Brigant.

"So—tell me again why you are risking your skin. And mine!" my brother said, his eyes glinting with mischief.

"What? Are you becoming forgetful in your extremely old age?" I quipped. "Can't you remember my telling you just yesterday?"

Nargal smirked. "You told me only that you are planning to help to kill a vampire king. But that cannot be the case!" he returned somewhat snarkily before becoming more serious. "Desmond, you know that a war between the Dae and vampires would not be advisable."

"The vampire king to be killed does not enjoy the kind of admiration that would start a war," I returned honestly.

"Still—why risk a treaty that has been in effect for five hundred years for Northman? I mean—he's a good sort. Hell! From what I've heard, he's an exemplary vampire to work for! And his reputation as a warrior is unblemished. However, that doesn't mean you should place your fate into his hands—let alone my fate and Diantha's!"

I sighed loudly. "If it were just for the sake of Mr. Northman—Eric—I would not act overtly on his behalf, even though his situation is grossly unfair. But I do not act for the Viking—despite his worthiness; I act now for my goddaughter."

Nargal's eyebrows skyrocketed almost to his hairline. "Goddaughter?"

I gestured toward the couch in my hotel suite. Though he and I always communicated on a secure line and I'd been willing to tell him all about the need to overthrow the vampire king, Felipe de Castro, I'd asked him to wait to hear my motives for doing so.

I wanted to tell him about what I'd done for—done to—Fintan's progeny in person. After all, Nargal had cared a great deal for Finn as well and would likely be angry to learn about the ways I'd failed our friend's descendants.

I looked at my brother and took a deep breath. As I steadied my nerves, I could not help but to recall that it had been Nargal who had introduced me to my dearest friend, Fintan Brigant.

FLASHBACK

252 YEARS EARLIER—NEAR LONDON, ENGLAND

DESMOND POV

As I approached my brother's cottage, I heard the distinctive sounds of fucking and rolled my eyes.

"Typical," I muttered.

"Nargal, I am here!" I yelled out, though I knew I didn't really need to, given my brother's hearing.
Still, I closed the door with a loud thud. I'd traveled all the way from Paris to London, and the journey had been tiring even on part-Supernatural bones. I was ready for a good meal and at least a cursory visit with my brother, whom I'd not seen in many years since Nargal had been away from the human realm.

Granted, the purpose of my current visit was mostly to join up with him so that we could travel together to visit our sister. Nargal also desired to see the countryside between London and my sister's village in Wales, for he'd heard that there were some interesting rock formations along the way. I figured that he'd accepted my offer to keep him company because traveling alone simply was not safe. Even Supernaturals could run into trouble on the open road—usually from other Supernaturals.

But I longed to see our sister, Ezzy, so I was determined to tolerate my brother.

Not surprisingly, since Nargal liked being an asshole where I was concerned, he had to act as if he was doing me a favor by letting me travel with him. He enjoyed reminding me that—unlike him—I lacked the ability to teleport. Nargal, on the other hand, could teleport to anyone who shared his blood. Of course, he would not have been able to travel all the way to Ezzy since the village in which she lived was warded from outside Supernatural influence. But Nargal could have used the Dae portals to get to her more quickly. I, on the other hand, had not yet been "recognized" by the head of my Dae family, my father's father, Zed; thus, the portals would not work for me—another fact that Nargal liked to use to torment me.

My human blood was likely why I did not have the ability to teleport. But, then again, the ability to "pop" came more from Nargal's mother's side of his family rather than from the father we shared. And—even in his mother's bloodline—the gift was rare. Indeed, a more common trait on my father's side was speediness of foot, a gift which I'd also not inherited. Given the fact that Nargal had been born with that gift too, he enjoyed tormenting me about that lack on my part as well.

My Dae gift was twofold: my telepathy and my physical strength, which—even with my human blood—rivaled Nargal's. And, of course, I'd have an abnormally long life, compared to humans.

Strangely, I was stronger in many ways than Ezzy, though she was fully Dae. I'd always secretly thought that Nargal disliked me more because I was stronger than his sister. Ezzy had been looked down upon in the Dae world (which I'd yet to be invited to visit), and Nargal had always been extremely protective of her. Ironically, the fact that his "bastard brother" had received gifts that would have made Ezzy less shunned by our kind seemed enough cause to make Nargal shun me most of the time.

I sighed. Nargal was, as Ezzy had put it, a "complicated being."

Of course, Nargal didn't sound that "complicated" as I heard him calling out his release as if he were a Barbarian. I rolled my eyes, but couldn't help but to smirk a little as I heard not one, not two, not three, but four others calling out their own releases moments later.

My brother—he certainly didn't do anything by half-measures.

Whether he was taunting a younger brother, fucking his way through whole townships, conquering an enemy, or spoiling Ezzy, he had only one goal in life: to seize all the enjoyment he could.

It was just the things that he enjoyed that sometimes gave me pause.

When another round of rumbling followed a woman's pleas for "more," I gave up on Nargal being a good host and went into his small kitchen. A fire was already lit despite the fact that it was July.
Of course, England never seemed to get too hot, but Nargal enjoyed fires no matter the weather, for the Dae realm tended to be much warmer than the human one.

Since I'd spent all my life in the human realm, I was more comfortable in colder climes than my brother was, but I still placed my hands near to the flame to increase the heat of them. There was something about fire that strengthened the Dae.

Even the part-Dae.

After taking a moment to enjoy the heat, I found a pot and began to look for ingredients for a stew. Even as the panting in the bedroom increased and the walls quite literally shook, I cut up root vegetables before adding water, cured meat, and a few herbs I found hanging from the ceiling.

As the noise increased even more from the bedroom, I could make out that three of the people with my brother were humans—two females and one male. There was also another male with him, but he wasn't human.

"Fairy," I mumbled as I put the stew over the flame so that it could cook. "Intriguing."

I looked at the bedroom door and then the stew. "It will take a while to cook," I thought as I began stripping and moved toward the bedroom. Despite my weary bones, I had one bone that seemed to be working quite well as I thought about Nargal's moaning companions.

And—if Nargal didn't appreciate my intrusion into his little party—he could just learn to be a better host!
Chapter 41: Of Dae Blood, Part 2

SEVERAL HOURS LATER (flashback continued)

DESMOND'S POV, CONTINUED

Normally, I did not partake in sex with men as excitedly as I did relations with women, though I had experienced sex with a variety of beings. Hell! I'd even bedded vampires, though the recovery time required after my last encounter, which had involved three voracious vampire women, had been substantial!

But worth it!

However, I will admit that the male fairy had caused great excitement within me, both when we shared one of the human women and, later, when he fucked me after the humans had gotten tired and left.

The fairy was beautiful, his golden hair shimmering as much as his skin. I could tell, once I was close enough to him, that he was only part Fae—just as I was only part Dae. Maybe it was that we recognized that we were both straddling two worlds that made us seem so compatible as we were straddling each other.

Indeed, there was something in his soulful eyes that called out to me—that made me know with certainty that he would always be important to me.

Oh—it was not love at first sight or anything.

At least not romantic love.

In truth, I had begun to doubt that I would ever experience love in that vein. The men in my family were notorious for being restless when it came to "love," though we did our duty for our people. Indeed, Nargal had been away from the human realm for quite a while because he and his wife had been trying to produce a child in the Dae world where our women were most likely to get pregnant.

I, on the other hand, was not expected to marry because—due to a childhood accident—I could not father children. I still was not certain how I felt about that fact, for a part of me wished very deeply to be a father.

"What are you thinking?" the fairy asked as we both put on our pants. I could hear Nargal in the kitchen, likely already enjoying the fruits of my earlier labor.

Looking at the fairy, I found myself wanting to be completely open with him. "I am thinking about the fact that I cannot father children. I am thinking that—because of it—I will not be required by my people to marry."

The fairy frowned a little, though the expression did not hinder his beauty in the least. "You would like to be a father?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yes."

"You could still be a husband," he commented. "Even if a Dae woman might not choose you
because you cannot father a child, a human woman would never need know. Or you could have a male companion," he said with a slight smile.

"Volunteering?" I smirked.

He chuckled. "Sorry. But I, too, wish to be a father. And—despite how much pleasure I had with you—I prefer the companionship of women on most days."

I laughed in return. "I would describe myself in the same way. And—for the record—it is the marriage part that I am glad to be free from, even though I would trade that freedom for fatherhood. But not having to be a husband is a consolation."

Fintan smiled, his face lighting up seemingly from within. "I would, I think, greatly enjoy spending my life with a single companion—as a husband—but only if I loved the woman."

My eyebrow rose. "Love is rarely a factor when it comes to the marriages of Supernaturals." Fintan's smile disappeared. "I know. And, for that, I lament. My father wishes me to take a mate for the betterment of our clan," he added as we joined Nargal in the kitchen. "Knowing him, I will have no choice in the woman."

My brother, never the consummate host" grunted and gestured toward the fire. I rolled my eyes and found two bowls. After washing them, I filled one for the fairy and then one for myself, ignoring the fact that Nargal was holding out his bowl hoping that I would refill his as well.

When I settled at the table without doing so, Nargal grunted again and punched me in the arm on his way to complete the task himself.

"Half-brothers," he mumbled, emphasizing the "half," as he took his seat.

"Nice to see you too," I responded with a half-smirk and half-sneer.

Nargal rolled his eyes but then smiled as if trying to charm a snake as he looked at the fairy.

"I see you and my half-brother are getting along," he said knowingly. Of course, he would know. After the humans left, he realized that the fairy and I were "busy," and—though Supernaturals were not modest—we knew when we were "not needed" in a sexual situation. Plus, my brother and I didn't share partners—at least not at the same time. Despite our promise not to kill each other for Ezzy's sake, Nargal and I just weren't that close.

"We are getting along!" the fairy smiled as he turned to look at me. "However, he and I have not yet been introduced properly. I am Fintan Brigant, though my friends call me Finn."

As I shook his hand—an odd gesture since he'd already fucked me—the name Brigant clicked in my mind. "You are related to Niall?" I asked.

"Yes. I am his son," Finn confirmed.

My eyes widened. "I did not know that Niall had part-human children!"

Finn's eyes rolled. "I have an uncle, Breandan, who does not appreciate half-breeds. My father is waiting for the right time to integrate me and my twin brother into the Fae-world at large."

"My brother is dealing with something similar," Nargal said with more thoughtfulness than I was used to from him, even as he chewed a piece of potato from the stew.
"I hope that things will eventually right themselves for you," Finn said comfortingly.

"I hope the same for you," I returned just as sincerely.

Finn nodded and reached out to squeeze my hand. The meal continued in mostly comfortable silence with spurts of conversation thrown in here and there, often about Niall's business in the human realm, since Niall had recently hired me to manage his interests in France.

After the meal, we all enjoyed some mead, and it was determined that Finn would travel to Wales with Nargal and me. Then, Finn decided that he would return to Paris with me after our visit with Ezzy was completed. He wished to see the city for the first time. Plus, he knew that his "vacation" would need to end sooner rather than later. And—if he came to Paris with me—he could check on his father's holdings in France.

THREE DAYS LATER (FLASHBACK CONTINUED)

NEAR RHAEDR GWY, WALES

FINTAN'S POV

I'd met Nargal in one of the higher-end brothels in London. It had been pleasant to find Supernatural company—especially of the variety that did not have fangs.

Oh—I'd had pleasant interactions with vampires before, but covering my scent took much effort, and letting my guards drop around even my fanged allies would have been a death sentence for me.

Happily, the Dae had not been in a serious conflict with the Fae since well before my birth. And Nargal was fun to be around. He was witty and sarcastic. And his appetite for spirits and sex matched my own!

Yes—the demon was pleasant company. I suppose one could say that I was on a holiday of sorts—at least, a vacation from my family. My father was too political for my tastes—too concerned with trying to figure out with whom I should marry and breed. My brother, Dermot, and I had also recently quarreled. I could not understand how he could be sympathetic to our uncle's beliefs since he and I were both half-breeds! But—then again—Dermot and I had always been quite different. Indeed, it was difficult to conceive that he and I were twins!

Spending time with Nargal was a mindless respite from my responsibilities in many ways.

But meeting and spending time with his brother, Desmond, was the opposite of mindless, though I welcomed that time, nonetheless.

I could quickly tell that Nargal and Desmond—though brothers—were not the best of friends.

My first clue had been Nargal's glare when Desmond had joined us for our impromptu orgy with the three humans. I'd not minded the half-Dae's appearance. Indeed, I'd welcomed a fresh partner. On the other hand, Nargal had quickly "finished" with the humans and left the room.

Another clue to Nargal's ambivalence for Desmond had been the fact that he called him "half-brother," instead of "Desmond," emphasizing the "half" every time he said it.

There were also many other small insults here and there.

During our three days of travel, Desmond had seemingly allowed these comments to float right over his back, clearly trying to ignore confrontations with his older sibling. Soon, I found myself
working as a bridge-maker between the two brothers, who were much more complementary than they seemed to want to recognize.

Nargal's personality was larger than life! Desmond was more soft-spoken, but he was clearly the more intellectual of the two in certain ways.

Seemingly, when not "on holiday," Nargal's brain-power was spent on military strategy. Desmond's intellectual pursuits were much more broad. He'd chosen the law as his profession, but he could speak intelligently about literature, music, and art as well. He also had a firm handle on mathematics and the new sciences that were developing.

As I watched the two brothers practice at sword-play, I could imagine the wonder they would be if they ever actually worked together.

On the surface, it seemed as if Nargal did not care for his brother because Desmond was a half-breed, but that did not make sense to me since Nargal had not blinked twice when he realized that I was a half-breed.

What was clear to me was that Desmond very much wanted to have a good relationship with Nargal. Though he wouldn't have admitted it, he obviously respected and looked up to his older brother in some ways.

What was less clear to me was why Nargal did not seem to want a relationship with his brother. Indeed, the older sibling seemed to tolerate the younger just for their sister's sake. But—then again—there were all kinds of reasons why siblings might not get along.

Part of me wondered if Nargal resented the fact that his father had bred with a woman other than his mother, but Nargal himself seemed ready, willing, and able to flood all the women in London with his seed, despite the fact that his wife was pregnant with their first child in the Dae realm. Indeed, Nargal himself had told me that he felt that marriage was merely a politically-motivated institution.

In fact, he'd chided me when I'd told him that I hoped I could care for—even love—whatever wife I was to have.

As I continued to watch the two brothers sparring in the Welsh countryside, I was prepared to step in if needed. Nargal was the better swordsman—clearly. But, then, as full-blooded Dae, he would have been. He clearly enjoyed toying with Desmond—trying to rile him. Meanwhile, Desmond maintained his control—especially in regards to his emotions. He was methodical in every movement. He obviously knew he was the lesser in skill and speed; he worked to offset his deficiencies by moving with a proficiency that seemed to be very well-practiced.

Desmond was also clearly very strong, and his well-placed blows were enough to disturb the full-demon's balance at times.

Again, I imagined what might happen if the two were to fight together.

I sat up a little straighter and readied my "light" when Nargal sliced Desmond's shirt.

As if sensing that I might intervene, Desmond shook his head slightly, though he did not take his eyes off of his "foe."

"That is one for you, Nargal," the part-Dae said to his brother. "Your move was a thing of beauty."

I'd already learned that compliments were the right strategy with Nargal.
"Perhaps I will show you another move," Nargal said, though his countenance had become less "deadly."

"I always enjoy learning from you," Desmond returned evenly.

As the brothers continued their swordplay, I couldn't help but to admire them both. I was much fonder of womanly curves, and—though a tighter passage—an ass was not generally as pleasing to me as a woman's sex. But I had to admit that I was attracted to both brothers.

I had met their rotund father, and I could see that both of them would eventually develop a similar body shape. But—for now—both were stocky and muscular. From what I could tell, Nargal was about three hundred years older than his brother, but they appeared to be almost the same age because Desmond's human blood made him age a bit faster than his full-demon brother. Indeed, if anything, Desmond looked to be a bit older by human standards, resembling a twenty-five-year-old. Nargal seemed closer to a human in his earlier twenties.

Before Desmond had entered the picture, Nargal and I had shared partners, but Nargal had showed no interest in fucking me, and I showed no interest in fucking him. It was clear that we were the "givers" rather than the "receivers" when other males were involved, for neither of us had any compunction about fucking other males in the name of variety. On the contrary, Desmond seemed to be open to being the "giver" or the "receiver" when it came to men, though—like me—he preferred women.

As a matter of fact, after a couple of nights together, Desmond and I had already cooled our physical relations. Indeed, I was beginning to feel an almost brotherly-type of affection for both Nargal and Desmond, though it was with Desmond that I felt I had the most in common.

To his credit, Nargal simply accepted Desmond and my burgeoning friendship as if it made a clear kind of sense to him. It was things like this that made me feel as if Nargal did, in fact, care for his brother very much. Even if he did not show it—or even admit it to himself.

It was as this thought passed through my mind that both brothers fell to their knees as one. Their wide eyes displayed grief.

And then panic.

"She is gone!" Nargal yelled out, even as Desmond began to weep.

Nargal soon joined him as the brothers embraced, both clearly needing to hold onto something in that moment.

I raced over to them, but—despite my pleas for information—neither brother could speak for several minutes as they clung to each other. It was finally Desmond who stopped weeping first.

He looked up at me, his eyes so full of sorrow that I almost began to weep as well. "Your people," he stammered, "when they die—they are able to present themselves to their kin to say goodbye on their way to the Summerlands—correct?"

"Yes," I said, my heart dropping. "You have lost someone?"
"Ezzy," gasped Nargal.

Desmond nodded. "The very sister we were going to see was—just a few minutes ago—executed as a witch," he said as if in shock.
"Burned!" Nargal yelled out before beating his fists into the earth.

Desmond nodded again—his face moving from engrieved brother to stone-cold killer in a flash. "A zealot was responsible. Ezzy showed us her own death. There were fifteen other women burned. Ezzy let us see what had happened and then asked us to avenge her and her sisters."

"We will kill them all!" Nargal yelled, again beating the earth.

"Yes," Desmond said calmly, even as he placed his hand only his brother's forearm. "We will."

By this time, I had sunk to my own knees. I could not imagine the grief that would be caused over losing a sibling. As much as I disagreed with Dermot's views, I loved him to my core.

"I will use all my talents and skills as Sky Fae to aid you as you avenge the death of your kin," I vowed formally to the brothers, bowing my head.

"And thereby you will become our kin," Desmond and Nargal answered as one.

[FLASHBACK OVER]
Chapter 42: Of Dae Blood, Part 3

DESMOND POV

"You said goddaughter?" Nargal asked.

"That is the title I have decided upon for my ward," I responded.

"You do not have a ward," Nargal commented.

I sighed. "I should have told you this many years ago, but it did not seem as if you would ever have need of the knowledge. Plus, there is a part of the story you will disapprove of."

Nargal looked at me in an almost paternalistic way—as if daring me not to tell him all of my secrets.

"Spill, brother," he ordered.

I took a breath. "Finn came to me decades ago. He had finally found the great love that had eluded him for most of his life. Her name was Adele. She was human and already had a husband," I informed.

Nargal frowned. "Why did Finn not tell me this?"

I shrugged. "You have been in the Dae world for much of the last two centuries. And Finn's affair with Adele lasted only a blink of that time."

"Affair?" Nargal asked. "So the woman stayed with her human husband?"

I nodded. "Adele loved her husband, but he could not father children, something I understand well."

Nargal frowned and nodded. One of the reasons my brother had been so free about "lending" me his children was that he knew that never being a father had gutted me in some ways.

Though he ought not to have felt guilt, Nargal did, for—opposite of me—he had been blessed with fathering many children. Diantha and Gladiola had been the fruit of his first marriage. His second marriage had produced ten other children, all boys.

Surprising himself most of all, Nargal was actually in love with his second wife, Klonna, something that he said he would never be with anyone! I liked to tease him about that, but—in truth—I was envious of what he'd found. The only drawback was that Klonna (and most of their boys) could not travel to the human realm, for she (and they) had been born with strong physical traits that prevented her (and them) from blending in with humans; thus, it wasn't a surprise that Nargal's visits to the human world had lessened over the years.

Of course, when Nargal became head of our family line, I was finally allowed into the Dae realm, and I visited my family as often as possible.

"Finn felt about Adele as you feel about your Klonna," I told my brother. "Sadly, that is just the way Adele felt about her human husband. Finn settled for helping Adele have something that her husband could not give her."
"Children," Nargal said.

"Two," I indicated. "Finn came to me when Adele was pregnant with the first, asking me to look out for them in case something happened to him. He also asked for something more from me."

"This is the part I am not going to like—isn't it?" Nargal intuited, steepling his fingers.

I nodded. "Finn begged me to give Adele a little of my blood during each of her pregnancies."

"What?" Nargal yelled. "Why?"

Having expected his reaction, I sighed. The Dae, by rule, guarded our blood and our secrets better than any other race, which was why few knew most demons were telepathic.

"Finn worried about his progeny, especially if Adele asked him to stop visiting, which she never did. Still, he loved her too much to deny her if she asked him to keep away. He wanted his children to have an extra layer of protection if they manifested a spark. In his defense, he did not think they would. After all, what other one-quarter fairy do you know of with a spark? Enhanced features—yes. But a spark? No."

"So Finn thought that your blood would create a spark in them?" Nargal asked, confused.

"No," I returned. "It was Finn's desire that—in the unlikely event that any of his progeny that did develop a spark—they would also be gifted with telepathy to aid them. Not knowing why I was hiring her, a young witch named Octavia Fant added a spell to my and Finn's blood. All of my traits were bound by the spell, except for my telepathy. And even that trait could only be activated by a spark from Finn's line."

"And it was this potion that Finn's beloved took?" Nargal asked with resignation.

I nodded. "Finn's son and daughter—Corbett and Linda—were enhanced, but did not have a spark. Honestly, I was relieved. Still, I checked on the subsequent generation to be sure. The first two grandchildren—Hadley and Jason—were even less enhanced than their parents. I did not find out about Sookie's spark until much later."

"Sookie. I have heard that name before," Nargal realized. "The Angel of Rhodes?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow.

I nodded. "Yes. She is also Eric Northman's bonded and pledged mate. And, as I'm sure you have deduced, she is a telepath. She was the third and final grandchild born of Adele and Finn's line. Not long after she was born, Finn was caught and slain as he entered this realm to check on his human family. Years later, Neave and Lochlan killed Finn's son and his wife. Cancer took Finn's daughter. Hadley was eventually made vampire. A werepanther took a liking to Jason, and that eventually led to his being bitten and made panther to a far greater degree than most bitten humans can turn."

"So—like found like. The Supernatural nature of Finn's descendants attracted other Supernaturals. And Sookie?" Nargal asked.

"She grew up believing herself to be abnormal at best and crazy at worst. There were none to help her learn to control her ability." I shook my head. "To my eternal shame—I did not follow up after the second grandchild came. I made an assumption based upon what I knew."

"It was a fair assumption," Nargal comforted.

"By the time I heard that Sookie was telepathic, Queen Sophie-Anne already knew about her, for
Hadley was her child. Sookie has been circled by Supernaturals since then."

"And the North Man?" Nargal asked.

"He and Sookie love one another in a way that—forgive me—makes what you and Klonna have look like a crush."

Nargal growled. "A crush!"

I shrugged apologetically. "I am sorry, brother. I always thought that you and Klonna would be the most complete couple I would ever know. And—don't misunderstand me—I know that you and she will retain your love as long as you live. But there is something different about Sookie and her Viking—something that transcends all that I have ever felt could exist between two individuals. Something that moves even beyond the concept of 'soul mates.' Maybe it is that they are from different species. Maybe it is because there have been so many obstacles for them to overcome. Maybe it is because—though they tried to resist each other for a very long time—the universe simply wouldn't allow them to stay apart. They are fate itself," I said, shaking my head at the hyperbolic quality of my own words.

Nargal frowned. "You have never believed in the concept of a 'fated pair,' brother."

"I do now," I offered.

"And how are Klonna and I different?" he asked curiously.

"From what you've told me, you and your Klonna knew from your first meeting that you would do well together. And you have done well together," I stated. "There have been no impediments."

"But we would stand together through tests," Nargal returned.

"I know," I replied. "I'm not saying you wouldn't."

"What are you saying?" Nargal asked.

"You know me. I have had little time for the concepts of love or destiny during my life," I answered. "You and Klonna certainly exemplify the love part. But Sookie and her mate have shown me that love and destiny can exist together. I cannot describe what I feel when I am in their presence in any other way."

"Is that why you would die for them? Why you ask me to fight with you?" Nargal pushed.

"Yes and no," I replied. "Such a love as theirs should be allowed to live and thrive—just to see what might occur because of it in the future. However, I will do what I can for them because of Finn and my affection for him. And because I will always owe him."

Nargal nodded solemnly. "As will I."

I looked at my brother, and I knew that we were both recalling the day when we'd discovered Ezzy's body—burned to the point that it was unrecognizable, except by scent. It had been Finn who had cut her down from the stake and helped us to perform the funeral rites of the Dae. And, then, it had been Finn who had helped us to kill all of the villagers who had been willing to mindlessly follow a hate-filled zealot. And—years later—when that zealot had proved elusive to Nargal and myself, it had been Finn who had found him and held him until my brother and I could arrive.

Oh—what fun we'd had with that so-called "man of God!" Yes—by the time we were done with
him, he'd been willing to sell his soul to Lucifer. In fact, I'd almost called the "fallen" angel himself—just to see if the zealot had anything left to piss or shit out of his body.

But—in the end—Nargal and I had been content to allow the bastard to burn slowly.

"Sookie favors Finn," I commented, "both in looks and in spirit. Her eyes," I added, "they are his eyes."

"If she is his by blood and yours by commitment and blood, then she is kin to all of our family," Nargal said after a few moments.

"I knew you would feel that way—once you understood her connection to Finn," I said with a smile.

"And her connection to you, brother," Nargal declared. "She has your blood; she has your demon gift." He shrugged. "Finn became a brother to us in all ways but by blood. Sookie seems to have corrected that one lack. And she has brought a piece of him back to us." My brother smiled at me. "And it seems that you are a father—at long last."

I shook my head and went to protest, but he continued speaking before I could.

"Godfather, father, guardian—these are all mere words until feeling is added. I can see that you love the girl," Nargal commented, "just as you treasure my children as if they were yours."

I sighed and nodded. "But—unlike with my nieces and nephews—I did not do right by Sookie. I did not even know that she was a telepath; I should have checked all of the issue from Finn and Adele's children, not just the first two!"

"Do not rehash this pain. You could not have known the gift would skip over the firstborn children or grandchildren. Such a thing does not happen," Nargal comforted.

"But when has a similar situation ever occurred?" I shook my head at my own failures. "A human-fairy match is common enough, but the introduction of my blood changed the situation, and I also should have accounted for the strength of the Brigant spark. I did neither, and I let Sookie down—and, in so doing, I let Finn down. Sookie's telepathy was an infliction to her—rather than the help that Finn intended for it to be. Sookie had no guide! And now I have learned that Hadley had a child, a son, and that son is telepathic as well."

Nargal sighed deeply. "Feeling the weight of guilt will not help either Sookie or the boy. Tell me—are you now doing for them as you can?"

I nodded. "I have already arranged for the child, Hunter, to have the help he needs even if I am slain."

"And your calling me for help to assassinate Felipe de Castro is evidence of your commitment to Sookie," Nargal reasoned. "Plus, since she has the spark, her life will be long, so you will have ample time to make things up to her," he added with a slight smirk.

"I believe she intends to let Northman turn her eventually," I commented.

Nargal chuckled. "Well—then you shall have even longer to make amends, though—to be frank—I would have arrived at the same suppositions you did after finding that neither Finn's children nor firstborn grandchildren carried his spark. Although it is not impossible for the spark to skip a generation, that is already rare enough. To have it skip over children in the same generation has never been heard of. And having it skip two generations? I would not have thought that possible."
Of course, as you said, your blood may have made the difference."

I sighed. "I will always regret not doing more for Sookie once I discovered that she was a telepath. But Finn was so firm about not wanting his human family tied up in the Supernatural world. He feared for them. Like I said, by the time I knew of her, she had already worked out her own method of shielding, and her life was already tied to vampires. It seemed best not to add Niall's problems—his enemies—into the equation of Sookie's life."

Nargal nodded in agreement. "Finn had good reason to fear for his family—given his fate."

"But Niall's enemies got to Sookie anyway," I said sadly.

Nargal frowned.

"Neave and Lochlan," I whispered.

My brother's sad expression deepened. "To have survived such a thing indicates your goddaughter's strength."

"And the strength of her bond with the Viking," I added.

"He aided her?" Nargal asked with surprise.

I nodded in confirmation. "Like I said, theirs is a love match that transcends normal rules. Even with a bond, the fact that he was able to aid her as he did defies all that I know of Supernatural connections. Hell! Even that skeptic, Ludwig, said that—though Eric had deep wounds from being silvered by Victor Madden—the Viking still came for Sookie at her hospital, gave her his blood, and joined in the fight against Breandan's forces. Ludwig told me that she felt energy between them—even that was strengthening them both. It must have been their bond."

"Impressive," Nargal commented.

"Yes," I agreed, even as there was a knock on the door of my hotel room. Quickly ascertaining the identity of the knocker, I walked to the door. "See—polite people come to a door and knock," I said over my shoulder to my brother.

"Ah—so I am not nice," he chuckled. "Thank you, dear brother, for clearing up that mystery for me."

I rolled my eyes and opened the door. I then stepped aside as two coffins were wheeled in. Having guarded them from the Texas border, Diantha walked in after the coffins.

Nargal's eyebrow rose, even as he glanced out the window to see that the sun was about ten minutes from going down. The hotel attendants placed the coffins where I indicated and then took their leave after I'd given them a generous tip. As Nargal greeted his daughter with a hug and a few words of affection, I moved to close the light-tight shutters in the room. Immediately after I'd done so, one of the coffins opened.

"Karin," I smiled in greeting. "It has been a while."

She nodded in agreement. "It was good of you to arrange for my sister and me to be here," she said, looking at the second coffin, which I knew held Pam. The younger vampire would not be awakening for several more minutes, but Karin the Slaughterer was older and had likely been awake for a while.
"You are welcome, Karin, I don't believe you've met my brother Nargal or my niece Diantha."

Karin nodded a greeting to both as she gracefully exited her coffin. "I have not had the privilege, though I have heard of your exploits," she said, bowing to Nargal.

"As I have heard of yours, Karin the Slaughterer. I am honored to fight by your side. And, perhaps, we will find an opportunity to exchange notes. Your maneuver in ending Altair is the stuff of legends," my brother smirked as he bowed in return.

Karin grinned, her fangs showing. "And may I just say that your work with that warlock in Algiers should have poetry written about it."

My brother laughed heartily, his sharp teeth prominent. "Who says it doesn't?"

"I should have known that you two would find topics of common interest," I intoned, rolling my eyes. My brother wasn't exactly an assassin—as Karin had been during certain times of her existence—but he had "dabbled" in the art of death-dealing.

"You'll have more stories after tonight," Diantha said in her rapid way that almost eluded my part-Supernatural ears at times.

"No doubt," Nargal grinned, just as the second coffin opened to reveal the Viking's second child. As greetings were made and Pam assured those gathered that her child would be "adopted" by King Stan if something went wrong that night, I smiled to myself, knowing that Eric Northman would be grateful that his children were with him.
The Long Con

Chapter 43: The Long Con

BILL POV

SIX MINUTES BEFORE SUNSET

[A/N: Bill's thoughts in the upcoming two chapters take place in about six minutes of "real time." This might seem odd, given the length of the chapters, but I work with the assumption that vampires can move through their thoughts very rapidly. Please, keep this in mind as you read.]

Vampires did not awaken slowly as humans did. We did not doze. We had no need of snooze alarms or coffee.

Indeed, we were either absolutely awake or completely unaware—unless we were under silver or being kept awake due to the pain caused by fire or direct sunlight.

Then, we might experience a sensation akin to human "grogginess."

Recently, I had found that out the hard way in Rhodes—when I'd woken up on fire. Thankfully, I was able to extinguish the flames, but the pain from my burns kept me from resuming my day sleep—kept me "groggy"—at least until after Sookie found me.

Of course, Northman had also been "woken" up on that horrible day in Rhodes. But, according to the rumor mill, he had not been awoken by licking flames or cascading sunrays; he had been shaken awake by Sookie—a phenomenon I had never heard of happening before.

The infliction of pain was the only thing that I knew of that could tear a vampire out of his day-death once he had entered it. Torturers loved the method! Hell—Lorena had arranged for Were, including the Pelt woman, to use silver on my body occasionally each day that I was "with her" in Jackson—just to "make sure she had my complete attention."

However, according to the rumors, in Rhodes, Eric had awakened without Sookie having to silver him, burn him, or otherwise hurt him, and then he'd made his escape with her and Pam.

Honestly, I did not believe the gossip that indicated that Eric had managed to half-fly and half-sled down the sloped walls of the Pyramid of Gizeh only moments before the hotel all but collapsed. Indeed, I figured that particular story had been propagated—propagandized—by the Viking himself!

But one thing was certain; Sookie had been involved in Eric's rescue.

I sneered. Why Sookie had not come for me—or even Quinn!—before she went to Eric that day was beyond me. But—of course—she did later find me in the rubble. She ensured my safety, while many other vampires had burned to ash before nightfall.

Yes—Rhodes had taught me that it was possible for a vampire to feel something akin to grogginess as I had waited for Sookie to find me, confident that she would not rest until she did.

But that had been my first time feeling such a semi-conscious state since I had become a vampire—despite the fact that silver had been used on me many times—by my own maker and (much later) by the fairy, Neave.
As a matter of fact, the use of silver on me had always left me in a fully-conscious state—even during the daytime—contrary to what happened to others of my kind.

I had been aware of the abnormal effects of silver on my body for a very long time—ever since the first time that Lorena had punished me for trying to visit my human wife.

Lorena had used a shard of silver to flay the skin from my arms, instead of simply issuing a maker's command to stop me from repeating my action.

My maker was a great believer in corporal punishment.

That particular punishment had occurred at night—and I had felt every minuscule effect of it. Shortly before dawn, Lorena had wrapped me in silver chains and put me into a wooden box. She had promised that the pain would not be so bad during the day. She told me that I would stay somewhat awake "so that my punishment could continue"; however, the sun's pull would be enough to make me "groggy." She promised me something like "down-time." She also promised me that she would free me when she rose the next night if I promised to behave.

My mind had been so addled with pain by then that I had thanked my sadistic maker for her generosity.

However, despite Lorena's promises, I had not experienced any kind of merciful bleariness during the day. I had languished in pain, continuing to feel the residual effects of Lorena's torture and the searing of the silver chain as acutely as I had felt it the night before.

When Lorena had freed me the next night, she had truly thought that I had experienced the usual hazy "respite" that a vampire would experience when under silver during the daytime.

After all, she had been silvered before by both her maker and vampire authorities. But her description of silver's daytime effects just did not sync with my own experience. However, I did not correct my maker, fearing that she would use the knowledge that I had been fully conscious all day to her advantage in future punishments.

Indeed, it was as if the silver forced my senses to stay activated during the day—almost as if it could override the effects of the sun's pull itself!

During my travels, as I had collected information for the database which had made me a wealthy, important vampire in the Americas, I found out that my reaction to silver was unheard of—unless there were others, like me, who kept the "gift" a secret.

Oh—I was not immune to silver—not by a long shot! Indeed, perhaps my "gift" had come about because I was less immune to it. Regardless, silver on—or, as I had recently discovered (thanks to Neave's bite), in—my body kept me not only awake, but also highly aware. Ironically, it was likely my odd reaction to silver that had kept me weakened for much longer than normal following the silver poisoning I received when I rescued my beloved Sookie from those horrid fairies.

I scoffed. I had heard the rumors questioning my vigor that had been proliferated by Eric and those in his soon-to-be obsolete retinue while I'd languished with silver poisoning.

Eric had so "generously" provided me with several donors a night in "payment" for saving the woman I loved.

As if I required restitution for doing that!

The amount of blood I took from the donors should have been enough to heal me of the silver
poisoning—long before Judith was contacted by my beloved in order to cure me once and for all. I smiled to myself, confident that Sookie's contact of Judith was yet another sign that she still loved me—that she would always care more for me than she would ever care about Eric.

I frowned as I thought about the Viking. Indeed, Northman had made no secret of ridiculing my inability to heal despite receiving so many blood donations. Of course, the pompous scallywag had no way of knowing that it was my unique reaction to silver that had caused the delay. Indeed, if I had been able to experience the "grogginess" that should have come during the days following my silver poisoning, I could have achieved something close to down-time, a near-resting state that would have allowed me to heal more quickly.

Simply put: blood and ample sleep—or at least rest—were both needed to revitalize vampires when they were injured. With Neave's silver-laced poison ricocheting throughout my body, I could not rest. That was why Judith had been needed.

Though some might consider it masochistic, I had, throughout the years, experimented with my "uniqueness," wondering if the ability silver afforded me—to stay fully aware during the day (even if I was in pain)—could benefit me.

Unfortunately, the things that I would have most liked to do during the day were forbidden to me by my maker or by my vampiric nature.

Early—very early—during my second existence, Lorena had commanded me to never kill her or do anything which might harm her or lead to her true death. Otherwise, she would not have outlived the day when I first discovered that I could palm a piece of silver and stay awake and fully alert as long as I grasped it.

And, of course, more recently, my reaction to silver had not allowed me to spend my days with Sookie, though I had considered telling her my secret so that our hours together might increase.

I would have gladly exchanged a little pain for the pleasure of her company during the daylight hours—even if we could have never enjoyed her precious sun together.

However, I knew that my beloved would not have allowed me to make such a sacrifice, for she would not have wanted me to harm myself. In fact, she had been horrified when I had described "the bleeds" to her—not that I was old enough to force myself to stay awake for long (not without silver aiding me, that is). And—as for older vampires—they carefully guarded how long they could force themselves to stay awake after the sun rose, though almost every vampire I knew had pushed himself to the point of getting the bleeds a time or two.

Just to see how long it would take to succumb.

But succumb we did.

All of us.

Once the bleeds began, even the most ancient among us could not keep themselves awake for long.

Of course, older vampires "evolved" over time to need less sleep and less blood overall, making "the bleeds" irrelevant for them at certain times of the early mornings and early evenings.

I wondered if I was a link in the evolution of vampires. Oh—I needed as much blood as any other vampire turned in the mid-nineteenth century. And I could not normally force myself to stay awake for more than ten minutes or so after dawn without getting "the bleeds," a time-frame that seemed perfectly normal. I was also at the point that I woke up a little more than six minutes before
sundown—again, perfectly normal.

Unless, that is, there was silver involved.

If there was, I could stay awake indefinitely, and—oddly enough—I would not get the bleeds.

Pain, of course, was the tradeoff, a tradeoff that was usually not worth it to me, though I had built up my tolerance to the pain of silver over time. Also, in my experimentation, I had realized that, although staying awake with the aid of silver might not dull my senses, it would eventually wear upon my energy. Like I said, vampires needed rest, and the silver did damage my body.

Still, I had always felt certain that my curious reaction to silver would aid me one day, which was why I had—for more than a year—made a habit of keeping a little velvet pouch on or near my body, a pouch containing my human father's silver pocket-watch. Indeed, the only time in recent memory when I had not done this was when I had been "called" by Lorena—before the unfortunate events in Jackson occurred.

I'd not wanted Lorena to get hold of the heirloom I'd discovered upon my return to Bon Temps, and I'd also not wanted her to question why I would keep silver nearby when "normal" vampires avoided it like the plague.

I gazed to my left and grasped the silver watch—as if it were a "security blanket."

Of course, that security blanket was currently wrapped in the safety of thick velvet. I'd not opened the pouch for a long time after Neave bit me with her poison-filled silver teeth, but I'd begun getting used to the feeling of touching the silver watch again—but just for a few moments at a time.

I cringed as I remembered Neave's deadly teeth—and the teeth of her lover, Lochlan; those weapons had glittered brightly, even in the dank shack where they had tortured my beloved.

I shuddered at the memory of what I had seen in that shack.

Sookie: beaten, battered, bloody.

The bite marks.

The divots of missing flesh on her once-smooth skin.

Neave and Lochlan had focused their attentions on Sookie's "soft parts," taking hunks from the undersides of her arms, her breasts, her stomach, her ample thighs, her calves. The two fairies had been so maniacal—so fierce—that they might have bested Niall and me had they not been engaged in an incestuous act (virtually on top of Sookie's agonized body) when we had burst into the cabin—like the conquering heroes we were!

Niall had engaged Lochlan, as I had faced Neave. Unfortunately, she managed her bite just as I executed a death-blow with my iron blade.

Sookie had been bleeding profusely, her sweet elixir calling to me.

But I had resisted taking her blood—despite being poisoned—even as Niall had beheaded Lochlan.

As I had staggered to a wall that would support my flagging weight, I had noticed that Sookie's clothing had been all but ripped off, and—though she had not been raped (thank God)—I had no doubt that the sadistic twins would have eventually gotten around to that. They had been too busy
penetrating Sookie's body with their horrific teeth and fucking each other in her spent blood to turn their sexual appetites upon her. I took some comfort in that thought; at least Sookie had not had to deal with sexual assault—again.

A moment of guilt shook me.

The trunk.

But—even before that horrible night in Mississippi when I had penetrated my fangs and more into Sookie—I had never made love to her "honestly." Indeed, many of our sexual encounters had come well before I loved her—when I was still prioritizing my assignment from Sophie-Anne over Sookie.

I sighed deeply, thinking back to the night I had taken the telepath's virginity, for "the telepath" had still been the way I'd thought about Sookie at that time. She had been vulnerable—heartbroken by her grandmother's murder and raw from the thoughts of the people of her hometown. Many of those thoughts had blamed her for Adele's death.

Moreover, a serial killer had still been on the loose at the time, and Sookie had been afraid.

I had taken advantage of her sorrow and fear; I had wanted her vulnerability.

"I let it happen," I said to myself, making a confession to my dark resting place that I would never be making to anyone else.

The "it" was Adele's murder.

Of course, I'd heard Rene Lenier's vehicle approaching the Stackhouse home on that ill-fated night after the Descendants of the Glorious Dead meeting. After making sure that Sookie was not in the home, I'd quickly weighed my options. 1. I could capture the killer, save Adele, and become a hero in Sookie's eyes. 2. I could let Lenier do as he wished and then show up in the aftermath of the situation to offer support and comfort to an aggrieved Sookie. One bonus to this option was that Adele, a possible impediment that might influence Sookie to stay in Bon Temps, would be dealt with. Another bonus would be Sookie's further susceptibility to my influence.

In the end, I'd chosen the second option, for I had much more experience with exploiting the vulnerabilities of others than playing the hero. Plus, a near-death experience for Adele might have caused Sookie to cling to her grandmother even more than before, something that was not expedient to my goals.

As much as I'd liked the elderly woman, the sacrifice of Adele Stackhouse was good for my cause. At the time, I'd alleviated my own slight guilt by acknowledging that Adele's human life was already waning due to her age. Sagely, I'd not told my queen about my lack of action on the matriarch's behalf since Adele was also Hadley's grandmother.

"And, of course, Sookie must never know," I said into the dark.

I closed my eyes and momentarily took the silver pocket watch out of the velvet pouch, letting it singe my skin—punishing myself.

If I could only do things over again . . . .

Putting the watch away and then closing the pouch tightly, I acknowledged that the situation had not been my fault. I'd been following the will of my vampire queen and my nature. I'd not been the one to kill Adele, nor had I glamoured Lenier to perform the act. And—even at the time as I'd
I nodded to myself. Yes—Adele's murder was not my responsibility. And what vampire would blame me for taking advantage of the situation that followed? Sookie had been the one, after all, to seek me out with the intent of losing her virginity in order to escape her grief. She had needed comfort on a carnal level, and I had been a generous lover to her, making sure that she felt great pleasure before I allowed myself to bite into her supple flesh and taste her lust-filled blood.

Yes—against vampiric nature, I had endeavored to be gentle with Sookie—human with her—knowing that it was her first time.

Strangely, it was after the sex that I remembered most vividly—the intimacy of having a human hold onto me for the first time since I had been turned. Indeed, during the last few hours of that long night, Sookie had even trusted me with the secret pain caused by her uncle's molestation of her!

Remembering how it had felt to kill Bartlett Hale, I smiled. Remembering how Sookie had disapproved of that act, however, I frowned.

There had been so many things that I did not understand about Sookie back then. But, once I realized I loved her, I endeavored to try to understand her. Now, I recognized that Sookie was so kind—so forgiving—that she did not wish anyone ill-will.

Not even her enemies.

The only being she had ever seemed disinclined to offer the benefit of the doubt to had—tellingly—been the Viking. Her skepticism of him had given me hope.

Indeed, Sookie's kind nature and her wariness of Northman were why I knew she would take me back as her mate. She had already forgiven me for the situation with Queen Sophie-Anne, after all. And she had never actually blamed me for what happened in the trunk, though the incident had made her standoffish of me for a time. Indeed—despite her dalliance with the Tiger—I felt that Sookie and I had been well on our way back to being a couple before Northman forced me to tell her about the queen's assignment.

"She should have never been told," I whispered with a growl.

"Once Northman is out of the way, all will be as it should," I continued.

Yes—with Eric gone—Sookie and I would have all the time in the world to renew our intimacy.

Both the emotional and the physical kind.

And, this time, I would not allow politics to come between us—even once we were in Felipe's court. Sookie would know that I treasured her above all else, and I would endeavor to keep our personal relationship separate from our work. Moreover, I would do all that I could to make her feel as if she came first in my life, even if—by necessity—my king would actually hold that place.

"But Sookie need never know that either," I whispered into the dark.
Chapter 44: Fool Me Once

BILL POV, CONTINUED

APPROXIMATELY TWO MINUTES BEFORE SUNSET

Despite my resolution to move on from my mistakes of the past and to concentrate upon my future with Sookie—a twinge of guilt stayed with me, concerning the things I had done or neglected doing where my beloved was concerned.

Again, I took my little piece of silver from the pouch and let it sear my palm. I sighed through my self-inflicted punishment, knowing that I deserved it to a certain extent, before putting the stop watch once more into its pouch.

"If I could only change the past . . .," I whispered.

I closed my eyes and let a recurring fantasy take hold of me.

I save Adele, and—in doing so—Sookie's brother is also proven innocent of the murders of Dawn and Maudette.

As Sookie and her grandmother gush out their thanks to me, I realize that I am glad I did not allow Adele to be harmed. And—more importantly—I realize that I truly care for Sookie.

Right then and there, I tell Adele and Sookie all about Hadley and Sophie-Anne, making sure to downplay that seduction—not honesty—had been part of my initial plan to secure Sookie. I ask my beloved and her grandmother to accompany me to the queen's court.

Excited by the prospect of seeing Hadley and weary because of recent events in Bon Temps, the Stackhouse women are happy to come with me to New Orleans.

When we arrive in New Orleans, the queen is willing to forgive my disclosure to Sookie and Adele once Hadley learns that I saved her grandmother's life. Of course, the queen settles Hadley's family into luxury. Adele, who so clearly treasures family, wishes to spend ample time reconnecting with her eldest granddaughter. Sookie does not want to leave her grandmother alone in New Orleans during the days, so she takes a leave of absence from the shifter's bar.

Meanwhile, I work my magic to ease Sookie into doing small jobs for the queen, just as Sookie had been willing to do for Northman. Soon, Sookie sees the good she is doing for the queen, as she ferrets out crooks and Fellowship members from the court. Of course, Sophie-Anne pays Sookie well for her services.

Seeing how happy and comfortable her grandmother is in Sophie-Anne's care—Sookie is pliable when it comes to formalizing a contract with the queen. Sophie-Anne makes clear that Sookie and Adele do not have to give up living in Bon Temps completely, and the Stackhouse ladies decide upon a split schedule between the court and the country.

Of course, as all these happenings occur, Sookie and I become closer and closer. She offers her virginity to me out of love and desire—not grief. Seeing our connection and wanting her telepath to stay happy, Sophie-Anne gives me permission to bond and pledge with Sookie, and I have ample opportunity to explain both rituals to my beloved.
Indeed, before I speak with Sookie, I formally ask Adele for her granddaughter's hand, something that both Stackhouse women appreciate greatly.

Sookie is overjoyed and—of course—says yes to my proposals; not long after, we complete our bond in love and then pledge before the queen and the court. Even Northman is in attendance, though he is not fool enough to cause any trouble. Indeed, everyone there knows that Sookie is mine—and the queen's through me.

Sookie and I, along with Adele, settle into a life of safety and opulence in the queen's court. We spend Christmases and parts of the summers in Bon Temps, and the queen orders that Eric Northman leave us to ourselves.

In fact, Eric is but a tiny footnote in Sookie's life.

And, importantly, under Sophie-Anne's direct protection, I am left alone by Lorena. I complete my database in the comforts of court, and Sookie and I live quite happily and prosperously until she requests that I turn her.

Yes—all this could have been—should have been.

I frowned as reality replaced fantasy in my mind.

"One poor choice," I whispered about the night I'd stood back as Adele had been murdered. That choice had led to consequences that I did not anticipate at all!

On the night when Sookie and I first had sex, when she practically begged me to take her virtue, I had allowed my lust—and bloodlust—for the part-Fae to overrule my reason.

To cloud my foresight.

Looking back, I realized that—after I'd tasted Sookie's passion-laced blood—I began to covet her in a way that I almost could not control. Perhaps, it was the fairy blood in her that made me contemplate defying my queen and stealing Sookie away to keep for myself—only myself.

But I forced my burgeoning love for Sookie to override my selfishness.

"If Sookie only knew how difficult that had been. If she only knew what I did for her—what I sacrificed," I whispered.

Indeed, after I'd realized that I loved Sookie, I'd convinced the queen to allow Sookie to stay in Bon Temps—not an easy thing to accomplish! But I'd done it! I'd persuaded Sophie-Anne to let Sookie ease into the Supernatural world. And I'd been prepared to guide Sookie until she was ready for the queen's court.

But then three things had occurred that had been beyond my control to stop.

First, Northman made the request for Sookie to go to Dallas, a trip that had been a disaster upon my relationship with her. By the end of that trip, Sookie and I were estranged due to Northman's manipulations.

Second, I had been forced to pitch my idea for the database to my queen before I'd wanted to. As I'd expected, Sophie-Anne had had the vision to anticipate its profitability. I lied and told her that I could work more quickly outside of the court; indeed, it was that lie that was ultimately the major determining factor in the queen's patience regarding the arrival of her telepath at court. As a matter of fact, initially, my plan was to wait to pitch the database idea until I was back at court, for I did
not arrive in Bon Temps wanting to stay there.

Yes—I'd sacrificed my own desires for Sookie!

Third, Lorena had reappeared into my life—using the fact that I was no longer living at court—to justify her intrusion. Of course, I could not tell her about either assignment my queen had me doing, so I could not avoid returning to her side. I'd hoped that Lorena's use of me would be short-term. But, once she had smelled my blood tie with Sookie, she became extremely jealous—even more frenetic than before. And—somehow—she learned that I was working on a top-secret project for my queen, something that she wanted for herself so that she could gain a foothold into the power structure of vampire society. God knows, she had burned the usual bridges of advancement. It figured that she wanted to use me and my work to get ahead!

King Edgington had been enticed enough by Lorena's promises of profit that he had agreed to house her for a while. Lorena had tried to seduce the information about my important assignment from the queen from me. Then she turned to torture. Then she decided to have Sookie kidnapped so that I would be more malleable and tell her what she wanted to know. Of course, she had no idea that Sookie herself had been my initial—my most important—assignment.

I sighed. The events in Jackson had turned out horribly. By the time all was said and done, Sookie seemed to be done with me—having even withdrawn my invitation to her home. Worse, Northman had managed to form an even stronger blood tie with her than the one Sookie and I shared. The queen, too, was angry at me and ordered me out of the country for a time—both to do research for the database and to punish me for not contacting her as soon as Lorena had summoned me.

Of course, the misfortunes of that time paled to the fortunes that seemed to be on the horizon for me.

I had slowly been re-earning Sookie's trust even before the incident with the fairies. Now I was certain that I had her gratitude, her affection, and her trust again!

And—soon—I would win even more of her faith by helping her to thrive in the court of Felipe de Castro.

Of course, the bonus would be that my actions in placating Sookie would garner more of Felipe's favor at the same time!

Yes—my fantasy where Sookie was concerned would soon become a reality.

Very soon.

Sensing that it was almost true dark, I reached out to try to "feel" Sookie. Alas, I could not.

By the time of her kidnapping by Neave and Lochlan, Sookie and my blood tie was already extremely weak—mostly because Northman's bond had superseded the tie. After my silver poisoning, the tie was tenuous at best—though I had not told anyone—including Eric, Sookie, or de Castro—just how weak it had become. Still, Sookie and my blood tie had remained a flicker within me—at least when she was nearby and not behind some godforsaken magical barrier! I calmed myself and reminded myself that the tie still remained despite everything—as if it were as reluctant as I was to let the woman go.

Unfortunately, despite the waning of my blood connection with Sookie, I had been able to tell when she and Eric exchanged blood—at least before my silver poisoning—when the two exchanged in Sookie's home. The euphoria of the heightened connection between my beloved and the Sheriff
seemed to always make its way into my tie with her.

Experiencing that hint of her elation—and knowing that carnal acts had likely accompanied it—had been torture for me. My only comfort had been that Sookie had never agreed to live with Eric, so their time together was limited by their jobs and the distance between Shreveport and Bon Temps.

Still, I hated that Sookie had forged a connection with Eric through the blood that I had only fantasized about.

But, soon, there would be no impediments to the bond that I knew that Sookie would welcome with me!

Despite my elation at that idea, I knew that my bond with Sookie would come with problems. For one thing, I would become a target to vampires more powerful than myself, but I felt certain that my king would keep my beloved and me safe in order to protect his vested interests in both Sookie and myself.

After all, other than a handful of sheriffs (Eric, unfortunately, included), I was de Castro's biggest earner, and I knew that he saw my potential to be even more profitable to him once I was fully absorbed into his personal retinue in the Las Vegas court.

And—as for Sookie—her value would become immeasurable under my tutelage. She had always underestimated herself, but I figured she would begin to understand her true potential after only a few weeks in Las Vegas.

And she would come to realize how Eric had been holding her back.

And she would recognize just how much her life was improved because of me.

Of course—despite how grateful Sookie would be—I also had to be prepared that a bond between Sookie and me could complicate our personal relationship.

I knew, for example, that she doubted her feelings for the Viking because she worried that their bond had been creating those feelings. I would simply have to assure my beloved that I would never influence her emotions, and I would hope that if I ever did need to "pull" her feelings in one direction or another, I could do so without her noticing.

And—if I could not—Sookie was trusting enough to believe that I had influenced her unintentionally or that I'd influenced her for her own good. Honestly, I did not think that the origin of her feelings would be that big of a deal for us—not like it had always been between her and Eric.

After all, she'd never confronted me about my potential influence over her before.

Indeed, even once she began to understand more fully the effects of vampire blood, Sookie had never questioned me about how much I had influenced her via our blood tie. And I had—for obvious reasons—never volunteered the information that I had used my blood to "soften her feelings" toward me after the Rattray attack. On the contrary, unlike with Eric, Sookie seemed to intuit that I had her best interests in mind and that I would not manipulate her with malicious or selfish intent.

And—to be honest—I did not plan to influence her unduly through our soon-to-be-formed bond.

That being said, another potential drawback of the bond was that Sookie might blame me if anything went wrong after we'd forged our connection. After all, facts had to be faced: Sookie drew in danger like a flame drew a moth! Inarguably, Sookie had blamed Eric—no, she had resented him
—for not coming to her immediate aid when she had been taken by the fairies. But—as a vampire—I was very aware that Eric would have been greatly debilitated by the pain coming from Sookie's side of the bond, pain which Victor had compounded by securing Eric in silver. It was a testament to Eric's age, his strength, and his possessiveness that he had even tried to go to Sookie before being stopped by Victor—let alone after he had been released from the silver.

I felt myself in the uncomfortable position of admiring the Viking—at least for a moment. I truly could not imagine the agony he must have felt as his bond with Sookie had forced him to endure the pain Neave and Lochlan had inflicted upon her. I was even more uncomfortable recognizing that I had to be grateful to Eric.

And thankful for his now-severed bond with Sookie.

Obviously, despite his own pain—despite being silvered—the Viking had managed to send her strength through that bond.

To send her the will to live.

Otherwise, Sookie would have surely succumbed to her torturers.

I closed my eyes as I continued to count down the final minute to sundown.

After months of suffering, pain, and almost hopelessness—I could finally see happiness before me. Happiness and a life with Sookie Stackhouse.

"As it would have always been," I said to myself. "If not for Northman," I added bitterly.

Of course, the best part—the part that would most torture Northman—was that Sookie herself had "built" the avenue for our happiness. She had asked her witch friend to break her bond with the Viking, a sure sign that she did not want him. A sign that she wanted a fresh start.

With me—I hoped.

I said a quick prayer to that effect and prepared to leave my resting place since I could sense that the sun was moments from fully setting. I made plans to hurry to Sookie's home, even as I again probed my blood to see if I could pick up any traces of her. There were none. But—given the witches' new wards on Sookie's dwelling—I was not surprised by this. After all, I'd not felt her the night before either.

But I had "felt"—intuitively—that she was home during my interaction with Thalia.

"Home," I said to myself. A home with Sookie was the thing I wanted most, and I felt certain that—if I lobbied for it enough—Felipe would allow Sookie and me to dwell in Bon Temps for at least part of the year.

Of course, that did not mean that we could not also establish a lovely permanent home in Las Vegas.

I imagined that home in wonderful detail as I jetted from my resting place, showered and then sped to the old farmhouse.

Sookie was sitting on her porch, though I could not even step onto the first stair because of the witches' spell.

"Invite me to come in," I entreated her.
She was looking forward, her eyes seemingly glazed over as if she were glamoured. She was noticeably shivering, despite the mildness of the evening.

"Sookie!" I said louder. "Invite me to come past the spell!"

"Bill?" she asked almost tentatively, looking up at me with reddened eyes as if she had shed many tears and gotten little sleep. "What's happened to me, Bill?"

I was so grateful to see her—to see her alive, despite the fact that she was also so despondent. Indeed, I was so distracted by her pale appearance that another vampire was almost able to sneak up on me.

I turned to face him when he was but ten feet away from me.

"Bubba!" I acknowledged with some surprise.

He nodded as if I was reminding him of his own name.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

"Visitin'," he said in his simple manner.

"That is all well and good, Bubba, but I need to speak seriously with Miss Sookie for a while. Perhaps, you should return tomorrow night," I suggested, though I knew that suggesting that Bubba travel to Vegas would be a more likely way for him to see Sookie the next night.

Perhaps it was time for the real Bubba to go to Vegas. It had been a while, after all.

"But I ain't here just to see Miss Sookie," Bubba said, following Sookie's movements with concern in his somewhat droopy hazel eyes. "I'm here to see the new owner of the house, too."

"New owner?" I asked, turning to look at Sookie. "What is he talking about, darling?"

With my senses, I could tell that the wards around Sookie's home were the same as they had been the night before. And that had to mean that Sookie was still the owner—right?

"Me," a voice said from the doorway.

"Thalia?" I asked.

"Yes, Bill," the vampiress said with an uncharacteristic amount of pensiveness. She placed an afghan around Sookie, who was still shivering.

"Eric took your home away from you?" I asked Sookie.

"I'm empty, Bill," Sookie said almost desperately.

I inhaled deeply. The wards around the house prevented me from smelling anything beyond the first stair of the porch. And—when I tried to step onto the porch again—they prevented that too.

"Invite me in, Sookie. Let me help you!" I implored.

"Someone took it, someone took it, someone took it," Sookie repeated, rocking back and forth.

"Took what, darling?" I asked her. "Your house?"
"She has been ill since last night," Thalia said evenly, though her eyes showed some concern. "But she is even more despondent now than she was then. The Weres who watched over the house said that she has sat in her current position since early morning. They did not see her take in food or even see to her human needs." The vampiress shook her head sadly. "Her witch friends must have successfully broken the blood bond; nothing else could have caused this reaction. As for Sookie's home, as I indicated last night, I was told to dwell here by the sheriff and invited inside by the telepath. It was not until I awoke tonight that I received a message that I now own this dwelling. It was," she paused, "unexpected news."

"Damn you, Eric!" I exclaimed as I tried to step onto the porch again. Again, I was repelled.

"If you own this house, why can I not access it?" I asked with—I will admit—somewhat unwarranted hostility in Thalia's direction, given her clear concern for Sookie's state.

The vampiress shook her head. "Hell if I know. I have tried to invite Bubba in too, but he cannot proceed past your current position either."

I looked at the simpleton vampire. "Is that true?" I asked him.

"I was told to come here to help Miss Thalia with anythin' she needed," he answered. "And to make sure Miss Sookie was safe. I dug myself in right over there," Bubba said, gesturing toward the tree line, "so I'd be here right at sundown." The vampire frowned as he looked at Sookie. "Miss Sookie looks mighty sad—don't she Mister Bill?"

I looked at my beloved. She was still rocking back and forth; mumbling "it's gone," again and again; and staring into space as if she were no longer seeing anything around her.

I looked at Thalia. "If you now own this place, invite me in," I entreated, hoping that she would recall the détente we had seemingly reached the night before.

"You are welcome to enter this property," Thalia said without hesitation. "Any part of it," she added.

I tried, again, to breach the porch, but I could not.

"Call the witches," Thalia suggested as Sookie continued to rock back and forth, shivering even more than before. "Maybe they will know how you can get in."

"Just bring her to me," I said after deciding that I did not want to wait for the witches. "Surely, she can exit the property! I will take her to Felipe, and he will make sure she is helped."

Thalia contemplated for a moment and then went over to Sookie.

"Miss Stackhouse," Thalia spoke in a more comforting tone that I thought she was capable of producing, "will you come with me? You need some help."

Sookie did not acknowledge the vampiress until Thalia reached out to touch her. And then Sookie screamed bloody murder!
Chapter 45: Fool Me Twice

DR. LUDWIG POV

"Do you have it?" the Northman asked.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes. But it is going to cost you; indeed, I'm surprised your witches didn't take care of this part of your cloak and dagger act," I responded acerbically.

Despite my tone, however, the truth was that I had warmed to the cold creature in front of me over the years—mostly because Eric Northman was only cold in the literal sense. In the ways that mattered, the vampire was "warm," and his sense of humor had almost been enough to make me laugh out loud a time or two. Generally speaking, only my own sense of humor could accomplish that feat.

"The witches used most of their supplies on the wards for Sookie's farmhouse," the tall vampire returned, looming over me.

I rolled my eyes again. It seemed like Eric enjoyed looming whenever he dealt with me so that I would have to look up—and then up again! If I didn't know that he was amused by teasing me in such ways, I would have been more annoyed.

"Plus, my bonded's witches are not sure that they could cover the bond-scent and the scent of my blood without covering Sookie's own essence, and that would seem suspicious," he continued.

I shrugged. "You are lucky I had the supplies needed, but—then again—I had a sudden boon on Dae blood this morning. Diantha was accommodating. You are lucky that she inherited the gift of covering up her Supernatural essence." I sneered. "Honestly, I find that particular ability to be almost useless these days, but—with my skillful manipulations—the Dae blood will work to camouflage all that is Supernatural inside of Miss Stackhouse. Of course, that includes what is Fae about her—in addition to the bond and your blood."

Eric frowned and nodded. "Understood. Unfortunately, a better solution did not present itself. We are counting on Compton's ineptitude at recognizing the difference. And—as you know—Felipe has never smelled Sookie without our bond. He will likely believe that the mild Fae scent she carried was enhanced by my blood and disappeared when our bond supposedly did. Anyway," he sighed uncharacteristically and dragged his fingers through his long, blond hair almost nervously, "the charade need not last for long. Once the players are all in place, then Sookie's scent won't matter."

I shrugged again, feigning indifference. After all, I wasn't about to let the Viking know that I favored his cause to the extent that I would have been willing to give him a discount for my services if he'd asked for one; luckily, the Viking never asked for such things.

It was in times like this—times when an inept, power-hungry asshole like de Castro hoarded power—that I was glad that the Hippocratic Oath was not something I had to worry about.

Because—sometimes—I did like to do harm.

I liked it very much!
That being said, there had been a time when I would have objected to doing harm to Felipe de Castro, but he'd devolved over the previous decade, and the trouble he would be making if he wasn't stopped was significant. On the other hand, Eric Northman would be a good king.

And I wasn't even speculating about that. I'd heard about each of the possible futures from the horse's mouth! Or—at least—I thought that the Ancient Pythoness looked sort of like a horse. Indeed, I'd even told her that to her face when she'd called me a troll.

Notwithstanding, the old battle-axe was my friend—one of the few I tolerated.

"The concealment potion will last only until dawn," I said, holding up two bottles for the Viking to see. I handed him one of the bottles.

"What's this?" he asked, looking impossibly handsome as his eyebrow rose.

If I were only a little younger . . . .

"This potion will counteract the other if your bonded needs to smell like you—and/or herself—before dawn."

The Viking smiled. "I did not ask for an antidote, but it will be good to get her scent back to normal as soon as possible."

"In that case, I'll expect double the price we spoke of," I intoned. Thinking of giving a discount was one thing. Actually giving one was another.

"Always worth the price!" he smirked.

"So—when am I to earn my Oscar?" I asked.

His eyebrow rose even as my phone buzzed in my pocket.

"Timely," I remarked before touching the button to answer the call.

"What!?" I greeted caustically, causing Eric to smirk.

I listened as Thalia tersely acted out her own lines. "Sookie Stackhouse is ill. We need you at her home immediately."

I rolled my eyes. "What's wrong with her this time?" I demanded.

"I believe," Thalia paused, "that she broke her bond with Eric Northman. She is not mentally stable."

"Well breaking a fucking bond will do that," I muttered unpleasantly, knowing that any vampires within twenty feet of Thalia would pick up my words just fine. Speaking of my words, I noticed that Eric cringed at them. Clearly, even the thought of his bond with Sookie being broken jolted him to the core.

Hell! The very idea disgusted even me—though I was as likely to bond with a creature as I was to take up singing show tunes! Some things ought not to be done—whether with science or magic! I intended to have a long talk with Octavia Fant about her witches even contemplating a bond-breaking spell!

I looked again at Eric, who had regained his calm demeanor. Though I would never outwardly demonstrate enough compassion to admit it, I was glad that Sookie Stackhouse had not hurt the
Viking with such an ill-advised deed.

"To break a bond is to break something within the very fabric of magic," I said aloud—judging harshly anyone who would be so fucking foolish.

"Well—yes," Thalia said, even as Eric shut his eyes tightly. "But what is done, is done. Will you help her?"

I let out an exaggerated sigh. "Will Northman even pay for her care anymore?" I groused. "I wouldn't if I were him," I added.

"If he does not, I will!" Compton yelled out.

I smirked.

Typically, the Confederate cock-stain was quite anxious to profess his "devotions" for Sookie Stackhouse. Of course, he'd rarely followed through—though his actions during the Fae conflict had been admirable.

Admirable—but likely motivated by his desire to worm his way back into Sookie's heart.

It made me like the somewhat flighty telepath a bit more that she didn't fall for Compton's hero/victim persona, though I knew that she'd felt personally responsible for his silver poisoning.

"Thalia, you can tell Mr. Compton that I will take his money," I said, winking at Eric. "I'll be there when I get there," I added before ending the call.

After I hung up, I regarded the Viking for a moment—even as he was looking right back at me. I tended to intimidate even the largest of men, but Eric Northman had never cowed to me. Nor did he expect me to be intimidated by him.

Yes—it was safe to say that I would be disappointed if he died.

"Good luck," I said finally. "I hope you gut that motherfucker," I added.

He smiled a little—a sincere smile, rather than his usual smirk. "Yes. That would be pleasant. But—if things do not go my way—I have taken pains to ensure you are not implicated."

"I'm touched," I returned sarcastically—not wanting the sincerity to get out of control! "But don't fool yourself; Felipe de Asshole wouldn't be able to touch me even if I held a fucking parade in your honor."

Eric's smile—thankfully—returned to a smirk. "Well then—let us part with my assurance that your payment for your services has already been transferred from an untraceable account to your Caymans account."

"Already double?" I asked.

"More than double what we agreed. An actress ought to be paid her worth—yes?" the Viking commented.

I almost chuckled, but held onto my usual pissed off expression. "I intend to bleed Billy-boy for a little more payment."

"I wish that I could witness his asshole pucker when you name your price."

Eric did chuckle.
I let out a half-chuckle, half-scoff, which was as far as I was willing to go to show my amusement.

Before I allowed myself to smile at the vampire, I teleported away.

**THALIA POV**

I stood back and enjoyed the "show" going on before me. The trollish doctor had arrived a few minutes before and was grumbling unpleasantly.

Compton was pathetic.

Predictably pathetic.

He was wringing his hands and worrying over "Sookeh."

Indeed, Compton made Bubba look like a Mensa member!

Sookie wasn't that good of an actress, but she clearly had the male members of her audience convinced that she was practically unhinged.

Pacing through the yard, Bubba was worried and confused. Though I felt a little sorry for him, it was best that we'd left him in the dark for now.

I'd seen Bubba's films. Even in his "right mind" as a human, he'd been a horrible actor!

And Ludwig was a bitch—whether she was acting or not!

But I really did like that bitch.

"Drink, human!" Ludwig ordered Sookie, who didn't react to the doctor's words.

"Help me!" the little doctor ordered me.

Playing my part, I held down Sookie as she was "force-fed" the "medicine" needed to calm her.

"What will it do to her?" Compton demanded.

Why—again—couldn't I just stake him?

"Honestly?" Ludwig asked.

"No—lie to me," Bill said sarcastically.


Bill frowned, even as the doctor dug her phone out of her pocket, pushed a few keys and tossed it to Bill, who still couldn't step onto the porch. Funny—the doctor had had no trouble.

Bill looked at the screen.

"My Swiss bank account number," Ludwig said. "Tonight's visit is five thousand dollars. Chop, chop!"

I almost broke down and laughed at the expression on Bill's face. Pam would have snapped a picture, despite the subterfuge.

Probably best that she wasn't there.
I wondered for a moment if Bill was going to spend the tiny amount. As Northman's second—for the moment, at least—I'd taken the liberty of looking through all of Area 5's accounts. They were impeccably kept—just as I'd expected them to be with the Viking in charge. They indicated that Bill’s little database earned him more than twenty thousand dollars a month.

But—still—the asshole paused.

More like—puckered—given the constipated expression on his face.

"'Chop, chop' is a Cantonese phrase, but it's common enough that even you should know it. But—just in case your vernacular is as outdated as your sideburns—it means to do something right away—as in immediately," Ludwig groused, as if talking to a small child. "So. Do. It."

Reluctantly, Bill used his own phone to make a transfer and then tossed the doctor's phone back to her.

Seeing the confirmation of the deposit, Ludwig pocketed her phone and then looked at her "paying customer."

"The potion I gave to Miss Stackhouse will calm her nerves. The breaking of the bond with Mr. Northman has affected both her body chemistry and her psyche. Bonds ought not to be broken."

"Eric is not worthy of her," Compton growled.

I rolled my eyes—discreetly.

"Worthiness is not always recognized by the blood of humans—unfortunately," the doctor said cuttingly, though Compton did not pick up on the insult. "And—no matter the cause—a broken bond brings repercussions to all who suffer from one."

"So Eric is suffering too," Compton said with a satisfied smile on his lips.

The asshole clearly liked the idea of his sheriff in pain.

I barely prevented my fangs from running out! I took a moment to wonder what Eric Northman could have done to earn Compton's derision. I came up with no answer. Eric ran one of the fairest territories I'd ever lived in. Shown the proper respect, he would help and protect any vampire who entered his retinue.

Clearly, Bill had never shown the proper respect to Eric. I did not know if that was because of misguided pride or cluelessness, but Compton's lack of respect for his better irked me; it always had.

Hell! Though almost a millennium older than Compton, I respected Eric, and I recognized that he was my "better" in many ways. Of course, I respected him even more because he knew that I was his "better" in other ways.

Looking at Compton, I doubted he was better than anyone at anything.

"I'd be surprised if the Viking is able to get out of his coffin tonight," the doctor murmured, though I was certain Bill heard her.

For her part, Sookie pretended to be coming somewhat "back to herself." From my position within the barrier of the house's wards, I was able to distinguish that her scent—which had reeked of the Viking—had transformed into something that was missing Eric.
Missing all things supernatural.

And that meant that the doctor's potion had worked.

"Sookie—please let me help you," I said, using the exact phrase that Sookie was expecting to confirm that her scent was covered.

Sookie looked at Bill and then rose with my help. "Bill? Bill?" she asked as she stumbled toward him.

"Darling," Compton said.

Honestly, I did not know how Sookie prevented herself from vomiting as she stepped from the barrier of the witches' spell and into the embrace of Bill Compton.

"Help me?" Sookie asked in a small voice.

Bill's expression demonstrated that he thought he'd won something.

"Of course!" he said as he held her tightly.

"She's going to need more than that dose," Ludwig said, "and the potion's not cheap!"

Bill growled. "King Felipe de Castro will be seeing to her care from now on!"

"Then I'll see you in Vegas when her condition requires for you to call me again," Ludwig said before teleporting away.

Bill looked at me as Sookie sobbed in his arms. "I am going to take her to the king."

I pretended to consider something before I responded. "I was ordered to stay with her. I will come with you."

Compton regarded me warily.

"My sheriff is my sheriff," I said. "I must follow Northman's orders. And," I paused for effect and looked at the now placid Sookie, "I have some regard for this woman. She was reckless to break her bond, but she was trying to regain control of her life. I can empathize with that impulse," I added truthfully.

Indeed, during my human days, those around me tried to control every element of my existence. And—when I'd had independent thoughts concerning my life—I had been raped by a gang of men and left for dead.

My maker had not given me a choice concerning my next existence, but—after my transformation into a vampire—I had been given more by him than I'd ever dreamed. On the night that I rose, my maker taught me to feed by allowing me to take the lives of the men who had harmed me. And—after he taught me many things that only increased my strength and power—he released me from his control.

"She has freed herself from Northman!" Compton spit out, breaking me from my thoughts of the past.

Had Sookie really broken her bond with the Norseman, I might have supported her choice—but only if Eric had been abusive to her. However, on the contrary, Eric had never treated Sookie badly, nor even like a pet. Indeed, with quite a risk to himself, he'd manufactured the situation so
that she could keep her freedom—even if it had taken her a long time to recognize that.

As I looked at Bill, I could see that he truly believed that Eric was an evil presence in Sookie's life. I could also tell that he would take everything from the telepath that Eric had wanted to give to her. Yes—Compton was the type who would trade Sookie's freedom to gain favor with her captor, even as he tried to convince her that his actions were heroic.

He was also the type who would believe that he was—indeed—the hero of the story.

He was deluded, and he needed to be slain. I resolved in that moment that I would be killing him, despite Sookie's wish that he stay alive. For her sake, I would make the death seem accidental, but it would be happening as soon as I could arrange things.

Otherwise, Compton would never stop in his obsessive attempts to possess and control Sookie Stackhouse.

"Miss Sookie and Mister Eric ain't together no more?" Bubba asked, clearly upset and confused by the idea.

"That remains to be seen," I said as I looked at Bill.

"You know that—without a bond—the king will claim Sookie," Bill said at a volume that Sookie would not be able to hear. "You also know that, if Eric gets to her before she has the protection of the king, he may kill her—or, at the very least, punish her greatly—for severing the bond."

I nodded. "Yes—you are likely correct." I pretended to resolve a matter I'd been struggling over. "You say the king will be at Fangtasia. So will the sheriff. We will all go there." I looked at Sookie pityingly. "She has set her fate into motion; I hope she is ready to face the consequences."

"The only consequences will be positive for her. Felipe will treat her well," Bill insisted, still speaking at a low volume.

"But she will have a new master—when she risked so much to free herself from the old one," I commented, even as I disentangled a now-docile Sookie from Bill's embrace and lifted her into my arms. I had to admit that she was good at pretending to be stoned.

Compton looked put out that I'd taken her from him, but he didn't argue.

Instead, he inhaled deeply and then frowned.

"What is it?" I asked.

"She smells different now that she is free of the bond," he said.

I held in a chuckle. "Of course she does!"

"No—I mean—before—when I first knew her—she had a sweetness to her scent from the Fae blood," he commented.

"She'll get back to her old self soon as she feels better," Bubba commented. "She's just poorly now," he added.

Bill nodded, accepting Bubba's diagnosis.

Apparently, the idiot was willing to be led by the simpleton.
Not that I was surprised. I also wasn't surprised when Bill went to try to take Sookie from my arms.
"I won't drop her," I intoned.
"She would rest easier with me," Bill said.
"She's not feelin' anything much now—from the looks of things," Bubba commented.
"Sookie is my charge until my sheriff says otherwise," I said tersely.
"She no longer belongs to Eric," Bill commented.
"If my sheriff is ordered to relinquish her by the king, then she is not his. But, until that moment, I
will do as I was ordered," I returned.
Wisely, Bill didn't get into a "turf war" with me—though it was clear that he wanted to be the one
to hold Sookie.
"Then, I will drive," Bill stated. "My vehicle would be the most comfortable for Sookie anyway,"
he added with a tiny nod of deferment in my direction.
I nodded back to agree with his plan.
"Sookie need not be jostled. I will go get my vehicle and bring it here," Bill stated before speeding
away—if the rate at which he moved could be called "speeding." For one his age, his speed should
have been double what it was. Hell! Even Bubba was faster! And he was a fraction of Bill's age.
I rolled my eyes as I heard Bill call Felipe de Cape. Obviously, the Civil War-era sycophant had
used the opportunity of being out of my presence to offer the king a report.
As if I couldn't hear every word he said!
Clearly, Compton had no idea how a vampire's age affected the senses.
Bill told the king that he "had Sookie" and would be presenting her as requested. He "offered" the
details that Sookie was ill and that the good doctor had reported that Northman would also be
impaired—because of the breaking of the bond. What he did not say was that he had any
suspicions about Sookie's Supe-less scent.
I smiled to myself as Bubba fussed over Sookie. "Hold her for me?" I asked the crooner.
Bubba looked confused, but he still took Sookie.
Bill's role in the production being finished, I sped away to capture the "Rebel refuse."
Chapter 46: Action

ERIC POV

APPROXIMATELY 20 MINUTES AFTER SUNDOWN

Action.

Action was what determined the world.

But the ability to perform action was the single most important element that Appius had taken away from my life in so many ways. Even when he'd left me alone, the specter of my maker's command was always "waiting" to take away my self-determination.

To take away my actions.

So—I'd done the only thing that I could: I'd become an actor most of the time—as "fake" actions had seemed preferable to none.

Of course, all vampires had to pretend at times; monarchs of no merit had to be bowed to. Older vampires had to be recognized, even if they were assholes! In other words, the hierarchy had to be recognized if one didn't want his or her head to roll.

Literally roll.

Before turning to dust.

Still—most vampires did not need to be actors in their everyday lives. But, as long as my maker lived, I did, so I had.

Indeed—I'd intentionally failed in some ways in order to avoid drawing Appius's attention in my direction. Of course, whenever I did fail at some business venture, Appius would always learn of it. I made sure of that.

And he would—thoughtfully—send a note.

My greater successes, however, were never publicly claimed by me; on the contrary, they were hidden whenever possible. When it wasn't possible, I downplayed my achievements.

In many ways, the most difficult element of my existence after Appius sent me on my way was knowing when to act on my own behalf and when to be an "actor" for my maker's benefit.

I'd acted (in both senses of the word) when taking a sheriff's position in rural America—because I knew Appius preferred life at court. However—though I enjoyed my life in Area 5—I knew better than to stand out too much. Indeed, on the contrary, I'd purposely dwelt in seclusion, which had been why I could pretend to be Leif with a neighboring sheriff and king! Indeed, Rhodes was the first summit I'd ever been to as Sheriff of Area 5, and—even then—I would have found excuses not to go if the queen had not insisted upon including Sookie in her retinue.

In an alternate universe, had Appius not been in the equation, there was no way that I would have settled for the kind of anonymity that I had. By nature, I was a social being; if opening Fangtasia indicated nothing else about me, it should have been that. Oh—a part of me had become bored
with the "vermin," as Pam called them. But another part enjoyed the notoriety that the business had allowed me. And—to be honest—though I'd never aspired to become a king or be more involved in vampire politics, a lot of that stance had been formed by "Eric, the actor," who knew well that I could not be something greater than I was since Appius still walked the earth.

Yes—as long as Appius was still un-dead, some things that I might have done had seemed pointless to me. In that way, he'd always limited my actions, even when he'd been on the other side of the globe.

Now that he was finally gone, I was warming up to the thought of being a king—and not just for Sookie's sake either. Indeed, I knew with everything in me that I would be an excellent monarch—that I was born to lead with action, rather than to follow as an "actor."

I took a moment to assess my three bonds. Sookie was not yet on the move, but I knew she would be soon. Karin and Pam were together and moving—as if by car—toward the Red River, where the most luxurious vampire hotel in the city stood.

I smiled. I'd been right. Based on my daughters' location, Cataliades had tasked them with helping with the Freyda part of tonight's activities.

I did not blame the demon—nor my children. Indeed, I felt very glad that they were near and had let them feel that in our bonds after they'd awoken. Pam's presence did not surprise me so much. From the less strong bond I felt from Miriam, I knew that Pam's child was still secure in Texas, but my youngest wasn't one for being left out of the action.

Karin's presence did surprise me a little. But I was grateful for it, nonetheless.

I let both of my girls feel my approval of and pride in them as I recalled my decisions to make each of them. Of course, turning them had been a risk—an action that could have backfired if Appius had decided to take an interest in those whom I sired.

Especially Karin.

She had been so vulnerable at first. And so had I.

I closed my eyes and remembered—with some shame—the state that I was in when I decided to make my first child. I'd found Karin about fifty years after Appius expelled me from his sight.

I'd been floundering. Back then, I'd required a ruler because I had forgotten how to rule myself—thanks to the "careful" tutelage of my maker.

I cringed as I thought about the early years of my vampire state, as Appius had systematically forced me to act in all the ways he'd desired. I had been fucked, literally and figuratively—raped both body and soul—as the relatively powerful man I'd been as a human was obliterated. Indeed, Appius's first lesson for me had been that I no longer had any power. He was so much stronger, and he could compel me to do anything he desired. Eventually, he almost broke my will by compelling me to "love" him and "enjoy" his attentions.

I did come to love him. And I had come to enjoy him.

And, in so doing, I became the actor, forgetting my true self.

Worse, I'd never forgotten that particular "act." I shook head as I recalled telling others throughout the years that Appius was a great vampire in many ways. Yes—part of me had come to believe my own act, and I'd even told Sookie that it had not been so bad being with my maker—that he'd
taught me much of value. I suppose he did teach me a lot about warfare; however, that was not for me as much as it was for his benefit.

He wanted me to hone my skills as a fighter so that he could hire me out.

And, of course, the warfare he'd practiced most often with me had been of the psychological variety.

I frowned. Now that Appius was dead, I wondered—just as Sookie had once wondered about the effect of our bond on her feelings—if any of the positive emotions I'd once felt for Appius had been real.

Though I'd not used the bond to affect Sookie in a way that would change her, I knew that Appius had done so with me—more times than I could count. Yes—he had forced my body to bend to his will. But he had also forced me to his way of thinking, taking all of my freedoms away. Eventually, he took away even my desire to act according to my own free will. It was then that—finished with me—Appius expelled me from his side.

Likely—at that point—he thought that my time among the undead would be limited. After all, a solitary vampire incapable of acting on his or her own behalf was doomed.

But I had not perished. Instead, I reacted to my release by finding surrogates for my maker—a fact which likely amused Appius to no end! In those dark days, I had offered my services—both fighting and fucking skills—to anyone who seemed to want them. I had asked for nothing in return. Yes—my actions continued to belong to others because I could not act on my own.

In those nights, I fought for a variety of masters—some deserving and some deplorable. Their merit was not something I considered as I grasped onto the small sense of purpose their orders gave me.

But one night—as I was out performing a thankless duty I’d been assigned by the latest in my line of masters—I’d seen Karin trying to fight off a group of men, who had already battered and raped her. I saw as she grasped a dagger from one of the men's pushed-down trousers.

I still do not know how she had the strength to kill two of the men before the others took the knife away and began kicking her.

I thought of attacking them, but that was not my purpose for being on the road that night, so I watched from the shadows. I made a deal with myself that—if they began sexually assaulting her again—I would step in.

But they didn't. By that point, they were content to kill her.

Her breaths became more and more shallow until her attackers left her (and their fallen "friends") for dead; indeed, those breaths were so shallow and she was so still by then that the so-called "men" likely thought that she had already perished.

I walked over to where she lay. At the time, I could not explain why I felt the urge to do so—beyond a tiny voice inside of myself saying that a warrior like the woman on the road ought not to die alone.

I figured she would slip into death quickly. But, after twenty minutes, one of her eyes opened slightly. There was enough focus in that eye that I knew that she saw me.

She could neither speak nor move her naked body. I had already determined that almost all of her
ribs were broken. Her pelvic bone was crushed. Her arms and legs had suffered multiple fractures, and her back was broken as well, which meant that she could no longer feel pain.

I found myself grateful—on the woman's behalf—for that fact.

Blood pooled around both her front and back entrances, and her windpipe was partially crushed, indicating that she'd been raped in all the ways that men could fathom. Her face was a pulp, and one of her eyes was unusable. I could not tell if the woman had been physically beautiful or ugly in life.

But her bravery was unquestionable.

I found myself speaking to her, hoping that she could hear me. "You are a warrior. The Valkyries will come soon."

To this day—night—I do not know what compelled me to say those words, but—with them—returned a fleeting memory of "me."

The "me" I'd been as a human. The "me" I'd been before Appius took away all that I was.

The "me" who had believed in such things as Valkyries.

And—looking toward the North Star—I knew that I still believed in them.

Despite all odds.

Despite all atrocities.

I believed. And that meant that I was still an "I."

"The Valkyries," I whispered as I recalled the gods and goddesses I'd once believed in. I had—at some point—lost my faith in them after Appius had begun using me as his plaything.

Yes—as I stared into the barely-opened blue eye of the woman who lay dying, I remembered Eiríkr. I remembered my human father and mother. I remembered that I had been being groomed to lead my people. I remembered that my actions as a general and warrior had advanced my people. I remembered that my actions as a husband and father had advanced my family. I remembered the impulse that had led me to seek out a new wife when Aude tragically died.

On the night that I'd "met" my maker, I'd been acting for the betterment of all of those I was destined to lead.

And I found myself acting again—this time for my own betterment—as I scooped the dying woman into my arms and took her further into the woods. I lay her down on a soft patch of grass amidst a cluster of trees, and then I took most of the blood she had left and fed her my own.

I acted on instinct as I turned her—for Appius had never taught me of the process—and then I dug a hole where we would both rest that night.

The next night, I emerged from the ground and left my new child before performing my duty to my master. That obligation fulfilled, I returned to his court, gave him a report, and then took my leave of him.

After that, I had many masters—but it was never the same. Remembering "myself" had changed the way I saw myself. I would offer my services as a warrior, but I would require payment for
them. I would give myself to a lover only when I wanted to.

And—of course—there was Karin to train.

I had returned to her before she rose, determined to be a good maker to her.

I had even succeeded in some ways, despite my state upon finding her.

I closed my eyes, remembering the night Karin had risen. I'd knelt by the earth where she'd transformed and prayed to my newly remembered gods that Appius would never again find me appealing enough to return to my life. I prayed even more fervently that he would never affect my child's life, but—in the back of my mind—I had always dreaded him.

After Karin rose, I taught her how to feed by letting her unleash her anger and her unrelenting thirst upon the men who had all-but killed her. And then I began teaching her all I knew about combat so that she could always protect herself. She took to vampirism well, but—as much as I'd wanted to be a good maker—I'd failed her in some ways.

For fear of feeling too much contentment and drawing Appius's interest, I held myself back for Karin in some ways. In other words, I "loved" her only as I thought would be safe for us—even though I knew, even then, that my limited affection wasn't adequate for her. Thus, our relationship was somewhat strained from the first.

Happily, we did not attract Appius's attentions; unhappily, I felt obligated to release Karin as soon as I knew she could survive on her own.

I could do no less for her; after all, she had saved me by reminding me of the fighter I'd once been.

Years later, when I decided to turn Pam, I vowed to avoid the kind of alienation that my "withholding" had caused with my first child, so I'd indulged my youngest's every whim. Luckily, she was not the kind of individual who needed me to be overtly loving. Indeed, Pam had always avoided "love"—until Miriam.

But no matter what—always—I'd been careful about how much emotion I allowed myself to feel for either of my children. I let myself enjoy their company when I had it. I let myself care for them. However, I "did" for them, more than I allowed myself to "feel" for them.

If Appius had been gone—dead and gone—when I'd turned my girls, I knew that I would not have held back parts of myself from either of them.

But the "actor" in me had needed to pretend not to love them so much—so that they would be protected. And the "actor" was quite strong when he needed to be.

Until "he" met a certain blonde, who made me incapable of not feeling.

Made me incapable of both "acting" and "not acting."

I found that—with her—I was incapable of keeping up a pretense of distance and non-caring.

And—then—I found myself "acting" on her behalf.

I tried, but I eventually could not hold back my desire for Sookie, so I'd acted to be with her, despite the fact that I knew that my heavy emotions for her might draw Appius.

And come he had.
Pam, Sookie, and I had all almost died because of his "visit."

But that wasn't—apparently—enough for the menace of Appius Livius Ocella.

Indeed, even from his ashy state, my maker continued to try to take away my will—to take away my ability to act as I wished.

Felipe, too, wished to take away my freedom.

Freyda—in her relative youth—sought to do the same.

"But Appius is dead now," I whispered to myself, needing to hear that truth again. "And Felipe will soon be no more as well. And—with Sookie by my side—I will get out from under Freyda's thumb," I half-sighed and half-prayed.

Yes. I was determined to do what I needed to do—to take out Felipe and make sure Sookie was protected. After that, I would have faith in my bonded.

"Faith," I whispered with a chuckle.

It was a concept I'd all but forgotten for the better part of ten centuries. But Sookie had reintroduced me to it—and then she'd injected it into me with every touch she gave me.

I closed my eyes and gathered my strength. I would need it for the upcoming events.

But, even as I attempted to envision the night as I wished it to play out—I could not help but to recall my near hopelessness of only a few days before.

My life had seemed doomed to inaction again.

I'd thought that I would be trapped in a marriage with Freyda—one which both Appius and Felipe had helped to bind me in. My bonded wife would have been lost to me, for acting to keep Sookie with me as a mistress would have surely driven her away. And keeping her in my life in any other way would have led to her vulnerability.

With effort, I pushed those dark thoughts away.

Now that Sookie and I were "together"—truly and permanently—the actions available to us were much more varied. They were all dangerous, of course, but—at least—Sookie and I would lose together if we lost. Of course, we would win together if we won.

The together part was what mattered.

And the fact that action would determine our fate—rather than forced inaction—warmed my long-dead heart.

"I no longer need to be the 'actor,'" I said aloud. "I will act as I choose."

I took a long, unneeded breath.

Faith—Sookie had given me that.

And freedom—she had given that to me as well.

I sent her a burst of my love and gratitude through our bond, and—almost immediately—I received a sense of love back from her.
Love and faith. Nothing had ever felt better.

In that moment, the figurative miles between us that we’d had to overcome and the physical miles that currently separated us did not matter in the slightest.

"I will not let you down, min kära," I whispered, knowing that she would feel my determination through our bond.

She sent me her own back.

And with that determination, I—once more—focused upon the night's events.

Even before I’d awoken, I had received an emailed confirmation from my contact at Anubis that Felipe and his entourage had arrived in Shreveport. A text sent just before dawn Mountain Time from Sandy Sechrest indicated Felipe's final numbers—as far as his allies went. Another text, sent from Indira about ten minutes after sunset, had offered information on the Oklahoma contingency that would join Felipe at Fangtasia.

All the intelligence reported confirmed what I’d already known.

I took a moment to consider my loyal allies as I thought about the night ahead. Such consideration had always served me well when I’d been a human leader. And the practice had continued to benefit me when I’d become a sheriff. It reminded me to appreciate those who fought by my side—to never take them for granted.

I began by thinking about my allies of the two-natured variety. Whereas Herveaux had proven useless, Norris's panthers—the ones that weren't too inbred, at least—were a promising community. I’d already arranged for Hotshot to grow and prosper with the influx of the other groups—even if I were slain that night. It seemed the least I could do for them.

Mustapha and his mate, Warren, were also tremendous assets. Though Warren was human, he was quite skilled. And I knew that Mustapha might very well galvanize the support of the remaining Longtooth pack once Alcide's ineptitude was known.

The Dae support Cataliades had committed had been an unexpected boon. And I was already considering things that I could do to show adequate appreciation for having such friends. Unlike Sookie's Fae kin, I did not see them entering and exiting her life at random intervals. And I did not see them endangering her life either. Indeed, I intended to foster our relationship with Desmond and any other Cataliades family member who appeared in our lives.

The witches, like the Dae, were one of Sookie's contributions. I could not help but to celebrate their presence in the night’s action as well.

As for vampires, I felt like a very wealthy individual indeed! I had the support of my people. And the likes of Thalia, Indira (and her sister Padma), Rasul, Maxwell Lee, and Palomino were amazing assets. And there were many others too—younger vampires like Molly for whom I had high hopes.

Sandy Sechrest promised only to add to my advantage.

And—of course—my daughters were now on the playing field as well.

Yes! I was a rich vampire!

And—as for Fae assets? Well—Niall had helped in the only way that Sookie and I had trusted him not to fuck up: an indirect way.
But I knew that my main Fae asset would always be my bonded. Her telepathy might come in handy—to be sure. But the aspects of my wife that would always be most treasured—essential—to me were her love and belief in me.

She made me need to act for myself—to act like the best version of me.

She made me want to act for her.

She made me want to embrace the man who had lived with her when I'd been cursed by Hallow.

She made me want to cling to the vampire who had—without a second thought—thrown himself in front of bullets for her.

Sookie was a woman of action—sometimes infuriating actions that made me want to curse her soft heart!

Like me, she'd spent time as an "actor," trying to cover her true self. I'd done so to hold off Appius. She'd done so to appear "normal"

But I was determined that our "acting" days were done, even as the days of our "action" were beginning.

Of course, some of the actions Sookie and I were performing that very night were "pretend"—but they were being completed in the name of the most fundamental truth in our lives.

The truth that we deserved a happy life—together.

Sensing that Sookie was now "on the move," I considered calling Desmond, though I discarded the idea. I was curious, of course, about my daughters' presence and roles. However, I did not want to risk unneeded communication, even on burner phones. The night was too important for anything to go wrong now.

Instead, I had faith.

Faith that Desmond or any of my other assets in the field would call me if there were any problems.

Faith that the demon had been wise as he'd assigned tasks to my vampire children. Likely, Karin and Pam would be joining Desmond's demon allies to take care of Freyda and her personal guards.

I grinned as I thought of the fun the two might have together.

"As it always would have been—should have been," I whispered, "if not for my maker."

I was not surprised when my "official" phone rang; after all, it had been ringing every few minutes since about twenty minutes before sundown—a clear hint of Felipe's true age.

I smirked. I'd never believed de Castro to be the seven hundred years he claimed. By my estimation, he was closer to five hundred years old. Of course, I'd never faulted him for lying; vampires did what they needed to survive and thrive.

I took a moment to contemplate how to sound weak.

Then I channeled the moment when I'd accepted that Appius had dominion over me and answered the phone.

"My liege, I was just listening to your messages."
"Why did you not answer earlier?" Felipe demanded.

"I am afraid that my phone became separated from me," I lied—badly—even as I triumphed at the natural-sounding cracking of my voice. Hell! I sounded like an injured—or pre-pubescent—vampire even to my own ears!

"I expect you to be at Fangtasia when I arrive in twenty minutes," the king gruffed.

"It will take me a bit longer than that," I responded, managing to sound both weakened and contrite.

"Why is that?" Felipe demanded.

"I—uh—must collect Miss Stackhouse," I lied.

"Ah—the telepath. You need not worry about her. Compton is bringing her to Fangtasia," Felipe crowed.

"Oh?" I asked, even as I let a subtle growl slip through as if Compton's involvement was both unwelcome or unexpected.

"I am anxious to get to the bottom of Victor's murder," de Castro answered. "I am sure you are too."

"Of course," I responded weakly.

"Excellent. Then I will see you in twenty minutes," he said.

"I—uh—it will . . . ." I paused as if searching for words. "It might take me a little longer than that, for I must drive there."

"Is your ability to fly broken?" de Castro asked. I could hear the smile in his tone.

"No!" I answered quickly. Too quickly and too fervently to be believable.

"Then I expect you as soon as humanly possible," Felipe chuckled before hanging up.

I grinned at the phone. The game had just begun and already Felipe was feeling too cocky.

"Excellent," I said to myself before leisurely walking outside and taking flight. I'd fly as far as one of my safe houses in Shreveport, and then I'd drive a car from there. I planned to take a bit longer than the twenty minutes my king had granted me, but I would be at Fangtasia before my bonded arrived.
Chapter 47: Before Battle

BILL POV

My memories of the last several minutes—or was it hours?—of my life seemed beyond me as I opened my eyes.

However, I immediately recognized the space I was in by both sight and smell—the cubby in Sookie's home. But I had no clue how I had gotten there.

What I did know was that I was wrapped in silver chains, though the substance was coated in leather. Still, the chains would likely be enough to weaken me to the point that I could not free myself.

Nonetheless, I struggled against my bindings to test them.

"Now—don't you fret none, Mister Bill," a familiar voice said from right above me. Likely—based on the volume of his voice—Bubba was sitting on or near the entrance to the cubby.


"Can't do that," Bubba drawled. "Miss Sookie explained everythin' to me. And Miss Thalia too! They was just waitin' for you to call Mister Phillip."

"You mean, King Felipe?" I asked after a moment's confusion.

"Yep—that's the one," Bubba confirmed. "They said you helped 'em out real good by doin' that, and Thalia made it a point to tell me to tell you 'thank you' for it," he added, his voice sounding as sincere as it always did.

"I bet she did," I muttered as the reality of what had occurred began to dawn upon me. Clearly, Thalia had been in league with Eric the whole time and just pretended to be sympathetic to Sookie's cause. The question was whether or not Sookie had been a willing participant in whatever schemes Eric had woven. I shook my head—sure that she had been forced to comply.

I frowned as I recalled the specifics of my phone call with the king. I had told Felipe about Sookie's mental and physical state. I had told him that Eric was likely incapacitated—or at least much weaker than normal. I had assured him that I had Sookie and would soon be on my way to Fangtasia. I had warned him that Thalia was with me and had refused to give up guarding the telepath until she received an order from Eric or her king—though I'd added in that last part more out of wishful thinking than certainty.

After I had told him that Thalia would be cooperative, Felipe seemed unconcerned and simply ordered that I get my party to Fangtasia as soon as possible.

Of course, I had agreed.

But—as I had hung up—something had happened to make the world go black.

"Bubba!" I yelled again. "What happened?"

"Miss Sookie and Mister Eric were playin' a pretend game," Bubba chuckled. "Coulda fooled me. I
mean—I knew that Sookie was pretendin' to be a pet last night. Mister Eric didn't want me to get upset when I saw her, so he told me not to make no never mind 'bout how he treated her." He sighed. "Did you know that I used to be an actor, Mister Bill?"

"Yes!" I seethed.

He snorted. "You know—compared to Miss Sookie—I don't think I was a very good one. I didn't even know she was pretendin' to be sick tonight! She sure had us both fooled—didn't she?" Bubba chuckled.

"Pretending?" I faltered. "But—why?"

"Well—that part I'm not too sure on yet," Bubba admitted. "I think it's 'cause Mister Victor was a bad man and Mister King Phillip wants to take Sookie to Las Vegas. And Vegas ain't a good place, Mister Bill," the addled vampire added.

I could almost visualize Bubba cringing.

"Let me out of here, Bubba," I entreated. "Whatever Sookie is doing is likely to get her killed! And we both know that Eric is just going to hurt her. He is surely forcing her to follow whatever plan he has!"

"Mister Bill, I think you ought to move on from Miss Sookie. I know you love her and all, but Miss Sookie just ain't for you anymore," Bubba said as if he were a fucking sage! "And Mister Eric—well he loves Miss Sookie something fierce! Took me a while to get used to 'em together too 'cause I really did think you and her'd make it. But I did get used to it. And you can too!" he rambled on.

"Eric does not love Sookeh," I growled. "He is just using her, and he will hurt her!"

"Nah," Bubba dismissed. "I know you're sad and all that Miss Sookie picked Mister Eric and not you. But they're crazy in love. Ain't no power greater than love," he added definitively before he began to hum "Can't Help Falling in Love with You."

That was absolutely not what I needed!

Again, I yelled for Bubba to let me out.

"This is for your own good," the simpleton stated after he was done with the song. "Miss Sookie didn't want you to be killed tonight in the battle. So she made sure you were safe."

"Battle! What battle?" I demanded.

"Ain't altogether sure 'bout that part neither." He paused for a moment. "Guess Miss Sookie's lookin' out for me too!" he chuckled. "That's probably why I'm here guardin' ya when you don't really need no guard 'cause of 'em chains Miss Thalia put you in," he added before beginning to hum "Jailhouse Rock."

I growled as I listened to Bubba's tune and contemplated my current situation. Obviously, I'd been used to provide Felipe with the information that Northman had wanted him to have. But—just as obvious—Sookie had made sure that I would be safe and live through the night. I found myself hoping—first and foremost—that my king would kill Northman. I also found myself once again wondering just how complicit Sookie was in whatever machinations Eric was spinning. But—again—I could not imagine her involved very much.

The evidence was in the fact that I was to be kept safe from the fray. I could imagine Sookie
ardently insisting upon that. Yes—Eric was the source of my betrayal, and Bubba was following along only because he didn't know better.

I frowned as I thought about the fact that it would not be I who presented Sookie to the king.

"No matter," I muttered to myself. After all, I was valuable to the king in many ways, and Sookie clearly cared about my wellbeing. The chips would fall where they may in the battle that Bubba mentioned. If the king won, I'd be released and rejoin Sookie. And then I'd make sure that Thalia was punished—unless she died in the battle. However—even if Eric prevailed—I knew that I would still have my chances with Sookie.

"Bubba, please," I tried again, "let me go. I can make sure Sookie stays safe."

"Don't worry none. Miss Thalia said that she and Mister Eric were gonna do that, and they're pretty much the strongest vamps I know!" he gushed before beginning to hum "Heartbreak Hotel."

I rolled my eyes and tested my chains once again. Of course, I was not able to break their hold upon me.

"Now, Mister Bill, you're just gonna get yourself hurt if you keep doin' that," Bubba said with concern. "Anyhow, I got more chains up here, and they ain't wrapped up in leather. I really don't wanna have to use 'em—okay?"

I sighed. Knowing I would not be able to convince Bubba to free me, I decided to go into down-time—so that the effects of the silver would not be so great upon my body.

ERIC POV

Hoof beats.

War cries.

Slicing metal.

Screams.

The thuds of falling bodies.

The excitement of surviving.

These things were what I recalled of battles from my human days.

As a vampire, my perspective had changed.

The speed that my body was capable of traveling.

The feeling of my fangs penetrating an enemy.

The sensation of blood drops hitting my body.

The taste of that blood—whether it be vampire, human, two-natured, or Fae.

All blood was delicious in battle!

And—after—I loved to fly above the wreckage, surveying the evidence of victory.
But the battle before me was different than any I'd encountered before.

Always did I try to imagine all outcomes of the conflicts I participated in, but my current prospect was new to me. For the first time, my success in battle would not assure my victory.

I might very well be killed for treason, after all.

However, I might also end the night as a king—with Sookie well on her way to being my queen.

I let the prospect of that possibility fuel me.

I felt emboldened as I embraced every ambition I'd ever stifled because of my maker.

I felt empowered by the thought of all the powerful allies who were risking themselves for me and mine.

I felt enlivened by the love that was—even then—filling Sookie and my bond.

I marshalled all of my motivations and said a prayer to Thor, who was still the go-to god in my book when it came to war.

And then I said a prayer Frigga—to watch over Sookie.

Finally, I prayed to Odin for wisdom and guidance in what was to come.

I considered all contingencies.

If I died in battle, Thalia would get Sookie out of danger.

If Sookie was somehow captured, her Dae allies would get her back—even if they had to unleash hell upon Felipe. Literal hell.

If the worst happened and Sookie died during the fray, I would meet the sun in the morning.

If we won, but I was executed, Sookie had vowed that she would go on, and I knew that Thalia would see to her needs.

If we won and I was made king, Sookie and I were ready to begin that very night to make Louisiana strong once more. And we would plow down anyone who stood in the way of that goal!

But would I be made king? That question pressed upon me more than whether or not I would be able to kill my current king.

Monarchs did not answer to many creatures, and—ultimately—the Ancient Pythoness controlled the Vampire Council, which was the only body that could dictate to a king or queen. For the most part, I trusted that old crone. I'd existed far away from her bad opinion, and I had the feeling that she liked my bonded.

For those reasons, I was hopeful that she would support me in my claim for the throne if a tie-breaker was needed with the four-person Vampire Council.

I tuned into my bond with Sookie and found her both pensive and close. The plan would have her arriving at Fangtasia approximately 10 minutes after I did—with the demons arriving in between. My instinct was to speed to Sookie and place her by my side, but I stifled that thought. She would be where she belonged soon enough.
45 MINUTES AFTER SUNSET, NEAR THE RED RIVER, SHREVEPORT

As the van carrying me, Karin, Nargal, and a few other demons drew closer to our destination, I smiled at the thought of the upcoming night, even as I tuned into the conversation being had in front of me.

Before tonight, I had known my sister mostly from her reputation alone; as she constructed our plans for the night with the demon, Nargal, she lived up to that reputation in spades!

Since Karin and my appearance at Fangtasia would signal to Felipe that something was amiss, we would be working with the Dae to "contain" Freyda and her personal guard.

Preferably in ashtrays.

I closed my eyes and "felt" for my bond with my new child. Though not due to rise until the next night, I knew that Miriam's transformation would be successful because I could already feel her.

It had hurt me physically to tear myself away from her side before she'd risen, but the move had been a necessary one. Though Eric would have forbidden me from coming if I'd asked, I'd decided that seeking forgiveness would be better than seeking permission in this case.

Unbeknownst to Eric, Padma—Indira's sister and one of my closest confidants—had been keeping me abreast of the situation in Area 5, and, when I'd learned that Eric intended to take down Felipe, I'd felt that I needed to be with him. Padma had mentioned that the demon, Cataliades, would help me. I'd called Karin before calling the demon. The rest was—as I say—"herstory."

As in Pam's story.

I smirked at that thought, even as I sent love and devotion to Miriam. I had no idea if my child could feel my emotions for her, however. But I hoped that—come what may—she would always know that I loved her.

I'd written Miriam a long note, explaining why I'd left her side—should she rise without me there. In the end, it was because I loved her so much that I knew that I had to help my own maker. It was important for me to give my child a life of freedom. If Eric prevailed, we'd have that.

If he failed . . . .

Well, I wasn't willing to entertain such a fucked-up notion!

I listened as Karin and Nargal finalized our plans for taking out Freyda's contingency. After the guards were removed from the equation, Karin and I would babysit Freyda—with a couple of demon's standing watch outside her hotel room—while Nargal and the others in his group would go to Fangtasia in case back-up was needed.

I hated not being among those who would directly fight the king, but I also knew that Eric would be furious if I were. Plus, in the unlikely event that my maker failed, there would be time and opportunity for Karin and me to escape and plan a revenge well-suited for the progeny of Eric Fucking Northman!

Nargal had already promised safe harbor for Karin, me, and my new daughter in the Dae realm if the worst happened. And—since Dae blood was unappetizing to vampires—Nargal had also promised that he'd get us human blood if we had to stay there for any length of time.
Karin had negotiated the arrangement, amidst a discussion over whether a machete was preferable to a katana.

Eventually, the two had discounted both and had agreed that the sledgehammer was a more elegant weapon that most thought.

And then my sister and the demon had launched into whether it was more satisfying to slay a fairy or a vampire, even as they'd finalized how to best approach Freyda's hotel.

Indeed, both Nargal and Karin were "ninjas" when it came to planning. I was impressed!

Though I didn't show it. Their heads were too big as it were.

Still—I listened carefully to both of them and learned a lot.

Not that I would ever admit that I didn't know something to begin with.

**CALVIN POV**

I looked around at the five panthers I'd brought with me to fulfill the task Eric had required of my group.

Because Sookie would not have wanted her brother to be in danger, I had not selected him for the current mission, though he was—even as merely a bitten-panther—a good match for anyone in our group during the full moon.

Having learned that Sookie and Jason were part Fae, I figured it was Jason's supernatural blood that had made his transformation to werepanther be a lot more than "partial."

However, the full moon would not occur for a while; thus—though stronger than a regular human—Jason would not be able to shift into his more powerful form.

Plus, Sookie did not need the added stress of worrying for her brother, despite the worth I believed Jason brought to the Hotshot clan. I still regretted that he and Crystal had not had children before my niece's death. The fact that she'd been slain when she'd been with child was even more tragic.

But tragedy was not what I wanted to focus upon as I looked upon the panthers I'd chosen for the night.

"Our task is quite simple," Mustapha said from next to me, having taken the lead. "Felipe has brought with him only a few Weres, and—as long as he follows his normal patterns—he will not use them tonight as guards. Still, we will subdue them at the motel where he has placed them so that they do not become a variable."

"Are we to kill 'em?" one of my people asked.

"No. We will kill only when needed," I instructed my people.

"Northman believes that the Weres will stand down as soon as they know that Felipe is dead, for they owe him no particular allegiance," Mustapha added.

My people nodded in understanding.

I gestured for Mustapha to follow me to a place where we could speak privately. "Your mate is in place?" I asked him.
Mustapha nodded. "Yes. From his position, Warren is targeting the entrance of Fangtasia. He'll take the kill shot if things go south."

I nodded. Warren—his rifle now full of wooden bullets would be trained upon the perfect spot to kill any exiting vampires. And—once Felipe's limited Were contingency was secured—Mustapha and I would be going to Fangtasia to help guard Warren. Meanwhile, one of Northman's trusted vampires, Padma, would be seeing to his safety. From what I knew, Padma was a competent vampire. The "sibling" of Indira, Padma had stayed under the radar, but she was old enough to protect Warren from most dangers.

Warren had one task only: to kill Felipe if he managed to exit Fangtasia. Eric had considered ordering the sniper to do the deed as the king entered the club. But—if Warren missed . . . Well—that outcome would not be ideal.

"Your mate will be well," I said to my new friend.

He nodded. "We will all be well," he returned.
Chapter 48: The Baited King

Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

Proverbs 16:18

FELIPE POV

"I am not accustomed to waiting—for anyone," I said to the pale-blond vampiress who had met me at Fangtasia.

Palomino—I thought her name was. At least she was beautiful to look at.

"The sheriff will be here soon," she soothed. "May I offer you and your people TrueBlood?" she asked.

I sneered and looked around the club. Fangtasia was closed for the night—not surprising, given the massacre the night before. And since that massacre had included tainted blood, I thought about staking Eric's minion on principle—just for offering me blood from the bar's coffers.

"The security footage from last night!" I demanded. "I want to see it! Now!"

"Uh—I apologize, your majesty—uh—but only Sheriff Northman, his child, and Thalia have the password," Palomino stuttered as she lowered her head.

Likely, she was afraid she was about to lose it.

And she might have—despite her beauty—if Northman had not chosen that moment to enter the club. He was accompanied by an Indian vampiress of intense beauty and a brown-haired male who looked as ordinary as vampires came. Rasul also entered with him, and I offered that vampire the tiniest of nods to acknowledge my ally.

"I was beginning to wonder if you had decided to stand me up," I said acerbically as Northman slowly made his way toward me. He looked much as he always had, but I could see a weariness in his countenance—a sure sign that the bond-severing had affected him more than he wanted to let on.

"Your majesty," Northman bowed low after he'd stopped about five feet from me. "I am grateful for your presence. As I said last night, I am anxious to determine the foe behind Victor's death. Debbie Pelt has been slain, but I feel that she was but a puppet in some larger scheme against your interests."

"And what enemy do you think that is?" I asked the Viking, who seemed to be losing energy by the moment. The tall blond was now slumping a little, though it was clear that he was fighting to stand tall. Most would have missed his weakness, but I was not "most."

"Fairies," Eric said simply. "Sookie Stackhouse's great-grandfather is currently warring with many of his own kind. They have come for the telepath before."

Felipe smirked as he noted that the Viking had spoken of Sookie with a "neutral" term. Oh—the Viking had tried to pretend to be neutral before—to make it seem as if he did not care on a personal
level about Sookie. I'd seen through that easily. However, even then, Northman had referred to Sookie as "Miss Stackhouse" or—on occasion—"my bonded." He'd never referred to her with merely the label of her gift.

And that meant that my current course—to seize Sookie Stackhouse as my own—might be even easier than I had thought it would be.

"Are you ready to declare your independence from the troublesome Miss Stackhouse?" I asked, not hiding my amusement.

Northman did not respond. Instead he offered to retrieve a laptop from his office so that I could watch the previous night's surveillance footage.

"Eric!" I said before he could leave the bar area. Now that he had arrived, I was in no hurry to deal with the Victor issue. I will admit that I was enjoying my time with Eric in his debilitated state. In my view, he'd never offered me adequate deference, standing a little too tall or bowing a little too shallowly in my presence.

"Stay and talk with me for a while," I said cheerily. "Just because we have business to attend to does not mean that our friendship should be ignored."

Perhaps I was having a bit too much fun poking the so-called bear—or Viking in this case.

Northman looked defeated, but nodded. He gestured toward the bartender to get him a TrueBlood and all but guzzled the beverage down.

"Hungry?" I asked with a smirk as Eric took another bottle.

"The battle was fierce last night," he responded stiffly. "And—as I said—the Fae blood affected us all."

I did not comment—instead affecting my most paternalistic expression with my clearly weakened minion. "Eric, please allow me to help you. Freyda is quite anxious for you to join her, and the title of consort is a step up from sheriff. Believe me," I said with false sincerity, "I would rather have you stay here in my retinue, but I am not selfish enough to hold you back. Indeed, the only impediment to your leaving this area seems to have been the telepath. Why not let me claim her? I will give her protection—and, thereby, free any constraints of conscience that you may have regarding her."

Northman, seemingly uncomfortable in his own skin in that moment, did not answer immediately. Instead, he took more time than would have been expected to understand my words and contemplate my offer.

"Sookie is my bonded and my pledged," he finally alleged.

I was just about to challenge that claim when I scented demons nearby.

Immediately, I signaled Sandy Sechrest to have our people on alert and looked toward the door. In walked Desmond Cataliades and a female Dae. If I recalled correctly, she was called Diantha and was a relative of the demon lawyer. A cousin or niece—I believed.

"Mr. Cataliades," I greeted, nodding with appropriate respect to the lawyer as he approached. "It is always nice to see you and your kin, but you must understand that tonight is a time for my kind to decipher the tragic events of Victor Madden's death. Whatever business you have would be best conducted on another night," I added with authority.
"We do not care about your Regent's demise. We have come to claim Sookie Stackhouse from the Viking," Desmond Cataliades declared.

"What? But she is the Northman's pledged and bonded," I returned with a slight smirk. "At least, that is what Eric told me mere moments before you arrived," he added somewhat teasingly as I glanced over my shoulder at the Viking.

"Is she? Is she still your bonded?" the lawyer asked Northman accusingly.

For his part, the soon-to-be-former Sheriff of Area Five looked down and away from the part-Dae's glare. Indeed, he looked about ready to topple over!

"Northman!" I demanded. "To what is this demon referring?"

The diminished Viking looked at me reluctantly. "Sookie's witch friends conducted their magic spell after we spoke last night," he admitted in almost a whisper. "Our bond is no more."

I felt a smile claiming my lips. "Then I claim the telepath."

"You have no right!" the part-Dae said forcefully. "Sookie broke the blood bond of her own accord, and I am here to make sure that Northman understands he is not to threaten her for doing it! If he does, I will see him staked! You," Cataliades turned toward me, "have no claim on Sookie."

"Of course, I do! Sookie Stackhouse is a registered asset of my kingdom," I returned confidently. "I have every right to claim her—now that Northman no longer shares a bond of blood with her.

"Sookie is my goddaughter and a fairy princess," Cataliades declared. "As such, she is not subject to vampire tradition."

I waved off the part-Dae's words. "Miss Stackhouse's fairy connections aside, I've seen no official paperwork from either the Fae—or from you for that matter—that would exclude Miss Stackhouse from my rule. Nor has her status as a Supernatural ever been recognized by the Vampire Council."

"The paperwork has been filed," the demon tried.

"And has it been approved?" I asked.

"Not yet, but it will be when the Vampire Council next meets. The paperwork identifies me as Sookie's guardian. Now that her bond with Northman is no more, I intend to ensure that she has a life away from vampires—the normal life that she has been denied ever since Bill Compton appeared in Bon Temps.

"She is still pledged to me by the knife," Northman claimed weakly.

"Without a blood bond, that pledge is forfeit—as you well know. And—sorry to be crass—but, clearly, Miss Stackhouse no longer wants to be yours, Eric," I said to the meek-looking vampire.

"And—as for your claim," I said to the part-demon, "it would seem that it is not yet in effect. That means that there is nothing to stop me from declaring Miss Stackhouse as my own," I smiled.

At that moment, I heard a vehicle arrive at the back of the bar.

"Perhaps that is the woman in question now," I said with an easy smile. "Let us see what she has to say. Of course, I have heard tell that she has denied her Supernatural connections again and again. And—of course—there was the whole bond-breaking thing," I reminded, just to see the mighty
Viking squirm. "So I doubt the telepath will wish to have future dealings with you," I added with fake compassion. "I sincerely believe you ought to cut your losses and go to Freyda, Eric. I would even allow you to go tonight—right away! Just think; you could save a little face." I forced my expression to become sincerer and somewhat paternalistic. "If you did leave tonight—I would have no need to follow up on poor Victor's death, now would I? Your retinue would be guaranteed their standing and safety. I would even promote your new Second to be the Sheriff of Area Five if she offered me her fealty."

I heard the door in the back opening.

"What say you, Eric?" I asked, even as the vampiress warrior Thalia entered the bar carrying Sookie Stackhouse. "What is this?" I asked. "The poor woman looks catatonic?"

"An effect of the bond-breaking—no doubt," Cataliades commented sadly. "And all the more reason why Sookie should be in my care," he added. "Her associations with vampires have harmed her enough."

"Paperwork, Mr. Cataliades," I practically sang. "You have none that I need yet recognize."

"I will," he growled.

I chuckled. "Then you can file an appeal through the proper channels. Perhaps, we can eventually share custody," I added with amusement.

The part-Dae frowned and then looked at Northman with hatred in his eyes. "Perhaps, an arrangement could be made that would benefit both you and Sookie, your majesty," he said with a little more respect. Cataliades had always been famed for his pragmatism, and obviously, he realized that he was powerless to stop me from doing as I willed with Sookie.

"I am listening," I returned.

"As long as this monster is kept away from her," the part-demon gestured toward the Viking, "I believe that Sookie would be willing to work for you—at a fair salary, of course."

"If I claim her as my personal asset, then a contract would not be needed," I returned.

"But a happy telepath is an effective one. And a trusted one," he observed.

"A contract and a salary would not be hardships for me," I commented. "But I would require that she be bonded to someone in my court."

"Sookie need not be bound to any of your kind to read minds for you," the attorney reasoned. "I simple blood tie would be enough to ensure her honesty, and she could retain a level of freedom."

"But a bond would guarantee an arrangement between us for her life. I would be foolish to settle for less," I said.

The demon frowned. "A bond from a vampire of her choice then," he countered.

I shrugged. "As long as her choice is someone I trust, I would be willing to agree to that."

"And she could not be turned," he glared.

"I would need something very valuable in return for that promise," I said, even as I heard Eric practically whimper from behind me.
"What if I were to offer you my service?" he asked.

I contemplated for a moment. "I have an adequate personal attorney now—a demon too."

The half-demon scoffed. "I know Mr. Antonopoulos. He is a middling attorney at best."

"And you are the best?" I chuckled at the part-demon's audacity.

Cataliades nodded. "I am. And I would agree to work for you for my usual retainer."

"Half of that," I countered. "The favor I would be doing in guaranteeing your alleged goddaughter's humanity would surely be worth the rest."

"Sookie will not be turned, or my kind will take your life. And my service to you will end when she dies," he countered.

"Fifty years' minimum for your service to me," I said. "And—I will guarantee that Sookie is not turned, unless she asks."

He nodded. "I will agree to that."

"I would insist upon keeping Miss Stackhouse at court—to ensure her safety," I said, inhaling in the direction of the still immobile telepath. Thalia had moved her into a booth and was silently watching the attorney and me as we negotiated. I was disappointed to find that Sookie seemed to smell like a mere human without her bond. But—no matter. Indeed, as long as she had her gift, a less enticing scent might actually be preferable.

I did not want her to be too enticing to potential rivals, after all. And—of course—if I missed her sweeter scent, I would just bond her to Compton or someone more worthy in my court. Hell—even Sandy might do, given her absolute devotion to me. Given Sookie's apparent prudishness, I figured she'd be pleased to be bonded to Sandy, who had no interest whatsoever in bedding women.

"Sookie will be allowed to live in Bon Temps for half the year," the part-Dae countered. "I will provide Dae guards for her when she is in residence there, and I will provide a tutor to help her hone her telepathic ability."

I could hardly contain my glee! A little "vacation" time to placate the telepath—plus the promise that she'd always return to my employ stronger! And at no expense to me? I felt as if I'd just been dealt a royal flush!

"She may live in Bon Temps for four months out of the year," I said, feeling generous.

"With a fifth being negotiable if she is not needed," he came back.

"Agreed," I smiled.

"Sookie is mine," Eric said uselessly.

I rolled my eyes and looked back at the Viking. "Face it, Eric. You have no place in the current negotiations." I returned my gaze to the attorney. "Let us see if Miss Stackhouse can be roused so that she can have input into her new contract," I smiled. "And you," I pierced Northman with a quick glance, "decide whether you are to go to Freyda tonight or face the consequences for what befell Victor."

"But I did nothing wrong. I tried to save Victor," Northman argued, though his voice was not
forceful.

For the first time that evening, I contemplated the benefits of killing the Viking. The Oklahoma Queen would be pissed off, surely, but I knew she could be placated with money. Plus, she was afraid to cross me.

Yes—the Norseman could be killed easily from the looks of him, and such an opportunity ought not to be wasted.

Only the inconvenience that would come with having to deal with the spoiled queen and my memories with Appius stayed my hand.

Indeed, I'd come to be very fond of Eric's maker during his time in my court. And Appius had been looking forward to his child suffering years of servitude to a much lesser vampire—which Freyda most certainly was.

However, I resolved that if Eric did not agree to leave my state that very evening, I would take his fucking head off!

I was positive that Appius would have understood.

"You have five minutes to decide what you will do," I said to the Viking, before refocusing upon the attorney, who had moved to try to rouse the telepath.

"Sookie?" Mr. Cataliades asked gently. "How long has she been like this?" he asked the elder vampiress.

"She was hysterical earlier," Thalia informed. "Ludwig had to be called and gave the telepath a medicine to calm her. Since then, she has not attempted to move around or communicate."

"Then, we must continue negotiations without her," I said to Cataliades. "For I will be taking Miss Stackhouse with me when I go tonight."

For a moment, it looked as if the part-demon might argue, but he did not. "Perhaps, you would allow my niece to accompany Sookie? She will need a guard who can be awake during the day—after all. And I would rest easier if my kin were with my goddaughter."

I considered his request for a moment before I nodded my agreement. "As long as she is there to guard—and nothing else—your kin may accompany Sookie. She will appreciate having a," I paused, "friend with her—I think. You must know that I wish to foster a good working relationship with Sookie," I added.

Mr. Cataliades gestured toward a table. "Then let us continue negotiations so that Sookie can be settled and the doctor can be called to her again."

I smiled. "Absolutely."

ERIC POV

The king was clearly confident that he was in total control of the situation.

But there were many things he did not know.

Things that I was counting on.

That I was confident in.
Felipe did not know that his daytime security team, a small group of Weres, were surrounded at the motel where he'd left him.

He did not know that ten of my most trusted vampire allies were positioned around Fangtasia—ready to converge.

He did not know that many of the vampires he had brought with him, including Sandy Sechrest, would fight with me.

He did not know that Freyda and the few guards that had remained with her would be of no use to him.

He did not know that several witches were ready to use the surveillance system in Fangtasia to know where to send protective "shields" that would help me and my allies avoid injury.

He did not know that Freyda and the few guards that had remained with her would be of no use to him.

He did not know that the Dae in the room were not the only ones at work that night.

He did not know that a sniper's rifle would be trained on the exit of Fangtasia—as the failsafe—if he did make it out of the club alive.

I studied the room and saw Sandy doing the same. Her people would quite literally be ripping their own right sleeves from their garments when the battle began so that they could be distinguished from enemies.

Yes—even as Felipe patronizingly suggested that I cut my losses and just go to Oklahoma that very night, he'd been being surrounded. Indeed, the only thing that would have stopped my attack would have been if Sookie had walked through the door.

But she was being carried, and that meant that she had telepathically verified that there were no surprises outside and no extra threats we needed to worry ourselves with.

"I'll get Sookie some water; it might help," Indira offered before grabbing a bottle of the beverage and moving to sit next to my mate in my booth.

"Where is Compton?" Felipe asked, finally noticing his sycophant was not present as Desmond drew a legal pad out of his briefcase and began writing down some notes.

Thalia rolled her eyes. "He traveled by separate car. He said that you wanted Sookie here as soon as possible, so I drove accordingly. Compton drives like an old woman."

Felipe chuckled as he studied what Desmond was writing—clearly to make sure that it met with his approval. With Felipe focused elsewhere, I took a step back, knowing that my sword was right under the lip of the bar.

"Are you sure you do not wish to join us, Miss Stackhouse?" de Castro said with a slight chuckle.

Desmond momentarily glared at the king for his callousness, but Felipe was too amused by himself to notice.

Of course, my bonded continued her act. Likely, she was counting down in her head. If Thalia carried Sookie inside, our people knew to attack exactly ten minutes later.

It had been nine and a half minutes.

I took another step back toward the bar.
I could see approximately half of the vampires who had entered with Felipe reposition themselves slightly and then subtly place their hands on their right-hand sleeves, but the king was too focused on the attorney to notice.

My eyes focused on his neck.

As was my custom right before an attack, I visualized what would happen within the first few moments of the battle.

I could see myself quickly grabbing my sword and slicing Felipe's head from his shoulders before he even knew he was under attack.

I could see Indira quickly moving Sookie to the floor. My booth looked like the others, but it was virtually indestructible. The loyal Indira, I knew, would ensure that Sookie was shielded by the booth and her own body.

I could see myself, Thalia, Rasul, Palomino, and Maxwell Lee—along with Sandy's forces, Desmond, and Diantha—killing or holding at bay Felipe's loyal ones until my reinforcements arrived.

I could visualize the witches doing their part to protect those who needed it—especially Sookie—should something happen to Indira.

I was too pragmatic to be cocky, but—in that moment—I could clearly see that I had a clear advantage. And I knew—with every bit of experience that I'd earned over a thousand years as a warrior—that I would be killing a king in less than twenty seconds.

I took another step backward and moved one hand to rest on the barstool, knowing that the hilt of my sword was mere inches from my fingers.

With ten seconds left, I sent my daughters my support and affection through the bonds I had with them. I wanted them to feel my pride.

With five seconds left, I sent my bonded all of the love that I felt for her. I wanted her to feel just how much she meant to me.

And then it was time for action.
A Little Less Conversation

Chapter 49: A Little Less Conversation

THE ANCIENT PYTHONESS POV

FIVE MINUTES EARLIER THAN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER

With my cloudy eyes—and my other, better senses (including my sense of what was to come)—I "watched" my prey from afar.

He was waiting to meet with Amelia Broadway's father, though I knew that man would never make the meeting, thanks to Lucifer's favor to me.

My target paced and then looked around as if he sensed he was being watched, but his eyes eventually focused in the opposite direction from where I stood.

I frowned.

Killing the male would be a waste in many ways.

And waste was something I despised.

But the future did not deceive me when it came to the being I was looking at.

He was too lost in bitterness to give up his path of destruction. Still—I was determined to allow him his one last chance to change his ways, improbable though it was.

I found myself pitying the fairy. Losing two sisters as he had would have likely harmed the psyche of almost anyone.

Of course, one of those sisters had not been worth much more than her brother. Claudette Crane had been an unpleasant sort and had been tolerated only by her siblings.

On the contrary, Claudine Crane had been a great loss to this plane of existence. I had seen that she had achieved her goal of becoming an angel. I was glad for her.

The fairy I was looking at had relied quite heavily on Claudine's impeccable moral compass. And—now that he no longer had his "better" sister—he was floundering.

Yes—I pitied him.

But I was not willing to let him run amuck. After all, he'd had ample chances to change himself for the better. But, instead of embracing them, he'd scorned them.

Dermot had suffered much more trauma than Claude had, yet he was on his way to being a functional part of the Fae world again. All he'd needed was to get away from Sookie Stackhouse—ironically enough. He had been fixating on her in an unhealthy way, and the presence of the cluviel dor in her home had not helped, for Dermot had been drawn to its power and had confused that with attraction for Sookie. But now that Sookie had used the Fae love token to ensure that her fate would be forever tied to Eric's, Dermot's attraction was already waning. And since Niall had determined to reestablish close ties with his son, I saw Dermot living a full and happy life.

Dillon Brigant was Niall's heir, but I had foreseen that Dermot—once back in the Fae realm—
would find a woman that would make him a solid mate. With her, he would produce twins: one boy and one girl. As three-quarter Fae, both siblings would have the essential spark, and the girl was destined to become Dillon's chief advisor. It was difficult for me to see too much of the future as pertained to the Fae world, but I could discern that Niall's experiments in Fae fertility would pay off and the species would eventually rebound as long as they did not fully shun mating with humans.

I shook my head. Dermot had not been the only fairy that Niall had been willing to accept back into the fold. I knew that the fairy patriarch had also been hopeful that Claude would agree to his offer to return to the Fae world. Indeed, Niall had even given up on the idea that his grandson would breed with a female—let alone marry one.

However, Claude could not control his bitterness toward his grandfather and had denied Niall. But that bitterness did not even compare to the hate he felt for Sookie Stackhouse.

I scowled as I allowed myself to feel Claude's hatred for the woman who'd only ever tried to love him as family.

And then I "rewound" the visions I'd received concerning him over the years.

Claude had—at first—merely resented (complaining to Claudine on many occasions) the fact that Sookie Stackhouse had been Claudine's charge. Because of the need to be close geographically to Sookie, Claudine had resisted Claude's desire to move to New York or Paris after they'd come to the human realm. Thus, even before he ever laid eyes on her, Claude had disliked Sookie because he'd not gotten his "way" and had been "forced" to settle in rural America.

Of course, Claude had ignored the fact that he could have gone anywhere he wanted! It had been his choice to stay under the "care" of his sisters—though it had been Claudine who had seen to most of their household's running since Claudette had been almost as useless as her brother—because he refused to develop his independence.

But Claude's "geographical dissatisfaction" was only the tip of the iceberg.

He blamed Sookie for things as mundane as his not getting more photoshoots for romance novel covers.

Likewise, he blamed her for things as serious as Claudine's death.

But—still—the fairy had sought out Sookie after Claudine's death, living with her and Dermot so that he could draw upon their strength.

He'd been attracted to the cluviel dor—to be sure.

But he'd also been inept to seeing to his own care beyond that. The idiot couldn't even do a load of laundry! Even I—as an ancient seer—knew how to turn on a washing machine!

I shook my head. Claudine could have chosen to appear to anyone in her family before she'd passed into the Summerlands and then ascended to her new form as an angel. In my opinion, she should have appeared to Sookie—if only to alleviate the guilt the telepath felt over her death!

Even Niall would have been a worthier visit!

But—ever the loving (and hopeful) sister—Claudine had chosen the undeserving Claude. She'd attempted to appeal to his "better angels."
But he had spit—many times—into the faces of those angels since Claudine perished!

Being no angel myself, I might have been willing to let Claude do as he willed, but the harm he intended for Sookie Stackhouse was not acceptable.

I sighed. Yes—Claude Crane had gotten his chances. Sookie had accepted him into her home and heart—despite the fact that he was an asshole.

In return, he was determined to harm her with as much destructiveness as his mind could conjure.

Insidiously, he'd encouraged the witch to undermine Sookie's relationship with the Viking, though Amelia had ultimately gone against him.

Like a gofer, he'd also worked his way into Dermot's emotions, pushing him to seek Sookie as his mate.

Like a leach, he'd tried to take Sookie's energy into himself.

Like Dermot, Claude had felt the magic of the cluviel dor, though he'd been unable to understand what it was since he had always been devoid of love—except for himself.

Despite receiving love from his family—especially Claudine.

I felt my lips turn downward as I imagined what might have been with Claude Crane. Many years before, I'd seen another possible future for him—one that would have come to fruition if he'd only stifled his egotistical ways just a little bit.

Just a fraction.

Though Claude was as preferential towards men as any being I had ever known of, his future could have included fatherhood, given Niall's funding of artificial insemination techniques. And that wisp of a future had shown me that Claude had it in him to be an amazing father! He'd had a daughter who'd resembled Claudine in both looks and temperament.

But he'd turned away from that thread of possibility.

"So its beauty is only real in my memory," I whispered gloomily, thinking of the little girl who would never be.

Sadly, Claude's current path had become one of havoc and destruction.

Unless…

Unless I stepped in.

I rarely did inset myself into the events of the world.

But when I did, I went all in.

I knew that my handmaidens were near me.

I knew that they would take care of me once I was inebriated on Fae blood.

I smiled to myself as I contemplated my intentions. Wasting good Fae blood would have been such a shame!
And I had not felt shame for more than fifteen hundred years!

The fairy continued his pacing and finally dialed his phone to try to contact Copley Carmichael. The witch's father answered, but very quickly disavowed his partnership with Claude before hanging up.

Obviously, Lucifer had come through and had not struck a deal with the witch's father. I made a note to thank him later.

Indeed, I decided that I would send him an old-fashioned thank-you note on expensive stationary. And maybe a naughty selfie or two. The "devil" would love that.

"Last chance," I muttered to myself as I looked at Claude. "For Claudine's sake—for Sookie's—please take it."

At the final crossroad that I was prepared to let him traverse, the fairy stood staring at his phone for a full minute.

In one direction, Claude could give up his vendetta against Sookie and move on with his live.

In the other, Claude would die by my fang—and I would feast upon him.

I was a selfish enough creature to celebrate the latter as Claude made the wrong choice and dialed his phone and connect with the lieutenant of the vampire monarch of New York.

Michelina, the Queen of New York, hated Northman's child, Karin—and, by extension, the Viking himself. However, Michelina had a role to play in the night's events, and I wasn't about to let Claude fuck that up by further stirring up the New York queen's old (and—frankly—illegitimate) vendettas.

Claude had made his choice, so I prepared myself for the kill.

Even as Michelina's lieutenant indicated that she would connect Claude with the New York Queen forthwith, I glimpsed the future. Claude was about to offer his help in procuring Sookie in exchange for the telepath's continual agony. Aware of Michelina's misguided hate, the fairy was about to promise the queen that all pain inflicted upon Sookie would hurt Eric too—and, by extension, all of his offspring.

I sneered. Claude was unsalvageable.

And that meant I could gorge myself!

I felt all remnants of pity leave me. I felt my regret over Claude's unchosen future dissolve into the part of me where I compartmentalized all such disappointments.

I allowed the beast within me to breath in the scent of fairy, and I let myself hunger.

And hunt.

Claude was powerful enough for his age, but he had never honed his skills.

In truth, he was a lazy little prick.

On the other hand, I may have looked frail, but I was anything but. And I did not count on just my vampiric state and age either. I had studied extensively—from the greatest warriors of the ages.
Of course, I amused myself by pretending to be as fragile as a mouse, even leaning on my handmaidens to get from Point A to Point B when the fools I wanted to fool were watching.

The joke was on anyone who was fooled by my act.

But I never even gave Claude Crane the chance to see that act.

Because the fairy was arrogant enough to deem himself completely safe, I was able to incapacitate him before he registered my presence.

And certainly before New York's queen had picked up the phone.

I crushed the phone under my foot as I sucked from Claude vigorously.

"Fucking delicious," I mumbled messily as I drew in Claude's blood as if I'd been starving. I felt his body shriveling up in my arms as all the struggle left him.

The "high" of Claude's blood hit me within moments, but I kept right on drinking until he was but an empty cask.

I hardly noticed when my handmaidens collected my drunken ass and promised that they would soon have me in a "nice bath" so that I would not have to rest with Fae dust on me.

It was nice to have creatures I trusted around me.

I knew that the fairy and her Viking—before the night was out—would feel the same.

I grinned.

And then giggled.

And then snorted.

Being drunk was a rare treat.

Being drunk—and receiving a welcome vision of the night's impending events at the same time? Priceless!

SOOKIE POV

From what I'd picked up from Felipe as I pretended to be drugged out of my mind, the king was overconfident—just as Eric had expected he would be.

And Felipe's arrogance would work well for Eric and me.

The king also seemed to have no true idea of what my telepathic range was, for his human chauffeur, who was waiting in the limo the king had secured, was "thinking" about how the king likely intended to either kill my beloved Viking or ship him to Oklahoma that very night.

I wanted to both stake Felipe for his plans and thank him for being indiscreet enough that his chauffeur knew all about them.

Instead, I contemplated some the events that had occurred to bring me to this moment—which was only moments away from Eric's attack.
If my counting to 600 was correct.

Thalia had given me a look as she’d pulled Bill's car into the Fangtasia parking lot.

Staring straight ahead in case we were being watched, I had not spoken a word; I'd merely shaped my fingers into a fist—Thalia and my agreed upon sign for proceeding with the plan.

She'd lifted me from the car and carried me inside Fangtasia. One hand in my pocket, I’d hit "send" on my cellphone just as we'd entered the club, thereby informing our allies that the countdown had begun.

A countdown that I was trying to keep track of—even as I listened as Felipe and Desmond seemingly planned out my future without my input. Had the situation been "for real," calm would have been the last thing that I'd been!

I took a long breath and kept staring off into space, avoiding looking at the one person I always wished to see—my bonded.

I couldn't help but to regret just how close I’d been to being bonded with another vampire—one who I now knew didn't deserve my trust: Bill.

The blood he'd given me after the Rattray attack.

The blood he'd given me before the Long Shadow incident.

The blood he'd given me during the Maenad incident.

The blood he'd taken in Jackson.

More than three.

The blood he'd licked from me after the Rattray attack.

The blood he'd taken from me during our sexual encounters.

More than three.

Three was supposed to be the magic number when it came to bonding. Given that fact, Bill and I should have formed a bond well before Rhodes!

But a bond had never formed.

Could that have been because I'd been badly injured two of the times I'd had Bill's blood?

Could it have been because the Fae in me—or the Dae—refused to accept a permanent mate who was a duplicitous ass?

Could it have been because Bill wasn't a strong enough vampire to form a bond with the exchanges we'd had?

Could it have been dumb luck?

Could it have been fate?

Honestly—I hoped it was the second of the options—that somehow I had resisted forming a bond with a vampire who had proven to be mostly destructive to my life.
However, likely, it was dumb luck.

But I'd take it!

Or maybe Bill just wasn't a "good" vampire—either morally or in effectiveness.

After all, fooling him earlier that evening had been much easier than I thought it would have been. Perhaps, I shouldn't have been surprised. If Bill Compton had one constant—it was that he believed what he wanted to believe.

Even when those beliefs had no facts to support them.

Clearly, his beliefs included the false idea that he "knew" me.

That he had my best interests at heart.

That he was perceptive.

He didn't. He didn't. And he wasn't.

Still—Bill had been needed to ensure that de Castro thought that everything was all hunky-dory. He was needed to guarantee that the king would have his guard down around an "incapacitated" Eric.

Ultimately, my ex was needed to ensure that the assassination of Felipe de Castro was easy.

"Please be easy," I prayed, even as I used my peripheral vision to see that Eric had taken another backward step toward the bar. Even if de Castro had noticed—which he didn't seem to do—he would not have seen my bonded's movement as being aggressive. Indeed, if anything, Eric looked well on his way to passing out.

I took another breath. I'd counted up to 500. So that meant that Eric would grip his sword in about a minute and a half.

And then he'd take Felipe's head.

The part of me that was still "human," hated the loss of any life.

But that same human part knew that Felipe was not an ethical leader and needed to be replaced. And the Supernatural part of me—which I was only now beginning to fully embrace—was looking forward to seeing my bonded eliminate our enemy.

In truth, it was going to take me a long time to become comfortable with that kind of impulse. Thankfully, Eric knew that, which was why he'd agreed to my plan about what to do about Bill.

Of course, Thalia had advocated that Bill die after he "delivered his lines" to "de Asshole" (as she called him), but there was still something in me that fought against that notion. It was not a part that still loved Bill, for I no longer did. It was a part that still wondered if there was any good in him.

So—Bill had been spared.

In the end, I was happy—at least for the moment—with that choice. And his "incarceration" served a larger purpose too. Neither Eric nor I wanted Bubba at Fangtasia that night—just in case something went wrong. And overseeing Bill was a good task for our friend.
Of course, Eric had tried—the night before—to convince me that I should not be near the battle either. But I had the oddest feeling that I had to be there for success to occur. It wasn't exactly a premonition, but the feeling was strong enough that I wouldn't ignore it.

I was certain that my presence would be needed to fully distract the caped-king.

That was why I was doing my very best to feign being "stoned." Likely, knowing my wonderful, witchy friend—no sister—I was stoned. Amelia's "calming tea," which I'd drunk on the way to Fangtasia, had certainly helped with solidifying that impression—at least when it came to keeping my metabolic "outputs" in check. Without it, I'm sure that my heart would have been pounding and my flesh sweating.

But—as it were—I was able to stare as if looking through Felipe de Castro.

At one point, he'd spoken to me—trying to get my attention—but I didn't even blink.

Clearly, he was convinced that I was debilitated by breaking my bond with Eric.

I almost reacted at that thought. Yes—even the thought of breaking my bond with Eric now shook me.

I found myself wondering why I'd ever contemplating doing just that—breaking my blood bond with Eric—even as I continued to count down the seconds until Eric would kill de Castro.

Of course, I knew the answer to that question.

I'd been worried that Eric and my bond was something to enslave me.

And I'd failed to see what that bond truly was—a coil of true love.

I was determined not to fail my bonded again.

I wasn't a vampire, but I had a good sense of time. Five seconds to go—I thought.

Confirming this, I felt a huge burst of love from Eric through our bond, and I readied myself to duck under the booth as Eric had made me promise to do.

In my mind, I counted down to zero and darted downward, though I turned my head to watch my beloved as he sped toward his prey.

I couldn't help but to appreciate the fact that Felipe had cried out in surprise—shock! I just wished that I'd been able to see the look on his swarthy face. I determined to ask Eric about it later. And I'd ask God's forgiveness about that as soon as I felt guilt—if I ever did.

A second after that action began, my Viking stood in the center of the room covered in blood and gore.

And de Castro was no more.

Unfortunately, his cape remained.

Eric's eyes flamed bright blue, the blood lust clear in them. I sent him calm and clarity, and he turned to face down the other vampires who were allies to de Castro.

It turned out that there weren't nearly enough to give my mate and our allies a good fight. As Indira basically covered me with her body, I peeked around her to see that many of the vampires who had
arrived with de Castro were actually not "with" him. As Sandy Sechrest had promised, Felipe had not been popular amongst his own. Indeed, the vampires whom Freyda of Oklahoma had lent were ultimately the ones who fought the most valiantly after Felipe fell.

But they too were easily killed.

Yes—I hated killing, but even I could recognize that Eric was a soldier in that moment.

I recognized other things too.

First, Eric would have served de Castro faithfully—if the king had proven to be worthy.

I felt pride for my bonded.

Second, Eric clearly commanded the respect of all who fought with him. Even those who were strangers to us—even Desmond and Diantha, each warriors in their own right—fell in line behind him.

I felt more pride.

Third, my bonded could have successfully led his current force against an army three times this one's size—because he was just that f-in powerful!

More pride.

Fourth, my bonded would have very much enjoyed taking his time with his enemies.

From him, I felt a little regret with every cut he made with his sword—with the cut decapitating de Castro eliciting the most regret.

My human side had conditioned me to believe that torture was a sin. But my vampire clearly would have favored drawing out the punishments upon his enemies' bodies.

That night—however—the timing of things ultimately suited us both. To demonstrate that he was an agent of retribution and not ambition, Eric needed to eliminate de Castro and his allies as quickly as possible. And—keeping my conscience clear—no death would be drawn out.

But I knew that—in the future—my mate would find enemies that he would want to punish using time and "art."

Despite my condemnation of killing, I found myself sending my mate support and something akin to—but not quite—approval. My days of stifling my vampire's nature were over. My days of knowing that he would always take into account my sensibilities on matters such as torture were just beginning.

I figured we'd come to compromises along the way.

Eric roared as he cut off the head of the last foe in the room.

Everything became silent for a moment as my mate and our allies looked around.

None of our friends had fallen.

Eric sped toward me, and the table I'd scrambled under seemed to disappear. I grinned into my bonded's kiss.
Chapter 50: Witches & Bitches

AMELIA POV

I'd expected the battle to be worse. I'd prepared myself to cast spell after spell to protect our allies, but I'd also assumed some of them to fall, nonetheless.

Thus, I'd purposely disconnected myself from the situation emotionally so that—even if someone I knew or cared for was killed—I could continue working.

Because of this "disconnect," watching the video feeds from Fangtasia's cameras had been like watching an action movie in some ways—though a bad movie where only one side was trained as warriors.

A movie called Samurais Versus Schleps!

Yes—my coven members and I had been prepared to cast spells around any of our allies who were in trouble. Indeed, as soon as the battle had started, I'd preemptively (and automatically—without even thinking) cast one around Sookie's booth—just in case the Viking was overestimating its indestructability. But—as it turned out—neither my fellow witches nor I had been required.

Octavia grinned almost evilly (an expression I didn't know she had in her) once every enemy on the television monitors was dead. She nodded in my direction. Clearly, she was not surprised that we had been unnecessary in the battle.

"I know how Northman operates," she commented. "We were always to be a failsafe—a redundancy—nothing more. And that was fine with me. Likely, the vampire and his bonded determined that it would be best if you were not present on the scene, but prepared this avenue for you to battle with them, nonetheless."

"What?" I asked with confusion.

"See it as a compliment," my mentor smiled with a wave of her hand. "Eric and Sookie trusted you to be a part of their back-up plan, but made sure that you were away from the battle so that you could escape if they were ultimately defeated."

I shook my head. "Eric never doubted that he would win tonight," I realized.

"Likely not—once he did the math. Of course, even with a ninety percent chance of victory comes a chance of defeat." She smirked. "You know—I am not surprised that you cast out a protection spell around your friend, even though it wasn't required. Eric would have expected that from you too. You created—if nothing else—an extra layer of security around his bonded, which likely kept him calmer during the battle." She paused. "And—as I have taught you—a level-head is needed in war."

I nodded in understanding. "Still—I can't believe it was so easy for them!" I said, looking back at the monitors and smiling a little as I saw Eric and Sookie celebrating their victory with a kiss that would likely make Sookie blush whenever she thought about it.

Octavia winked. "Easy or not, I have still gained a favor from the North Man. So I am certainly not offended that the Viking didn't actually expect to need us. I'm sure he had other failsafe's too," she
added wryly.

I thought about the sniper outside of Fangtasia and nodded. "Yeah—he's definitely a planner."

Octavia chuckled. "Well—let's get over there," she said, gesturing toward the monitor. "We either have a new king to welcome or a fugitive to help escape."

"But Eric won't be escaping. Sookie said that he was gonna take whatever punishment was handed down—if it came to that," I commented with a frown. "Otherwise, his vampire children and Sookie would never truly be free either."

Octavia smirked. "The Viking has powerful allies that he doesn't even know about. And one of them tasked me with supporting him tonight—even if it came to cloaking him so that he and his bonded could safely leave the country. However, I think I'm merely a failsafe in that regard too."

"Who?" I asked.

Octavia shook her head. "One whom I would never dare question. She has made me realize that it is time for the witches of this state to join with our Supernatural brothers and sisters. And Northman and Sookie are the keys to the success of our alliance."

"How?" I asked, sadly reduced to one-word questions.

The elder witch shook her head. "I didn't ask. And—once I train you to take over the coven—you never will never ask such questions either."

"Huh?" I asked.

Octavia merely smiled at me and turned to go.

I followed.

FREYDA POV

I was incensed!

Queens were not ordered!

And they certainly were not herded into a room or handled!

Yet I was at the mercy of Eric Northman's two progenies.

One—Pamela—was well-known to me. Rumor had it that she had recently become estranged from Eric.

The second was Karin, the Slaughterer. The vampiress's reputation preceded her. She was known for being able to assassinate anyone, even much older vampires. She was also known for her "honor"; rumor had it that she wouldn't accept a job—no matter how much the promised payday was—if the vampire in question didn't deserve his or her death.

After they'd dared to order me to "sit and stay" on the bed of my hotel suite—as if I were a dog!—the two "sisters" had sat back comfortably on the couch and begun a conversation about the relative merits of neutral versus bold decorating strategies in hotels!

And the bitches had completely ignored my questions for ten minutes!
"Where the fuck are my guards?" I demanded again—for probably the fiftieth time.

Finally, my captors looked at me.

"I believe they fled when they saw us," Karin stated flatly.

At least she was speaking.

"I doubt they'll be back," Pam added with a smirk. "You need better guards anyway—considering the way they just tucked tail and ran."

"You killed them—didn't you?!" I demanded of Northman's brood. "If you did, I'll have your heads!"

"Like we said," Karin reiterated in a stony tone that made me quiver with fear, "they disappeared when we arrived to offer you our protection."

I frowned. "Protection?"

Karin nodded. "Indeed."

"From whom?" I asked.

They didn't answer.

"Eric sent you—right?" I demanded.

Again, they didn't answer.

"You know that your maker will soon be raised to the status of my consort," I said possessively, eyeing the older of the two vampiresses before me. "I will honor Eric by raising him in such a way. Indeed, your maker is very well regarded by me. And you ought to honor him by serving me," I added somewhat haughtily.

"Has our maker not attempted—in many, many ways—to get out of the contract you forged without his consent?" Karin asked evenly.

"Appius's consent should guarantee the consent of his child," I tried.

Pam rolled her eyes. "Appius sired Eric Northman. But my maker made himself!" she said fervently. "And Eric did not make himself into the vampire he is today merely to serve one of your ilk!" she added with derision.

My fangs snapped down as I hissed at her insult. "You need to learn humility, child! Your maker will be on my leash before the night is over! And you will be out of his life."

Thankfully, Karin stopped her sister from moving on me.

"The one in need of a lesson—and a leash—is you," Karin said stonily. "Specifically, you need to learn to respect your elders. And both Pamela and I are older than you are."

"But I am your better!" I seethed. "I am a queen!"

Both sisters snorted. "Yes," Karin chuckled, "you are the queen of a state with a quickly dwindling number of vampire residents."
I didn't miss her implication, and—if I'd not known it before—I was now well aware that all my vampire guards were dead. I just hoped that my people with Felipe were faring better!

"It's surprising that you are suddenly so interested in vampires respecting their makers' wishes. Didn't you become queen by betraying your own maker?" Pam jabbed.

"You know nothing of me!" I yelled out. "And I demand that you release me now!"

"But we are only protecting you," Karin said coldly.

"Protecting me?" I sneered. "You are holding me against my will!"

"No—indeed," Karin shook her head. "I'm sure you don't know this, but tonight, Felipe de Castro has attempted to murder Eric Northman—our maker—and forcibly take Sookie Stackhouse—our mistress—even though the two are bonded."

"Clearly, you are in Louisiana only because de Castro deceived you to come," Pam said, her sarcasm more obvious than her sister's. "Thus, your life is in grave danger—unless you are in on Felipe's plot," she added with a smirk. "Are you? If so, my maker would have no choice but to act against you."

"I would do nothing to harm Eric!" I yelled out. "And neither would Felipe! Eric is to be mine, and I am here to collect him—as per the agreement made between Appius and myself!"

"Your so-called agreement will soon not be worth the paper it was written on. My master belongs to another, and we will be keeping you here and cozy until she's had the chance to officially claim him," Karin stated.

"And then your illegitimate claim will be caput," Pam chimed in.

"You cannot hold me against my will!" I yelled out. "I am a queen!"

"And a queen you will stay," Karin stated.

"As long as you cooperate," Pam added.

"If not . . . ," Karin began.

"It's off with your head!" her sibling finished in a high-pitched voice. Who was she? Fucking Alice in Wonderland?

I frowned at the two. "I'll report you both to the Vampire Council."

"Oh—Eric will be doing the only reporting tonight. He will be informing them of Felipe's plot against himself and his bonded. As of yet, he's ordered us not to kill you. You see—he believes that you really are not involved in the caped cocksucker's plot," Pam intoned mockingly.

"Yes—clearly you are victim here too, manipulated by Felipe," Karin droned.

"Eric intends to ask that you be allowed to return to your state as long as you accept our mistress's claim," Pam grinned.

"What mistress? I am your mistress!" I raved, even as the two began ignoring me again and went back to their previous discussion about whether wallpapering was preferable to painting.

I huffed as I watched the two bicker like—well—sisters, though Karin kept a close eye on me. For
that reason, I didn't dare move off the bed.

With nothing better to do in that moment, I found myself wondering if there could be a kernel of truth in what the Viking's brats had said. I shook my head. Eric wouldn't risk defying Felipe unless the king had actually threatened him. I refused to believe that the Viking would fight the powerful Nevada king for anything as inconsequential as the telepath. But why would Felipe want to murder Eric? After all, I would be taking Eric out of Felipe's territory soon enough.

Plus, Felipe was my ally! He would not take Eric from me!

"Wait! Did Eric kill Victor? Is he planning to kill Felipe?" I demanded.

"Look—a lightbulb just went on over her head?" Pam muttered.

Karin ignored her sister's snide remark. "A group of Fae and Weres killed the Regent of Louisiana," the assassin responded evenly. "As for Felipe, my maker learned that he was bringing a small army into Area 5 with the intention of killing him. Given the fact that Eric had served Felipe loyalty since the takeover—only to be met with the king's betrayal—my maker determined to protect himself—as was his right."

"Eric can't kill Felipe!" I yelled. "That would be a death warrant to him! And he is to be mine!"

I looked at Karin desperately. "You must stop your maker! Tell him that—if he just agrees to leave the state and come to Oklahoma with me—then all will be well! I will help to smooth any of Felipe's ruffled feathers. And—even if Eric did do something to Victor—I'm sure that I can help to cover that up too!"

Pam smiled. "Oh—but Felipe has no feathers left."

"And a new king will soon be crowned," Karin added.

"But—if Eric killed Felipe—he will be charged with treason and slain!" I cried. "He will not be allowed to be king."

"Maybe," Karin stated flatly. "But my maker would rather be faced with that fate than have to marry you."

"Appius promised me the Viking!" I snarled in response. "And—even if Eric were allowed—by some miracle—to take the throne, the contract making him mine will not become void!"

"A king cannot be a consort," Karin stated flatly.

I frowned. The vampiress was right.

But that didn't mean that the contract could not be renegotiated so that it was a marriage agreement between two monarchs!

That idea brought a smile to my face.

"Take me to Fangtasia! Please!" I begged the two vampires. "If what you say is true, then I will be a witness on Eric's behalf!"

Pam scoffed. "What could you possibly say that would help my maker?"

"Uh—I'll say that Felipe—for no just cause—worked to undermine Eric at every turn!"
"Everyone already knows that," Pam said with a roll of her eyes.

"I'll say that Felipe intended to murder Eric," I countered. "And a queen's support and testimony will go a long way toward swaying the Council to allow Eric to live on and become the King of Louisiana, Nevada, and Arkansas!" I enthused, already imagining ruling four territories with the Viking.

Pam sneered. "And what would you want in exchange for your testimony?"

"A marriage!" I gushed. "Surely Eric would see the benefits of—a two-hundred-year union! We would rule the largest territory in the United States! And a marriage would legitimize his own claim to the throne if any others questioned his rise to power!"

"You were not listening, apparently, when I told you that someone has a prior claim to my master. A marriage to you—even if my maker had to bed you only once a year—is not something he would find tolerable," Karin returned.

"But how could he not? I am a queen! And beautiful! Surely he is not so hung up on his human pet that he'd ignore an offer of a true partnership with me!" I stated. "I will admit that someone of his age being a consort to someone of mine might have offended him. But partnering with a fellow monarch? He would have to see the benefit in such a thing!"

"Sookie Stackhouse is bonded and pledged to my maker," Pam growled. "She is no pet!"

"But their bond has been broken," I insisted.

"And where did you get that information?" Karin asked.

I frowned. "Felipe told me," I confessed after a moment's pause.

"What else did he tell you? Leave nothing out," Karin interrogated cuttingly.

I shrunk back a bit because of her malice-filled tone.

Afraid not to speak, I responded. "Felipe said that he was coming to Shreveport to investigate what happened to Victor. He told me about Eric's version of what happened—the attack on Fangtasia by the Were and Fae, as well as how most of the vampires were made drunk by the Fae blood put into their drinks. Felipe seemed to want to believe Eric's story, but he was wary of it too. He'd heard from one of his people that the bloodbag had broken her bond with Eric."

"Who told him that?" Pam demanded, though she figured it was Bill.

I shook my head. "I do not know."

"What more do you know?" Karin pushed.

"Felipe said that Eric would have no choice but to immediately fulfill the contract with me since his one remaining argument for appeal had hinged upon the bond. He promised that I would be able to take Eric home with me tonight."

Pam growled at my words.

I frowned at her. "How can you blame me for wanting him?"

"It is how you want him," Karin observed coldly. "Now—tell me about your forces here."
"I brought fourteen; four stayed here with me. The rest were dispatched to aid Felipe," I admitted. "But Felipe didn't intend to attack Eric. I'm sure of that! He just wanted to be ready if Eric attacked him!"

Karin scoffed. "As if that would have been possible."

"Eric ambushed Felipe and murdered Victor too—didn't he?" I asked, trying to sit up as tall as I could. Neither of Northman's children were as tall and elegant as I was, and I had used my statuesque body to intimidate many a rival—though the two seemed unimpressed. I was determined that—once Eric came to his senses—I would make sure his brats were punished.

Neither of those brats answered me, however.

"Are my people dead?" I asked.

Again, my question went unanswered.

I tried a different strategy. "Listen—your maker needs me. I can either tell the Vampire Council that Eric was planning to assassination Felipe all along or assure them that Felipe was practically insane in the end. Without my help, Eric dies."

"Are you threatening my maker?" Karin asked, her tone even deadlier than before.

"Why can't we kill her again?" Pam asked drolly.

"I am having a difficult time remembering," Karin responded without breaking her stare with me.

I felt my shoulders slump under the weight of that stare. "If—uh—two monarchs die tonight in Area 5, then your maker will—uh—certainly be executed," I stammered.

"Felipe had several of your vampires with him," Karin countered. "If you try to speak to the Vampire Council about any of this, you will be seen as Felipe's confederate. And—even if you were to somehow convince them that you were innocent in this matter—I would enjoy hunting you," she said, her lips turning up into a sinister smile. "In my line of work, I rarely get to take my time when killing. I have a whole list of torture techniques I am anxious to try out."

"Can I help?" Pam intoned.

Karin smirked. "It can be a training exercise for your new child too."

I cringed. "I was just kidding—of course," I laughed nervously. "It is well-known how much I like your maker. I would do nothing to harm him. Indeed, you needn't worry that I'll ever tell the Vampire Council anything of this night," I added.

"Yes—but your presence in Louisiana is unfortunate," Karin commented. "And suspicious!"

"But I just came to claim what is mine—before Eric could do something foolish like re-bond to that woman," I added with an edge to my tone. "I'd also assumed that Felipe would be claiming Sookie Stackhouse so that I would never have to deal with her again!" I cried out, letting my anger overcome my fear for a moment.

"I'm afraid Felipe lied to you. The bond was never broken," Pam grinned like the fucking Cheshire cat!

"But it was broken!" I insisted.
Pam rolled her eyes. "Trust me when I tell you that you have been misinformed," she sneered.

"Come now, Pamela," Karin said stonily. "Have some pity for Queen Freyda. Felipe used her, after all. He manipulated her into supplying him with more people."

"You are right, sister," Pam said with a little smirk. "And that's exactly why our maker sent us here to protect the queen in case Felipe succeeded against him and decided to murder her as well! Thank you for reminding me why we were told not to kill her. And thank you for reiterating exactly the story that her highness better tell to anyone who asks," she added with a clear warning in my direction.

I went to speak out my protests about their narrative, but Karin held up her hand and glared at me. "Silence or be silenced!"

"Oh—goody! We were not told that we could not gag her!" Pam enthused.

"One more word out of her and we will," Karin threatened. "And—remember-my sister and I were instructed not to kill you tonight—only. Our future nights," she paused and showed her deadly fangs, "are unrestricted."

I was pretty sure that the Slaughter didn't make idle threats, so I kept my mouth shut and contemplated my situation.

Felipe was dead. My vampire soldiers and guards were dead. I was alone in the state. And it seemed clear that I would not be allowed to speak with the Vampire Council before Eric Northman was either made a king or sentenced for treason.

Despite my somewhat dire circumstances, however, I was still alive.

I smiled to myself. If Eric had wanted me dead, I would have been dead already.

Clearly, he did not.

I took that as a sign to hope.

Eric had honor, and that meant that he might hold to the spirit of my contract with Appius, even if he was made king.

If Eric only agreed to marry me as an equal, then all of my worries would be solved and I would profit immeasurably!

I knew that he and I would be perfect together, and I was certain he would come to see the same truth!

And—even though it would anger me—I'd even allow him to keep his little telepathic pet on the side—if he was, indeed, still bonded to her.

She was mortal and would eventually die, after all. And then I would have him all to myself.
Chapter 51: Counsel

KING STAN DAVIS POV

I had been born Stanislaus Davidowitz in Eastern Europe. My parents had been poor, but proud. Some sort of political unrest had forced them to flee from Dresden, Germany, where they'd grown up, and settle into a small village in what was now the Czech Republic. My father had been a miller and took on my eldest brother as his apprentice.

I could still remember my mother teaching me and my siblings to read and write, though no one else in our community cared anything about such "impractical" things.

My parents, however, believed that knowing something about the wider world would make my siblings and I somehow "better," even if we never saw that world.

Of course, I had ultimately seen that world—several times over. And it had been my ability to read which had put me onto my maker's radar. He'd moved to his country estate about a ten-minute walk from my own home, and the wealthy man had been in need of a helper for his valet, Timothy.

I was made that helper because I knew how to read.

I had been around ten years old at the time—not yet a man, but close enough to move away from my family's home. In turn, my family was compensated for me. And—it wasn't as if I was not allowed to see them. Indeed, I could visit them as often as my work allowed, and I was also given leave to provide them with excess things that they might need from my employer's estate.

I could still remember the pleasure I felt in taking my mother a chicken or eggs—and once even a milk cow—when Timothy gave me permission to do so.

From the first, I had known by instinct that my employer—Domingo—was different from others. I had not been afraid of the difference, however. Indeed, Domingo had seemed cultured and civilized in a way that attracted me very much.

Even as Timothy had taught me how to be a valet and to run a household, Domingo had made sure that I continued my studies, tutoring me himself. From him, I received an hour or two of lessons each night. Literature, mathematics, geography, history—these subjects were all opened to me over the years.

And then, one night—a decade after I had entered his household—Domingo kept me in his library after our lesson on military strategy was over and told me what he was.

Even as he'd shown me his fangs to prove his nature, however, I'd not been frightened.

Even when he'd told me that he fed off of and glamoured those in the village, including my own family at times, I'd not been frightened.

Not even when he'd told me that he'd taken my blood on occasion.

Domingo had offered me two choices that night.

One: I could be glamoured to forget all about his nature. If I made that choice, Domingo planned to
appoint me as the long-term caretaker of the estate where I'd spent half of my life. I would run the household as Timothy had taught me to do, making a good living and having a comfortable home for the rest of my life. Domingo encouraged that I should marry and assured that any spouse or children I had would find employment on the estate as well. However, he said that he would never again see me. He intended to depart the next night and would not return to the estate until at least two generations had passed from the earth. It was in this way—moving from one of his estates to another—that he'd managed to conceal what he was from humans.

Two: I could leave with Domingo. Timothy was getting up there in years, and Domingo was hoping that I would continue my tutelage with his old "day-man"—as I learned vampires called their trusted human helpers—and eventually take over for him. Domingo also promised me travel, though not to larger cities, for he preferred the country life. However, even the idea of being only a half day's ride from Paris (for Domingo's next destination was in the French countryside) excited me.

Domingo showed trust in me by giving me the rest of the night and the next day to decide. If I chose option one, I'd simply be glamoured that night. If I chose option two, Domingo suggested that I take part of the day to say goodbye to my family, for—though letters would be possible—I would likely not see them again.

Of course, being a vampire, Domingo had promised death upon all of my kin if I breathed a word of his true nature to anyone as I was making my decision. In truth, telling Domingo's secret had never even crossed my mind until he'd given me the warning.

After Domingo had left me to my thoughts, I looked around the library. The books on the shelves represented all of the lands that I might visit—all of the stories within which I might find myself a character.

If I followed my employer.

Leaving my family had been the only thing that had given me any pause—mostly because I contributed part of my wages and other incidentals to my parents' household.

Given Domingo's pragmatic nature, I figured that he had another caretaker in mind for his estate if I took him up on his offer. Given his generous nature, I bet that he'd arrange for my youngest brother—who'd just turned twelve—to become that person's apprentice. And—beyond that—there would be nothing to stop me from continuing to send some of my wages to my mother and father.

I had all but made up my mind when I'd realized that sunlight was streaming through the windows and Timothy had entered the library with several men with crates to pack up the books that would be traveling with Domingo.

After instructing the men about which shelves to pack, Timothy led me to the kitchen, placed food in front of me, and told me about the night when Domingo had offered him exactly what he'd offered me. When he was done with his story, he'd asked me if I had any questions of him.

I had only one: Did he ever regret saying yes to the vampire?

Timothy had chuckled as if my question was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard and then told me to take a horse when I visited my family, for that way I could travel quickly and be back in time to help him arrange for the household's move.

When I asked him about my brother and whether he thought Domingo would hire him, Timothy instructed me to bring him back with me if my parents approved.
He—according to Timothy—might be able to do one or two things to help with the move too.

And, with that, my decision had been made.

Like Timothy, I never regretted it.

The old valet died a few years later, and it was when I informed Domingo of Timothy's passing, that I learned that vampires cried tears of blood.

I became Domingo's lover a few years after that. And—on the night of my twenty-eighth birthday—my maker made me his child.

After giving me another choice.

I'd never regretted that decision either.

I stayed with Domingo for about a century before the New World beckoned to me. My maker had not wanted to leave Europe, but I had been ambitious, and my maker had given me his blessing to explore.

Many years later—when I informed him that the Vampire Council wanted to appoint me to be King of Texas—since the previous monarch wished to disappear into seclusion for a while—Domingo made his way to the Western Hemisphere for the first time. In front of the Vampire Council, he formally released me from his maker's command so that I could be a king.

After a short visit, he'd returned to Europe where he still passed his life just as he had before—as a bit of a recluse. Knowing this, I always made it a point to visit him when I could.

However, after Rhodes, where I was injured so badly, Domingo quickly came to my side, protected me, and gave me his own blood to heal me. He even managed to keep Barry, my telepath, from carelessly—though unintentionally—betraying me!

Lucky for Barry.

And for me.

Sensing he was unhappy within the bustle of my court, I'd told my maker several times that he should return to his beloved countryside, but he'd decided to stay on until I was at full strength. He was clearly suspicious of Felipe de Castro's recent acquisition of Louisiana and Arkansas from the incapacitated Sophie-Anne Leclerq and did not want for Felipe to think that he could get away with adding Texas to his territory.

Originating from around the same region on the Iberian Peninsula as my maker, de Castro had once sought out a friendship with Domingo. My maker had found him to be a waste and had moved on from his estate near Barcelona several years before he'd intended—just to avoid any future visits from the vampire.

My phone beeped, and I looked down to see that I had a message from Nan Flanagan. I cringed. That vampiress was as abrasive as they came, but she was also very effective at her jobs—one of which was as Communications Director for the Vampire Council.

I quickly opened her message. "Bitch," I muttered as I read her missive.

The message had merely "ordered" that I be ready to take Nan's call in two minutes.
Why she hadn't simply called was beyond me! Likely, she enjoyed the idea that I would now have
to dread hearing her shrill voice for the next minute and fifty-six seconds!

Indeed, having to deal more directly with Nan was the only reason I'd paused before seeking my
current position on the Vampire Council.

But my ambition had overridden the Nan nuisance, and I had lobbied to become the representative
for the Zeus Clan on the Council only a few weeks after I'd been made King of Texas. I recalled
that the only other Zeus monarch bidding for the role was Freyda. Even as a "new" king, however,
I was deemed to be readier for the Council role than Oklahoma was.

Freyda had been placated only with the promise that she would be chosen—without a doubt—when
the Zeus position was next available.

In two decades.

The representatives for the four North American clans all had a tenure of twenty years, with our
terms of service each ending five years apart (unless there was some emergency which required an
earlier appointment). In that way, there would be only one "new" member of the Council of four at
any given time.

Not surprisingly, the clans each had different "election" procedures.

The Moshup Clan rotated leadership by state, so they had no election process to speak of.

Narayana decided their representative through election every two decades. The only stipulation
was that a monarch could not be re-elected immediately.

Zeus voted just like Narayana did; however, it was custom for us to give each new monarch a
"turn" on the Council before those who'd filled the role repeated.

Amun had a freer election process and a more fluid term of service. Not only could a Council
member be "re-elected," but also monarchs could resign from the Council when they wanted or
needed to do so. Recently, Phoebe Golden, Queen of Iowa, had done just that when she'd wanted to
concentrate upon building up the defense systems for her state following the Rhodes incident.

So Amun had elected a replacement member just a few weeks before.

Russell Edgington.

Felipe de Castro had (heavily) advocated for that position—just as he'd done when the Narayana
Clan had last selected a representative. He'd lost that race too. The California queen, Agnes, had
been selected instead of him.

Thank God!

Of course, fifteen years before—when Agnes had been selected—I would not have minded Felipe,
to be honest. Indeed, I'd even preferred him over Agnes (though, of course, I'd had absolutely no
say at the time—as I'd been only a sheriff in a territory in another clan). But—over the years—I'd
lost all respect for Felipe, and I'd come to appreciate the fact that Agnes's focus was on the good of
her minions, rather than upon herself.

The same was not true for Felipe.

I mean—I was ambitious—to be sure! By Felipe's brand of ambition was also damaging to the very
places he'd vowed to rule with wisdom and justice!

And recently he had been clamoring to move Louisiana and Arkansas into the Narayana Clan!

It was as I was contemplating the complications of Felipe "owning" territories in more than one clan that my phone rang.

"You are required for an emergency session of Council—to be conducted via conference call," Nan's annoying voice announced.

"Why?" I asked, even as I rolled my eyes.

"I don't have to answer that, but I'm in a generous mood. Apparently, Northman has killed Felipe de Castro tonight," Nan said with annoyance.

"What?" I asked.

"The Viking wants to make his case to become King of Louisiana," she said, sounding bored.

"Eric Northman," I said as a smirk landed on my face.

"That's what I said. Did the blast at Rhodes ruin your hearing?" she asked sarcastically. Be. Ready. In. An. Hour!" she emphasized slowly and exaggeratedly before hanging up.

"Such a bitch," I glared at the phone before a smile crossed my lips.

I sat down heavily at my desk. "Northman actually did it!"

"Did what?" my maker asked as he entered my office. Domingo looked handsome as always.

Opposite of myself, he was a vampire who was steadfastly—purposely—behind the times. Indeed, he even dressed in fashions that were a century and a half old!

But he looked damned good! I licked my lips before I responded.


"A bad precedent," Domingo said as he sat down in the chair in front of my desk.

I nodded. A sheriff killing his king—and getting away with it—is not a good thing.

"But it is a welcome gift nonetheless," Domingo added.

"Yes," I agreed. "Felipe was overly ambitious in the end. It makes my life easier that he is gone from this world. But to allow the Viking to become king may not be the prudent thing—despite how much I like him. And if the Council doesn't make him king . . . ."

"You will have to kill him," my maker finished for me. Even though Domingo hated to be involved in vampire politics, he still knew them well—for he was a true scholar.

My maker looked out the large window of my office. My garden of Texas native vegetation had fascinated him, for many of the cacti and succulents there had been unknown to him.

"I knew the Norseman in Europe," Domingo said quietly. "I was living in Tuscany at the time—at the estate with the vineyard."

I nodded to confirm that I knew to which of his many properties my maker was referring.
"I had to check in with the King of Florence. You know how I despise that kind of chore."

Again, I nodded. Indeed, I had taken over that duty after I'd been turned because my maker hated being at court so much.

"Eric was also in the Florentine court at the time. His maker was treating him like a dog. No," he paused, "Appius was treating him worse than an animal. I did not even learn Eric's name then, for Appius had forbidden him from having one." Domingo shook his head sadly. "In my years, I have seen several makers who turned children just because they wanted someone they could abuse or torment. Most such makers do not have the ability to be so cruel, however, for a blood bond—afters all—is strong on both sides. And affection is automatic to all but the coldest of soul."

"I know," I whispered. I'd lost my own child, Rachel, in Rhodes and still felt the loss acutely.

Sensing my pain, Domingo reached across the desk for my hand.

I was comforted immeasurably by his touch.

"What struck me about Northman was that—despite his maker's abuse—there was an honor within him that even a monster could never touch," my maker said thoughtfully.

"I never met Eric's maker," I responded.

"I would not have let you when you were with me. And I am glad you were never subjected to him when he made his way to this continent either," Domingo commented. "Being in the same space as Appius was toxic."

"Eric's child, Pamela, has already involved me in all this," I sighed.

"I am aware," Domingo said. "The newly turned girl—the one who has not yet risen—is Northman's child's child."

I nodded. "Of course, I did not know why Pam asked me to care for her child. I figured she might have regretted making her, and with my Rachel gone . . . ." My voice trailed off. "Not that anyone could replace my child."

Domingo nodded in understanding. "You will find a new child when it is time—if that is the will of the gods."

I bowed my head a little. "Pam said that she would return before her young one rose. So I felt that I was doing only a small favor for her."

Domingo gave me a little smile. "I have heard that Northman's younger child can be persuasive—and misleading when she needs to be."

"Yes."

"Still—I believe that you were aware that Pam was fleeing from de Castro when you accepted her into the state," my maker observed.

I sighed. "Yes, but I didn't mind sticking it to de Castro a bit—not that I would have ever staked him myself. Plus, I owed Eric a debt for his aid to one of my nest-mates. You know Farrell?"

Domingo nodded. "Yes—he is the one you enjoy as your lover upon occasion."

"When I am craving a man, and I cannot have you—yes," I confirmed.
My maker smiled at me. "I will always crave you, Stanislaus."

I smiled back at him and would have gone with him to my bedchamber if I didn't have to take a conference call in a few minutes.

"I am torn," I told my maker honestly. "I want to help Northman no matter what, but—as you said earlier—a sheriff killing a king sets a bad example."

"Unless there is a justified reason for it," Domingo returned.

"You mean beyond the fact that de Castro was a prick?" I smirked.

"Officially, there must be a legitimate reason. But you are excellent at reasoning legitimate reasons from seemingly nothing," he added with a smirk of his own.

He rose and walked over to me before giving me a kiss on my cheek. "I have a book to finish. I will see you after your obligations have been met."

I nodded. "Do not spoil the ending of this book to me—as you did the last one. I have not finished it yet."

Domingo grinned. "No promises if it is bad."

I chuckled and watched as he moved gracefully toward the door of my office. He turned right before opening the door.

"Save the Viking if you can, my child; I know you like him, and he would be a good king and ally to you. But do not compromise yourself."

I nodded to Domingo. He may have no longer been able to command me or advise me in an official capacity, but I still listened to his advice when he honored me with it.
Chapter 52: Good Company

ERIC POV

"You know what to do if the Council asks for my head," I said to Thalia quietly.

My ancient friend nodded.

The look that passed between us convinced me that Thalia did—indeed—know what to do. In many ways, killing Victor and de Castro had been the easy part of the plan. What now followed was harder, for I no longer had any control over my fate; it was in the hands of a Vampire Council of four.

And I figured that I was already beginning with one vote against me.

The Moshup Clan's representative, I knew, would celebrate the opportunity to have my head. The Queen of New York, Michelina, was no fan of mine. I had turned down an overture that she'd made toward me centuries before because—frankly—she'd come across as a little desperate and fucking her held no political advantage for me.

To make matters even more complicated, Karin had been the one to assassinate her sire about ninety years before. Oh—there had been good reason to do away with Mateo; though once he'd been a great vampire, he'd become an unimaginably dangerous entity during his final years of undeath.

Not only had he become obsessive and erratic, but he'd also "forgotten" that it was necessary to cover up the fact that vampires were real! I did not know who had hired Karin to "take care of the problem," but I had heard rumors that many older vampires (including several of the older European monarchs) had gotten together to pay for Mateo to be "euthanized" as it were.

Michelina could not "officially" hold a grudge against Karin (or me)—because my child had been acting for the betterment of all vampires and it had been Mateo's fading sanity which had left him vulnerable to attack—but I knew that her private opinions would most likely not allow for leniency toward me.

Agnes, the current leader of the Narayana Clan was logical. But de Castro had never wronged her directly, and he had been a part of her clan for several decades; she'd worked directly with him on many projects, which could work for or against me. Plus, Agnes was known to be old-fashioned in her thinking—when it came to vampire tradition—something else that could work either for or against me. The California queen's support would be a coin flip.

Russell Edgington, the current leader of my own Amun Clan, would be on my side. Of that, I had little doubt. Russell had liked Sophie-Anne. And he'd despised de Castro and Madden.

Stan of Texas was the current leader of the Zeus Clan. He had become a "friend" of mine since I'd presented myself as Leif in Dallas in order to keep an eye on Sookie. And Sookie had saved the lives of many in his retinue on that horrible night when the Fellowship attacked Stan's nest. Plus, her involvement had led to Stan's rescue in Rhodes, though his child, Rachel, had died that day.

However, Stan was pragmatic, so he might vote in whichever way was best for his own interest.
Thus, his vote, too, was a coin flip in my mind.

But I needed one vote—at least—between Agnes and Stan.

The Ancient Pythoness would be called to break a tie amongst the Council if need be. I could only hope that—if I got two Council members on my side—the old biddy would support me.

But I'd rather not have the situation come to that point.

And that meant that I needed both Agnes's and Stan's votes.

"Ready?" Desmond asked me. Nargal, having already helped my vampire children eliminate Freyda's guards, had just arrived and was at his brother's side. "My daughters?" I asked Nargal.

"Skilled," Nargal said with a nod of his head. "And selfish," he seemed to pout a little. "Indeed, I am quite upset that I got to kill only a few because they were so efficient. Still, I had fun." He looked at me piercingly. "My brother figured that my visible support would help you and your bonded during your hearing."

"Mine too," Octavia said as she approached.

I looked from the full-Dae, to the witch, to Desmond.

"When you present your case to the Vampire Council, it will be with the clear backing of a variety of Supernaturals," the lawyer informed.

"That could backfire," I commented, watching Sookie as she greeted and hugged Amelia and Bob. "And it could put you all in danger as well," I said, turning my attention specifically toward Octavia. "You reside in this state, and—if things do not go my way—I have no idea who will be made ruler."

The elder witch shrugged. "I believe that helping you will be helping my coven," she said matter-of-factly. "Having to deal with the effects of de Castro's rule—and Madden's misrule—has taught me that some vampires are better than others." She shook her head almost sadly. "For many years, I did not wish to be a leader among my kind. Oh—I took on some students, like Amelia," she said, gesturing toward the younger witch, "but I avoided Supernatural politics. If I had not, I might have better helped my fellows after events like Rhodes or Hurricane Katrina." She sighed deeply. "Instead, I retreated and buried my head in the sand—even leaving New Orleans after Katrina! And—because of the inaction of those like me—otherwise good witches were coerced into performing magic for Regent Madden against their will and without payment." She looked again at Amelia. "I have little legacy to show for my life, but I would try to make this state better for her. So I am placing my faith in you; do not let me down, Viking."

I bowed in response to her as Calvin approached.

I frowned as the werepanther nodded toward Desmond.

"You should hold off on letting your involvement with me be known until after a good outcome is had," I cautioned Calvin.

"I know that you've already lived up to your commitments to me and my people." He chuckled. "And my banker is very pleased!" His expression sobered. "The demon said that you could use someone of the two-natured variety sittin' in your cheerin' section tonight. Mustapha is kick-ass, but he's your day-man and not affiliated with a pack. And don't worry 'bout me." He shrugged. "Good luck to anyone who wants to find me if I have to go into hiding. Hotshot might be small, but
few have any idea of how deep our dens go."

I reached out to shake the werepanther's hand out of respect, even as Sookie approached me.

She, too, had insisted upon being by my side during my trial with the Vampire Council—come what may. I'd tried to talk her out of it—just as she'd tried to talk me into running if things did not go our way. But I knew that running from a Council order of execution was futile.

Eternity was a long time to be caught, and a judgment from the Council didn't expire—even once a completely new regime was formed. And—once caught—I would not simply be executed. I would be tortured for a very long time.

And my punishment would be extended to every one of my blood.

Karin.

Pam.

Miriam.

Sookie.

I would allow none of them to be lost.

I looked around the room. In addition to the non-vampire Supernaturals in my corner, Rasul was also prepared to speak for me if Felipe and Victor's mishandling of the state needed to be explained. Sandy was prepared to speak too. And Thalia would be clearly visible behind me and Sookie as well.

Pam and Karin—much to my relief (thanks to Desmond's careful planning)—would await the outcome of the proceedings with Freyda. If the best-case scenario occurred, they'd have one of the demons escort the Oklahoma Queen to her state and then join me and Sookie at Fangtasia for instructions. If the worst happened, they'd kill Freyda and disappear. Of course, I would "confess" to Freyda's death right before my execution in order to tie up that loose end so that my children and my other allies would never be implicated.

"The time is here," Desmond said kindly as he gestured toward two seats in front of where a video camera had been set up; the camera would broadcast our images to the members of the Vampire Council.

I took a breath I hadn't needed in a very long time—and then I took my bonded's hand. "There's still time for you to go."

"No!" she said loudly. I felt her fire and a little irritation at me in our bond. "No more of that kind of talk. We're gonna face our fate together," she said quietly, her voice steady and sure.

I was certain that I had never loved her more than I did in that moment.

I was certain that she'd never been more "mine."

I was certain that—if I survived the night—I would endeavor all my remaining days to make sure she understood just how much her commitment to "us" meant to me.

SOOKIE POV

I'd seen fancy televisions that could show more than one channel at a time. But I will admit that I
was impressed when Desmond turned on the television and I saw a screen split into four chunks.

I could tell immediately that the figures in the four images weren't the kings or queens of the Vampire Council. Indeed, some kind of "sound and video check" was clearly taking place. I noted that one of the younger vampiresses in Eric's area, a brunette named Molly, was tinkering with some equipment on our end, focusing a camera on Eric and me. Nargal moved to stand behind her.

"Pan out a little to show the whole group," he said, even as I turned my head to see those gathering right behind Eric and me. Calvin winked at me. Octavia gave me a little smile, and I could tell from her head that she had come to appreciate me greatly; after all, not many would have opened their homes like I'd done for her. Of course, she still thought that I was "trouble." But—as I dipped into her thoughts for a moment longer—I could hear that she thought that Eric and I would be worth that trouble if we ruled the state as fairly she thought we would. As if she knew I was listening, she projected that she was ready to truly lead the witches of Louisiana and that she hoped they would build a good partnership with the vampires.

I smiled at her. "I hope so too," I said.

She nodded and I looked at Nargal, who had left Molly's side and was now standing next to Thalia. I'd not had the chance to interact much with him, but there was a twinkle in his eyes as he looked back at me.

"You know, young one, your grandfather was a good friend to me," Nargal offered. "And—after tonight—you will be officially seen as a part of the Cataliades clan," he added.

"Welcometothefamily," Diantha giggled from behind her father.

"Really?" I asked him. I'd known that Desmond was helping me and would be declaring himself as my "official" guardian, but I hadn't thought that the rest of his family would accept me in such a way.

As Nargal nodded in confirmation, I found myself smiling at the thought of Desmond's family adopting me. I already loved him and Diantha, after all. Indeed, I found myself happy that my recent choices were going to be making me more attached to the Supernatural world. I took a moment to chastise myself for resisting my place among everyone in the room I was in, especially Eric.

Indeed, I couldn't imagine better company!

"What's wrong, min kära?" Eric asked as he squeezed my hand lightly.

"Other than the fact that we are about to find out if you're gonna be a king or be executed—you mean?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes. "Yes—I can feel that you are nervous about that; however, a moment ago, there was more."

I nodded in confirmation. "Yeah—just looking around, I was mad at myself for not realizing that being part of the people in this room was better than being part of a human community that never really accepted me." I sat up a little straighter, knowing that every pair of supernatural ears in the room could hear me, and I spoke to all of them—in addition to my vampire. "I'll never take any of you for granted again."

"Do not take yourself for granted either," Eric whispered, leaning down to kiss me.
I smiled into the kiss.

Desmond cleared his throat. "It is time," he said.

I felt my nervousness ratchet upward.

"Time to face the music," I muttered, even as I hoped that the song would be a good one.

ERIC POV

I faced the camera (and the proverbial music) as I saw the four monarchs on the Vampire Council take their places.

"Desmond Cataliades representing Eric Northman," the demon lawyer said as he moved to stand next to where I sat. "Mr. Northman has requested this emergency session to inform you that he was forced to kill Felipe de Castro and wishes to take the Louisiana throne. Mr. Northman is aware that —since he once swore fealty to Felipe—his act could be seen as treason, yet he asks that you take into consideration extenuating circumstances, including the fact that King Felipe was in Area 5 tonight to murder Mr. Northman without just cause and to take his bonded and pledged mate—both clear violations of Supernatural law and Felipe's oath as king."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Desmond nod slightly as he finished his opening.

I was not surprised when Michelina, the Queen of New York, was the first of the four Council members to speak up. "So, Northman, you have killed your king. And why am I not surprised that you would try to get out of your rightful punishment by using underhanded excuses?"

I looked into the camera directly. "My reasons are not underhanded, your majesty. They are simply true. Felipe wanted me out of the way. And he intended to leave this state with my bonded."

"Come now, Eric; you cannot actually expect us to believe that Felipe was out to kill you. After all, when he took over Louisiana, he left you alive—a magnanimous move on his part. And an unwise one, in my opinion. I would have killed you," the Queen of New York added coldly.

"I'm sure you would have," Russell mumbled as he rolled his eyes.

Michelina ignored him. "Not to mention that Felipe had much to gain from your impending marriage with Freyda of Oklahoma. Plus," she smirked, "I have it on good authority that your bond with your pet telepath has been broken. So—if Felipe wanted her—he could simply claim her. As could any of us now," she said, her threat clear.

"Sookie Stackhouse is not a pet," I said firmly, though calmly. "She is my mate, and our bond it stronger than ever. As for Felipe keeping me alive after he took over the state—that is true. I swore fealty to him, and—had he not broken covenant with me, first by allowing Regent Madden to undermine me, my territory, and my businesses, and then by trying to take my life and my bonded—I would never have acted against him. But, perhaps, I should have—even from the start."

"What do you mean by that?" Russell asked.

I looked at my bonded and then at the camera. "The night of the takeover, I would have fought—had Sophie-Anne not already have been murdered. I chose survival, and—as I said—if Felipe had been worthy, I would have been his loyal sheriff indefinitely."

"It seems that—to you—loyalty is synonymous with murder!" Michelina yelled out. "Thus, I call that Eric Northman be put to death immediately! For high treason!"
"Please calm yourself, Queen of New York," Russell said firmly. "We are well away from taking a vote. We have not even heard all of Eric's case yet!"

Michelina scoffed. "I have no doubt where you will fall—Mississippi king—when it comes to adjudicating the murderer of Felipe de Castro!"

I responded as Russell growled at his fellow Council member. "I committed no murder; I defended myself and my bonded. And let us acknowledge facts. Vampires may be an ambitious group, but most of us have celebrated our honor for longer than I have existed on this earth. Rhodes was a tragedy which would have been ten times worse if not for my bonded, yet Felipe took advantage of what happened in Rhodes—just as, I believe, someone recently wished to take advantage of the King of Texas's vulnerable situation. This kind of taking advantage—by a king no less—demonstrates a decided lack of honor. Humans attacked us. Felipe de Castro ought to have rallied around his fellow monarchs—not plotted to steal one or more of their territories," I commented.

I noticed that Stan had sat up a bit straighter at my words. "You are right that many were," the Texas king paused, "disabled by Rhodes, but had Sophie-Anne been stronger before that, Felipe might have failed."

"My queen was not lacking in strength before Hurricane Katrina, and you all know it." I stared unwaveringly at all the monarchs in my view. "I know that many of you have had to help recovery processes following hurricanes or earthquakes, but there has never been a natural disaster that took the number of Supernatural lives and livelihoods that Hurricane Katrina did. Sophie-Anne—while dealing with a trial because King Peter Threadgill tried to kill her in her own territory, I might add—was trying to help this state thrive again. Felipe took advantage of that fucking hurricane, my queen's injuries from Rhodes, and the death of Andre. And he conducted a successful takeover. Whether he should have done that sets up for an uncomfortable precedent—don't you think."

"Are you trying to imply that you killed your king out of some kind of allegiance for your slain queen?" Russell asked helpfully.

I had hoped for such an opening.

"I will admit that I wished to fight on for Sophie-Anne, but—since she was already gone—I turned my attention toward me and mine. And their survival," I informed. "That is why I agreed to serve de Castro when Madden made the offer."

"It is unusual," Agnes of California said, contributing for the first time, "that a new king would keep on anyone of power from the previous regime, especially a vampire as strong as Sheriff Northman."

"But de Castro was wise in some ways," Russell remarked. "He would have known the kind of profit made by Area 5 under Eric's tenure. He would have speculated that losing that income would have been a massive detriment."

"Is it not true that you were found—on the night of the takeover—at Sookie Stackhouse's home?" Michelina asked snidely.
I could feel my bonded's temper rising, but I also knew that she was in control of herself.

"Of course, I was there," I responded, instead of becoming defensive. "Where else would I be—but with my bonded?"

"Is it not true that your story about de Castro's so-called murder plot against you is a lie? Why—I would bet that you killed your king only for a mere bloodbag!" Michelina sneered.

Now—my temper threatened to rise up to the surface.

It was Sookie's injection of calm into our bond that stopped me from lashing out.

Luckily, Desmond chose that moment to reinsert himself into the proceedings. "Ah," he said, "I believe I should speak upon this point. And," he added, "glaring toward the part of the screen holding Michelina's image, "I would advise you not to use disparaging language against Miss Stackhouse."

"Why ever not?" Michelina asked with a haughty sneer. "Why would you care about how I address a human, demon? You are only Northman's counsel in these proceedings."

"I am also Mr. Northman's father-in-law—of sorts," the part-Dae said with an incline of his head. "And even if Sookie were 100% human—which she is most certainly not—her behavior in Rhodes ought to be enough for an honorable queen—which is what I know you to be most of the time, New York—to speak of her with respect."

"Are you questioning my honor?" Michelina charged.

"No," Desmond returned. "Just your objectivity in this case."

"How dare you!" the New York queen yelled.

"Micky, please," Agnes soothed, using the New York queen's nickname, which I knew was reserved for only her closer friends.

"The demon is right," the California monarch said gently. "Miss Stackhouse saved many of our kind in Rhodes, at great personal risk. Mr. Cataliades's request that you speak of her with respect is a reasonable one."

"What did you mean when you said that Eric's bonded is not completely human?" Stan asked when it was clear that Michelina was done venting out her displeasure.

"Sookie Stackhouse has my blood flowing through her veins. In addition, she is of the Fae house of Brigant. I am her guardian—instilled in my position by Fintan Brigant, son of Niall, and Sookie's paternal grandfather," the lawyer informed. "From this day forward, Sookie Stackhouse requires that the vampire world acknowledge her as a Fae princess and Dae ward."

I felt Sookie squirm slightly next to me at the word "princess," but she did nothing to deny Desmond's words.

"What?" Russell asked. "But—as far as we all knew—Sookie was just a talented human!"

"I am sure that you can understand the desire of Sookie's family to be discreet, given the ongoing conflict among the Fae concerning those who are not of full blood," I said diplomatically. "Of course, Felipe knew that Sookie had Fae blood. I can produce recorded phone calls that demonstrate that I was upfront with my former king about Sookie's lineage."
"And the Dae connection?" Stan asked.

"My blood was a gift to any of Fintan's descendants who possessed the Fae spark," Desmond proclaimed.

"And my brother's blood is my blood; thus, Sookie is my blood," Nargal said from behind me.

"And Sookie's blood is Northman's," Desmond added. "So, the vampire, Eric Northman, is also family to all of the Cataliades clan."

"And all of our kin," Nargal added.

I fought to keep my eyes from opening wide at that proclamation. Basically, Desmond and Nargal had both just promised that they would wage a war for either Sookie or me!

"Are you threatening us?" Michelina asked tersely.

"Of course not," Desmond said with a toothy smile, his teeth looking as deadly as a vampire's fangs. "I am merely indicating why I am here on behalf of my goddaughter and her bonded. And—of course—I am a witness too."

"A witness to what?" Agnes asked.

"To the fact that de Castro entered this bar with the intention of killing Sheriff Northman. To the fact that Felipe wanted Sookie Stackhouse for his own. To the fact that he allowed Victor Madden to run this state into the ground and undo all the good that was being done by Sophie-Anne—despite the dire situation—before her death!"

"I can attest to that as well," Octavia said.

"And you are?" Agnes asked.

"I am Octavia Fant, coven leader of New Orleans and supporter of Eric Northman's regime."

"Whether or not Mr. Northman has a regime is still a matter of argument," Michelina said unpleasantly.

"You seem to have a collection of eclectic allies, Eric," Stan said with some amusement—though some caution.

"There are none here that do not believe that Eric Northman would be a worthy King of Louisiana," Desmond said confidently, "if you will let him."

"What of Nevada and Arkansas?" Agnes asked. "Would you desire them too, Mr. Northman?"

"I never desired to be a king at all," I answered honestly. "But—to protect me and mine—I find that is my only option at this time. As for Nevada, I would put forward Sandy Sechrest, who was Felipe's second-in-command. And—in Arkansas—I would defer to the Council." I bowed my head.

"Oh—how deferential of you," Michelina sneered. "But we have lost focus on the fact that you killed your king! If I had my way, Council representatives would—even now—be converging upon that little bar of yours to make sure you were finally dead by morning! But I have been blocked in this and forced to endure this needless call when we all know What should be—must be—done when a sheriff kills his king," she said, seeming to sneer at her fellow Council members.

"But we must not kill a new king either! And I see Eric's actions as completely justified. The gods
know that Northman will be a worthier king anyway—better for us all!” Russell proclaimed, making his position clear. "Felipe was a lit fuse intent upon blowing up a power structure that has worked well for us for years! Gods! He was trying to strip Louisiana and Arkansas from Amun!"

"Narayana was upset by Felipe's ideas of expansion as well. There have been rumors that he was spreading himself too thin—much to the detriment of his people," Agnes sighed. "Pity—he was once such a promising king."

"Felipe's character is not in question!" Michelina glared.

"Isn't it, Micky?" Agnes asked. "Should it not be? As much as I hate the thought that a sheriff killed his king, I must entertain the possibility that Felipe had broken a law even more sacred than the one Eric did."

"What law?" Michelina practically spit out.

"The law of bondeds," Agnes said softly.

"Yes," Russell nodded. "Long before this Council formed, the protected status of a bonded was recognized. I have no trouble believing that Felipe would have ignored that status."

"But they are bonded no more!" Michelina yelled out.

"Whatever your source is—you are incorrect," Desmond said.

"You are biased!" Michelina sneered. "And that is why I have sent one to you who is not!" she added triumphantly.

Just then, my attention went to the door of my bar as I heard several vehicles approaching.

"What have you done?" Agnes asked Michelina.

"I have simply asked Nan to be on hand in case Northman is found guilty of treason," she responded innocently.

At her words, the tension inside of Fangtasia grew. The magic of the witches practically cackled in readiness. The Dae all seemed to flex their hands at once, ready to cast fire at enemies if needed. Calvin and the others of two-natures in the room seemed to shimmer. And my loyal vampires all dropped fang.

"Nan is a Council representative," Stan said almost soothingly. "She will not act without a consensus from this body."

I nodded and looked at my bonded, who had also tensed up.

"Six vampires," she whispered, alerting me to the number of potential enemies who had arrived.

I nodded and then turned back to the others. "Stand down."

The energy in the room abated somewhat right as Nan Flanagan entered; she was wearing a cat-suit that made her look about as un-sexy as any vampire could, and she was flanked by four guards.

I could tell that one of her people had waited by the entrance.

"Lovely little gathering you have here," Nan said, looking around the room.
"Nan," Russell said from the live feed. "I assume you are there to observe only."

"And to act if need be," she said, sounding bored.

"You can begin by determining whether a bond still exists between Northman and the . . . ." Michelina paused and did not complete the insult she had been surely planning. "And Miss Stackhouse."

Sookie and I had both risen to face the spokesperson for the AVL.

Nan strolled over to us and smirked before inhaling deeply. She seemed somewhat surprised for a moment. Clearly, Michelina had a spy or a confidant in Felipe's circle—or perhaps Freyda's. Either way, it was obvious that the New York queen had been informed that Sookie and my bond had been broken. And she had contacted Nan with this information.

I had never been more thankful for Ludwig in my existence! Had she not created an antidote that would reestablish Sookie's authentic scent—which included our bond and an abundance of Eau de Eric—the premeditation of my action against Felipe would have surely been discovered! I was determined to give the little troll another bonus!

I'm sure she'd expect it.

"So?" Michelina asked insistently.

Nan looked at the screen almost apologetically. "The telepath reeks of Northman. The bond is inarguable and strong."

Michelina frowned. "But I was told . . . ."

"Rumors are often incorrect," Stan said.

"Let us get back on point," Russell said. "I believe that it is to the Viking's credit that he even attempted to serve Felipe! And all that I have heard before tonight indicates that Eric served him well! Thus, it is de Castro's failings that have led us to this point—that led him to his death."

"But consider the precedent if we accept Eric as king," Agnes said contemplatively. "I agree that de Castro had become a prick. Hell! Nevada was part of my own clan, so I've had to work with him for years! As I indicated, he began as a good and visionary king. But—during the last few years—he became so hung up on his personal ambitions that he all but ignored his people's welfare. Still—the overthrowing of monarchs—even bad ones—has never been sanctioned by this Council."

"And allowing a monarch of summarily kill his sheriff without cause—especially with the intent of stealing someone with whom that sheriff was bonded—should not be a policy of this Council either," Russell said firmly.

"But to what should we give the most weight?" Stan asked his fellows.

"If Felipe intended what he has been accused of, then I cannot help but to believe that Mr. Northman was justified," Agnes observed.

"But how can we even know Felipe's true motives?" Michelina asked. "I still say that Northman is likely lying about his king's intentions in order to cover up his own ambitions."

Russell muttered. "What ambitions?"
"Northman is not lying," Sandy Sechrest averred, stepping forward so that she was in the frame of the camera. "Sheriff Northman has been being wronged for as long as Nevada has been the ruler of Louisiana. I had hope that Felipe was turning a corner from a selfish phase to a selfless one when he ordered Madden to allow Eric to live on the night of the takeover. But—after that—Felipe let Madden have free reign in squeezing every penny possible from Area 5. He allowed Madden to interfere with Eric at every turn—once the king decided that he wished to have Sookie for his own."

"You are betraying your liege," Michelina accused.

"I was loyal to Felipe for a very long time, but he is dead and gone now," Sandy said. "My loyalties—now—are to the vampires who remain in Nevada. They have been straining under Felipe's unfair taxing. Instead of building up his existing kingdoms, Felipe had been looking outward—overlooking his people—and scheming to take even more states in Amun, Zeus, and Moshup! He had designs on all of the Mississippi River states! And upon New Jersey too—since he felt best suited to run Atlantic City! And I can produce proof of that if required. He wanted the telepath, Sookie Stackhouse, to aid him with his ambitions!"

"What?" Russell asked. "All states bordering the Mississippi?"

Sandy bowed her head. "Yes—you were on his list of conquests, King Edgington." Sandy looked steadfastly toward the camera. "Honestly, if Felipe had remained a good king, I would have fought at his side until my true death, even if he expanded his territories to include the whole world! But he was not—ultimately—equipped with enough honor or restraint to be a just ruler, so I told Eric of Felipe's plans to murder him and steal Miss Stackhouse. I stand ready to accept punishment for that if need be," she said with pride.

"So, you were Cassius to Northman's Brutus," Michelina sneered.

"Don't forget that Caesar was a fucking tyrant in the end. I should know; after all, I am old enough to have seen that cluster fuck firsthand," Thalia muttered from behind me. "Everyone who stabbed him deserved a fucking medal."

"Let us not get off track," Agnes entreated. "Do you have more to say, Miss Sechrest?"

"Yes," Sandy said, after glancing at me. "I have not yet told you—or Eric—about the full extent of Felipe's interference into his life—or the true reason why Eric was allowed to live on after the takeover."
"What do you mean?" Stan asked, responding to Sandy's declaration that she knew about not only Felipe's misdeeds toward me and Sookie, but also his reasons for allowing me to live after he'd killed Queen Sophie-Anne.

Sandy glanced again at me and then looked back at the camera. "Appius Livius Ocella, Eric's maker, contacted Felipe more than a year ago—in early January 2005—to call in a favor."

I felt myself go rigid at the mention of my maker's name.

Sookie squeezed my hand, and I felt her instilling our bond with comfort and support. She was learning to use the bond, and—in so doing—she was showing both her acceptance and care of me.

"A favor?" Agnes asked.

Sandy nodded. "Appius had been sensing that his oldest surviving progeny, Eric, was happy. Jealous of what was causing that emotion in his child, he wanted to know why."

I closed my eyes tightly. In early January 2005, the witch, Hallow, had taken away my memories and I was with Sookie. Yes—I had been so very happy then. And carefree.

"Jealous that Eric was happy?" Agnes asked.

"Yes," Sandy informed. "Appius did not like that Eric felt contentment."

"He did not want his own child's happiness?" Russell frowned, even as I felt Sookie grip my hand more tightly.

"That was the time when Eric and I first loved each other," Sookie proclaimed proudly. "It stands to reason that one so embittered and jaded as Appius would hate that love."

"Love?" Michelina scorned. "Vampires don't love, human."

"I believe it has been established that I am not fully human," Sookie said, her back straight and her eyes piercing the camera. "I am a mixture of Fae, Dae, and human, and I am the bonded, pledged mate of a vampire. Oh—and I dare any vampire who has a good relationship with his or her child or maker to claim that he or she cannot love!"

I squeezed my bonded's hand in support of her and her words.

"You were not addressed, Miss Stackhouse. You ought to learn to keep your thoughts to yourself," Michelina glared. "And stay in your place."

"Why? Because you see me as a pet—at best?" Sookie shook her head. "I am no pet! And even if I was an ordinary human pet, y'all should consider joining the new century and gettin' along with humans, or you'll be the ones bitten in the ass! Meanwhile, I am a Fae princess! I am a telepath! I have saved the lives of vampires, fairies, the two-natured, and humans! And I claimed Eric Northman as mine—by love—before Appius visited Felipe!"
"Blood is the only claim that matters to a vampire," Michelina said coldly.

"Apparently not—according to Appius's actions," Sookie said, jutting out her chin.

"What do you mean by that?" Agnes asked with interest.

"The proof is in the pudding," Sookie explained. "The proof is in Appius's need to punish his child for finding love! The proof is that Appius could never truly control Eric with his blood—not his mind—and that pissed him off to the point that he was willing to hurt Eric in any way he could!" she finished. "Appius, apparently, could not kill my bonded's heart with his supposedly all-powerful blood, so he enlisted Felipe's help!"

I could not stop myself from leaning down to kiss Sookie's brow, even as I heard Nan scoff from behind me. Pity—I thought she'd decided to leave after her "sniffing" duty was completed.

"Finish your testimony, Miss Sechrest," Nan intoned. "I'm tired of all this love and heart shit."

Honestly, I did not need to hear Sandy's answer to know what my maker had likely done.

Sandy gave Nan a threatening look, but nodded in agreement. "When Appius contacted Felipe, Appius had been moving from place to place rather quickly because of his unfortunate younger child, Alexei," the vampiress relayed. "Appius asked for temporary sanctuary in Las Vegas. Even at that time, my former king had been putting together a plan to align Nevada with the states along the Mississippi to create a gambler's paradise, but—back then—he didn't intend to take those states over.

"And then Appius came. He looked over Felipe's plans and—along with Victor Madden—began filling Felipe's head with visions of ruling the whole central part of the United States through his control of gambling all along the Mississippi River! Other legal gambling zones, including Atlantic City and other coastline cities were to be targets of the second main phase of the plan.

Sandy looked guilty for a moment. "Appius was keen that Felipe begin in Louisiana. I had no idea of his purpose, but Felipe sent me—at Appius's bidding—to collect a man named Julian Trout not long after Appius arrived at court."

"The weather witch!" Sookie cried out.

"Yes. I learned of his nature later when I was auditing the books and found that a huge payment was made to Mr. Trout right after Hurricane Katrina occurred," Sandy informed.

"Who is this Mr. Trout?" Russell asked.

"A weatherman," Stan informed. "Sophie-Anne informed the Vampire Council of him the night before the bombing in Rhodes. Miss Stackhouse told her that Trout had at least a cursory knowledge of Hurricane Katrina before it happened. He was, apparently, able to use that knowledge to get the Rhodes conference postponed until after Hurricane Katrina occurred, ensuring Sophie-Anne's vulnerability. The Council was to investigate further, but Trout died in Rhodes."

"He did?" Sookie asked.

"Yes," Stan informed. "He and his wife both perished when the hotel collapsed."

I could feel Sookie's sadness.
"Mr. Trout did more than just predict Hurricane Katrina," Sandy informed. "I learned only a few weeks ago that Appius threatened the weather witch's wife. He coerced Mr. Trout to predict the next hurricane that would develop in the Caribbean and then to strengthen it before driving it right at New Orleans. Appius then glamoured Trout to forget all but the prediction element of the plot, for he had received intelligence—by that time—that Eric had a blood tie with a telepath."

"Dead God," Sookie gasped.

Sandy continued. "After Hurricane Katrina, Felipe became like a buzzard, circling an injured prey. He already had a spy in Sophie-Anne's court."

"And one in Area 5," I observed.

Sandy nodded. "Yes. Felicia. She did not, however, begin as a spy. Her maker owed a lot of money to Felipe, and he threatened to call in the marker if Felicia did not cooperate. Felicia's maker could not cover his losses, so Felicia complied. She informed Felipe about your businesses and power structure. She informed Appius about more," she paused, "personal matters."

Sandy looked at me apologetically. "I know that Felicia hated betraying you. About a month before her death, she contacted me, asking for my help, but there was nothing that I could do for her at the time. I did, however, learn that Felipe had begun using coercion over gambling debts more and more often in order to implant spies in a variety of states." She looked back toward the camera. "After the takeover of Louisiana, Felipe decided Felicia had outlived her usefulness; she was killed by Appius's child Alexei partly because of what she knew."

I shook my head. Felicia—I had known—had been a spy. But she had also been a loyal soldier for most of her time with me.

Sandy continued her story. "One of the earliest things that Felicia told Felipe and Appius was that she felt Eric had found a true companion—at least potentially—in Sookie Stackhouse, the telepath. That was when John Quinn was deployed to figure out if Sookie's affections matched the Viking's affections. It was," Sandy paused, "hoped by Appius that Quinn could steal Sookie's affections away from Eric and leave him desolate."

I heard Sookie gasp next to me and I squeezed her hand in support.

I was not surprised that Quinn's involvement in her life was even more of a contrivance than we'd thought, but I regretted my bonded's pain.

"Of course, Felipe also used Quinn to help gauge the weaknesses of Louisiana, even as the weretiger seemed to be in the state for work," Sandy reported. "Appius was pleased to learn that Sookie—though tied to Eric by blood at the time—would," she paused and continued as if reluctant, "form an attachment with Quinn."

"Have you more to report?" Russell asked when Sandy paused.

The vampiress nodded. "Appius stayed in Las Vegas only a few months before Alexei got into trouble there. Felipe covered it up, of course. But it was thought that somewhere with fewer temptations would be best for the young one."

"A stake would have been best," Thalia muttered.


Sandy continued. "Felipe was the one who suggested that Appius go to Oklahoma. At one point or
another, Freyda had mentioned her interest in Eric. And Felipe and Appius thought it would be amusing if Eric was basically sold to Freyda. Both vampires knew that it would only be a matter of time before Alexei got himself into some kind of trouble or another. And that would offer Appius the perfect opportunity to broker a deal with Freyda that did not indicate his true motive."

"His motive to hurt you," Sookie said to me, her eyes now shining with tears.

I squeezed her hand and accepted her love through our bond with gratefulness.

"Of course," Sandy continued, "the motives of neither Appius nor Felipe were to be known. Appius wanted to punish Eric for his contentment. Felipe wanted to further weaken Louisiana after Katrina. And then Rhodes happened. Felipe saw his opportunity to take Louisiana, and he did just that, after promising Appius that Eric would be left alive. Felipe was happy to leave Eric in place, for he knew that it would be only a matter of time before Eric was dealt to Oklahoma anyway. And—in the meantime—Eric was a big money-maker. Felipe wanted to seize Sookie right after the takeover, but Victor sensed that Sookie had bonded with Eric—something that threw a wrench into Appius and Felipe's plans. After Victor informed Felipe about the pledging, Felipe told Appius, who was incensed that Eric had not gotten his permission to pledge. Felipe, too, was frustrated, for Eric was working vigilantly and craftily to protect Sookie's independence."

Sookie leaned a little closer to my body, and I could feel her love ricocheting through our bond. I could also feel a little regret from her. I knew that she wished she'd doubted me less. I forcefully pushed love and acceptance her way.

I wanted her to know that I had no regrets and that she shouldn't either. We had lessons to draw on, but we'd never fucked up to the point where we couldn't salvage our relationship.

Thank the gods!

"As soon as the ink was dry on the contract with Oklahoma," Sandy went on, "Appius decided to come to Area 5 and fuck things up for Eric in a more direct manner. He spoke with Felipe about his progress almost nightly. Appius was about to drop the bomb of the marriage contract when he and Alexei were killed. Right after that, Felipe contacted Freyda and instructed her to claim Eric as her consort. Meanwhile, Felipe let Victor know that he should make life as uncomfortable as possible in Area 5 for Eric. Felipe became more and more impatient for Miss Stackhouse to be in Las Vegas as his. I have no doubt that Felipe was ready to steal her tonight—no matter what he had to do to get her."

"Even if all you say is true," Michelina frowned, "that does not prove that Felipe intended to kill his sheriff tonight. And, though a maker treating one as old as Northman in such a way is unprecedented—disturbing even—that doesn't negate the fact that Appius had the right to negotiate that contract with the Oklahoma queen."

"But Miss Sechrest's testimony does prove that Felipe has not been on the side of his sheriff," Agnes argued. She shook her head. "I think upon those whom I have tasked with fulfilling the duty of sheriff for me. I rely on their loyalty. If they fail me, they are punished—but for just cause! There is no proof that Eric ever failed his king! Indeed, it was rumored that the profits from Area 5 ensured that Louisiana was kept solvent. And we all have heard the gossip about Victor's interference. To learn that Felipe sanctioned—even encouraged that interference—is an outrage!"

"Northman's effectiveness is not on trial here, nor is Felipe's mismanagement of resources," Michelina snarled. "Northman's treason is inarguable!"

"Can there be treason against a monarch who has already broken the covenant of fealty?" Agnes
challenged.

When Michelina seemed ready to argue, the California queen continued forcefully. "You are younger than me by 500 years, Micky! You know how much I admire you, but you and those of your generation seem to believe that the one in power is somehow less obliged to fulfill the covenant of fealty than the one in the more subservient role. But both leader and follower should be—must be—held to the same promise. Based on what I have heard tonight, it seems clear that Felipe was ultimately an illegitimate king to Northman long before the Viking executed him."

The California queen glared at me. "You did make the death swift—yes? If you tortured Felipe, that would change my opinion on this matter."

"His death was immediate," I averred.

"You could prove that?" Agnes asked.

"Yes," I confirmed.

"And you killed to protect yourself and ensure the safety of your bonded? Not for personal gain?" Agnes asked.

"Yes," I answered one more time. "Felipe died because he threatened my bonded."

"Bonded!" Michelina scorned. "Whatever! Eric Northman belongs to Freyda of Oklahoma—if he lives through the night. We all know this!"

"Eric is mine!" Sookie snarled from next to me. "I claimed him and bonded with him before Appius finalized his contract with Freyda! Eric Northman is my bonded and pledged mate! He. Is. Mine! And I am prepared to fight for him!"

"Here's a threat for you, New York Queen. Fuck with Sookie and her bonded, and you will have the Dae at your gates," Nargal warned.

"And all others who hold faith with these two," Octavia added.

"You threaten us! Was that your strategy all along, Northman? To coerce us into making you king?" Michelina challenged me.

I shook my head. "No. If this Council decides that I am to die for Felipe's death, I will accept that, and there will be no retaliation. However, my bonded will not willingly give me up. Should I live through this night by your mercy, I will be hers and no other's. For that, we will all fight with all that we are."
"Your love for her is that strong," Agnes said with some awe in her tone.

"Yes," I responded.

"Then you are lucky," the California queen smiled.

"Whether Northman loves or not is not the question," Michelina said, sounding a little tired. "The question is whether Felipe's crimes outweigh his. Tell me, Viking," she challenged. "What kind of king would you be?"

I was somewhat surprised by her question, but answered quickly and honestly. "I want to take Louisiana into the next generation with honor—in remembrance of Queen Sophie-Anne and in remembrance of my own human father, who once taught me that to rule was the most fearsome, humbling, and grand responsibility one could have. I will honor the Vampire Council as I have attempted to honor all the monarchs I have served."

"And what of Freyda's claim to you?" Michelina asked. "You could align with Oklahoma as an equal! Indeed, the wisest choice you could make—if you live through the night—is to accept Freyda as your wife and queen!"

She sat back in her chair. "Indeed, if you agreed to that stipulation, I'd be willing to vote that you are not guilty of de Castro's death right now," she added with a smirk.
"This governing body does not make its decisions based upon coercion," Russell growled at Queen Michelina's words.

The Queen of New York scoffed and crossed her arms over her chest. "This Council—just like the one in Europe upon which it was modeled—has done whatever is required in order to accomplish its goals for as long as I have been a vampire! You being so old should know this better than anyone."

"Times have changed," Russell returned. "I have changed with them. I suggest you do the same Michelina!"

"Come now, Mississippi, what's a little blackmail among friends?" she smirked.

"Please, Micky, stop this foolishness," Agnes sighed.

"Yes, stop!" Stan agreed.

"Did you not hear that a Fae princess has a prior claim upon Eric Northman?" Desmond reinserted himself, aiming his comment at the Queen of New York.

"But a maker's claim is paramount. And—if Northman were made king—he could do worse in a marriage than Freyda, who is undeniably beautiful," Michelina reasoned. "So—you see—I am trying to do him a favor."

Sookie stood up next to me, and—in that moment—she seemed to glow.

"I'll only say this one time! Eric was mine before his maker strove to sell him like a common whore! Appius hated his own child's happiness! Can you imagine such a thing!" she demanded of the New York queen.

"My maker is dead because of Northman's child!" Michelina spit out—though I didn't think she'd intended to do so.

"Micky, please. Mateo had gone rogue," Agnes said compassionately. "If you hold a grudge against Northman and this child, then you must also hold one against me. I was among the group who hired the Slaughterer," she added softly.

Michelina gasped and then glared as if wishing to harm the California queen.

"Micky," Agnes entreated, "search your heart and your mind. Mateo was my friend; he is why you and I became friends. But you know as well as I do that—after your vampire brother met the sun—Mateo lost the aspects that had made him a great vampire. You know that he had to go. However—even during his deepest periods of insanity—can you imagine that he would have ever knowingly harmed you? Of course, he wouldn't have!" Agnes answered her own question.

Michelina looked away from the camera.

"Karin did her job, Michelina," Russell spoke up, his voice compassionate. As the oldest vampire
on the Council, he would know.

"And it was the Ancient Pythoness herself who rang the death knell for Mateo," the King of Mississippi continued. "But she did so reluctantly. And—those of us who supported her decision—did so with heavy hearts."

Michelina shook her head and wiped away a red tear before it fell. "Again, we have moved too far from the matter at hand!"

"No. We have not," Russell said powerfully. "We are talking about legitimacy of rule. Appius kept a grip on Eric for over a thousand years, even though vampire precedent frowns upon a maker controlling a child for more than 300 years. Appius also worked to imprison his child further! And Felipe was no better a sovereign! A good ruler should be a father or a mother of sorts to his or her subjects. But Felipe lost his way. Felipe broke covenant with Eric. And he acted to take Eric's blood-bonded from him. I, for one, am ready to vote on this matter!"

Michelina frowned. "Was it not Felipe's right to demand his asset's service? Northman should have been forthcoming with the telepath."

"I am not the telepath!" Sookie insisted, still on her feet next to me and still glowing a little. Like the fairy she was!

I smiled a little. She had—indeed—embraced her nature. And—in so doing—I could only imagine what strength she might find.

"I am Sookie Stackhouse, and—soon enough—I'll be Sookie Northman. I will not allow myself to be controlled or owned or stolen or bartered for! As a Supernatural, I am afforded the right to choose when and to whom I will offer fealty!"

"Yet you pledged against your will," Michelina challenged. "I have heard the rumors."

"Rumors can be misleading," Sookie responded. "Here are the facts! Number one: I have chosen to be Eric's mate. Number two: I have claimed him, and he has claimed me. Number three: Appius had no right to steal my bonded or ruin his happiness. Number 4: Felipe had no right to try to harm a loyal sheriff!"

Sookie took a breath. "Appius would have slain Eric's spirit. Felipe would have slain my bonded in order to take me. And I'm fucking glad they are both dead!" Sookie yelled out, glowing even more than before.

She was fucking magnificent! And she was saying all that I wished I could say, but could not—given the nature of the proceedings.

"Dearest," Desmond cautioned his goddaughter in a whisper, "perhaps being calm would be better."

"No!" Sookie yelled out with a vigorous shake of her head. "No! The issue is simple! Felipe was a horrible king! He took advantage of his people and undermined at least one loyal sheriff! That much is irrefutable. From what I can tell, you all knew Felipe was—at the very least—mismanaging his territories," she accused the Council. "Yet you all did nothing!"

"We had no right to step in," Stan said.

"Maybe y'all need to amend your policies so that you can keep kings and queens from doin' things
that'll get you all into trouble! Many of the vampires I've met have a lot of honor. I get that y'all can be cruel and ambitious too. But—from what I can tell—most of the time your cruelty is against enemies, and your ambition doesn't crush those who ought to be respected!"

Sookie sat down forcefully into her chair, having never let go of my hand. "I just hope I'm not wrong about y'all," she muttered.

"The world is changing, as Sookie said," Nargal offered. "Eric would be a king able to negotiate that change."

"He strives to work with the two-natured, and he has fair-dealings with humans too," Calvin said.

"And respect for the witches of the world," Octavia echoed.

"And the Fae," a surprising voice said from behind me. I looked back to see that Niall had "popped" in with is son, Dermot. Sookie looked over her shoulder, and I could tell that—in that moment—much was being healed within her relationship with her great-grandfather.

Meanwhile, Nan looked about ready to shit herself as she noted the fairies' presence. She backed away from them a little.

"And the Norseman has ever been a noble leader of vampires," Thalia averred. "And I am old enough to know when an illegitimate leader is best dead!" she muttered for good measure.

"I know that Eric is ready to die if your Council finds him guilty, but that would be a grave error on your part," Niall said firmly—his tone very near to threatening. "Felipe de Castro needed to go. He endangered my great-granddaughter at least once because he did not reign in his minion, Victor Madden! And Madden's petty actions against Sookie's bonded forced her to endure an indescribable level of torture at the hands of my enemies. Felipe shirked his duty to my great-granddaughter even after she had saved his life and he had committed his kingdom to her safety! If anything, you should be celebrating the one who removed him from this plane. And—just to be clear—I am willing to fight for the lives of these two," the fairy added, surprising the hell out of me. "I am willing to die for their right to rule in Louisiana."

"Their?!" Michelina asked with exasperation.

"But of course," Niall smirked. "Sookie is of my line. If she is bonded and pledged to a vampire king, then what else would she be other than a queen?"

Agnes chuckled a little. "Northman, I do not know whether to be envious of your cornucopia of friends or frightened of you because of them. Regardless, I agree with Russell that a vote is called for, but—I want it known for the record that the implicit and explicit threats from your friends have not swayed my decision."

"Understood," I acknowledged.

The California queen smiled at Sookie and me, her gaze warm even through the monitor. "I support your kingship, Eric Northman. I believe that Felipe de Castro broke his covenant as king long before you broke faith with him as subject in order to protect yourself and your bonded. Moreover, I believe that he went against the laws vampires have established since mainstreaming and that—even if she were fully human—Sookie Stackhouse ought not have been thought of as chattel by the king. Eric, I thank you for ridding this nation of someone whose ambition would have ill-affected us all. Further, I recognize the claim of your fairy mate upon you. And, on a personal note, may I say that I am glad that her claim has undermined the ill-begotten plans of your
maker, who—quite frankly—would have done the world a favor by meeting the sun the day after he made you!"

Clearly done speaking, the Queen of California sat back in her chair.

"I echo the sentiments of the California queen," Russell stated. "No matter his promising beginning, Felipe was a rat by the end. And vermin must be exterminated. Perhaps, Miss Stackhouse is correct that this Council needs to evolve to create greater checks and balances to prevent monarchs from preying upon those like Queen Sophie-Anne when they are in a vulnerable position due to no fault of their own. In my friend Sophie-Anne's memory and upon his own merit, I support Eric Northman's claim to the Louisiana throne. And—as king—he can strike aside that farce of a contract his maker planned for him. Eric," the Mississippi king said, addressing me directly, a slight smirk on his face, "like Agnes, I am glad that Appius has no more claim on your 'love life'—as the humans call it—for the fairy princess by your side clearly seems to own that aspect of you."

"She does," I said, nodding in agreement.

"In that case, I'll just call you a lucky bastard and wish you well," Russell added with a wink toward Sookie.

The vote was two for my continued life and kingship, but there were still two to come, and I didn't hold out any hope of receiving Michelina's support.

But it seemed that Niall's visit and direct support would not be the only surprise I received that night.

The Queen of New York spoke next, though her words seemed to pain her. "I will not block you from taking the throne, Eric Northman, nor will I call for your head. However, I think that the action you took this night could set an unwise precedent for future sheriffs. Indeed, if an underling of yours decides to take your life because of that precedent, I won't be overly sorry," she growled. "But the testimony of Miss Sechrest has made me aware of Felipe's shortcomings, and—as California said—there is a case to be made for a monarch being just as obliged to his or her followers as an underling is to his or her ruler. As to Miss Stackhouse's claim upon you as opposed to Queen Freyda's, I abstain from weighing in on that matter any further. I remain steadfast in my belief that a maker should have ultimate authority over a child, but," she paused, "you are well beyond the age when Appius ought to have freed you. And there was no reason why he should have tried to enslave you further. I will hate your child until my final death," she said matter-of-factly. "I won't be able to help myself. However, my own maker—before he declined—taught me that only the worst of vampires reward their loyal children with pain. I will not tarnish his memory by causing you more suffering just because of the way I feel on a personal level."

Shocked by Michelina's words, I looked at Sookie, who was also quite stunned for a moment. And—then—elation filtered into the bond from both of us; my beloved's smile was the most beautiful expression I'd ever seen.

Three votes meant that I would not be sentenced to death!

"What a fucking waste of my fucking time. I'm out of here," Nan huffed, her heels clicking against the dance floor as she moved toward the door, her minions following along like puppies. "And may I say again—what a colossally fucking waste of my time! Not a good beginning, Northman! I'll expect your pretty mug on a couple of talk shows to make this up to me! And your bonded too! You can be the poster boy and girl of inter-species love!" she added sarcastically before slamming the door behind her.
Stan smiled and pushed up the glasses that he didn't need. "It's always a relief when she leaves, but she's excellent at her work." He chuckled. "Anyway, it seems as though my vote isn't needed. But I will make the decision to ratify your kingship unanimous, Viking. You have the qualifications to be a king—and you certainly have the age, given that you are older than I am! And—as to your fairy's claim upon you—I agree with Russell. Her claim predates that of Freyda of Oklahoma, and now that your bonded has made her heritage known, it would be foolhardy for any to challenge that claim," he commented, seeming to look first at the demons of our group and then at the fairies.

"You asked for Louisiana only, Viking," Russell said. "Do you have opinions about Nevada and Arkansas?"

"Sandy Sechrest was in Vegas long before Felipe, and all know her to be a good businesswoman. I believe that she should be given Nevada. As for Arkansas—there are few vampires left there," I commented. "My resources will be spread thin enough getting Louisiana back on her feet. I would suggest that another neighboring monarch be offered Arkansas."

"Oklahoma could have it—as a consolation?" Agnes offered. "Wait—never mind. Freyda has a difficult enough time managing what she already has!"

"Indiana and I could hold the territory in a kind of guardianship until a worthy candidate for monarch is found," Russell offered. "As Eric said, there are very few vampires in the state right now—only eleven permanent residents when Felipe's people are not taken into account."

"Any opposed to these plans?" Michelina asked.

When no one on the Council said anything, the New York queen sighed. "Then I propose that Sandy Sechrest be granted the title of Queen of Nevada. Do you accept?" she asked, looking at Sandy.

"I do," the vampiress affirmed.

"Fine. Then, by the power vested in me as the Official Chairperson of this Council," Michelina said in a clipped tone, "I believe that congratulations are in order, Queen Sechrest and King Northman. I am sure that your attorneys will file the required paperwork in a timely matter?"

"Of course. And there will also be paperwork petitioning that Sookie be declared Queen of Louisiana as well," Desmond said.

Agnes chuckled. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Desmond. After all, a non-vampire has never been a queen."

"Perhaps, as long as she did not have succession rights?" Russell suggested with a smirk.

"Just file the goddamned paperwork!" Michelina snarled right before her part of the screen when black.

"Do not hold this night against her. She would not have acted that way had Karin not been the one to do what was needed regarding her maker. Micky really is of a good sort," Agnes said with a little nod. She seemed to be looking right at Sookie. "Most of us are—you know."

"Most that I know—yes," Sookie agreed.

The California Queen's portion of the screen went blank after she gave another smile to Eric and Sookie.
"I'm glad I didn't have to oppose you," Stan said with a lopsided grin.

"God, you're an asshole!" Russell commented as the ancient's screen went black.

Stan winked before disconnecting his communication link.

"And that's a cut," Molly said, disconnecting our own link.

For a moment, no one else in the room made a noise.

"That went a lot better than I thought it would!" Desmond finally laughed, turning to face Sookie and me with a lethal-looking grin on his face.

"So Eric's—uh? And he's—um?" Sookie stammered.

"Eric is king. And your claim to him has been verified," Desmond confirmed.

"So Freyda's?" Sookie asked.

"A nonissue," I smiled at my bonded as I turned to kiss her forehead and sent all of the affection I felt for her into our bond.

She smiled at me. "We really won?"

I nodded. "Yes. And now we get to rule."


I chuckled. "We'll make it look easy!"
A Cup of Tea

Chapter 56: A Cup of Tea

SOOKIE POV

I sat at my kitchen table, contemplating the events of the night, even as I tried to calm my frazzled nerves.

Somehow, I'd managed to hold it together during Eric's trial and its aftermath, but I figured I was allowed to have a little "freak-out time" now that things had settled down and I found myself alone for the first time that night.

"Eric is king," I said to myself as I sipped my hot tea with milk. Yes—I was counting on Gran's tried and true elixir to see me through the next few hours.

I closed my eyes and concentrated on everything that had gone right that night. Indeed, most everything had gone well! Certainly, Queen Michelina had been a bitch, but even she did the right thing in the end. And part of me felt guilty that Felipe's and Freyda's loyal vampires had been killed, but they'd chosen their sides. Moreover, I couldn't even begin to muster up any regret for the deaths of the Nevada king and his sleazy minion.

As Pam had intoned when she'd strolled into Fangtasia after seeing to Freyda's exit, "Count de Chocula" deserved to die for his fashion sense alone!

I chuckled to myself, finding it easier to concentrate on the positives of the situation after recalling my "vampir-ific" (Pam's word—not mine) friend's morbid humor.

I took another long sip of my tea. Eric had easily beaten de Castro. None of our allies had been killed or even severely injured—much to the chagrin of Dr. Ludwig's bank account. My bonded hadn't necessarily been found "innocent," but he had been found justified in his actions. And he'd been made king! And a great variety of Supernaturals—including my great-grandfather—had given my mate and me their allegiance or support. I couldn't help but to believe that the coming together of so many seemingly disparate (thank you, word-of-the-day calendar) groups was for the betterment of a lot more creatures than just Eric and me.

Desmond had already drawn up a draft of the paperwork the Council would need to certify Eric as the King of Louisiana. My godfather and Eric had worked on tweaking the document until it was perfect, according to my bonded (for myself, I had no idea what all the "official vampire legal jargon" meant). After Eric had signed the contract, Diantha sped away with it; apparently, she would hand-deliver it to Stan (the closest Council Member) the next night. Clearly, email didn't work for such official matters.

Before returning to the Dae realm to be with his wife and children, Nargal had promised to come to a "family" dinner that I was planning to have—just as soon as Eric and I figured out what our permanent address would be.

Calvin had taken a call from the leader of one of the "refugee" groups that was to relocate in Hotshot; then he'd gone home so that he could spend some quality time with his pregnant and apparently very horny (according to his thoughts) wife, sleep a bit, and be ready for guard duty at dawn.

To put a damper on things, Alcide had shown up about fifteen minutes after Eric was declared
king, only to be taken outside and taken to task by Eric for fucking Sandra Pelt.

And for acting more-less like a douchebag lately.

I'd decided to stay out of their confrontation—for once.

For good.

I had the distinct impression—from listening to Alcide's thoughts by the end of his "visit" with Eric—that he had all but decided to relocate now that my mate was King of Louisiana. Given everything that had occurred throughout the past weeks, I couldn't say that I was surprised that Alcide would "tuck his tail" and run! Still, I was glad when Alcide realized that leaving Fangtasia immediately and leaving me alone indefinitely would be best for him.

After all, I didn't want him dead.

However, I couldn't muster up even a little bit of sadness that Alcide Herveaux would be exiting my life forever. And for good.

Apparently, Freyda had been given the news of the Council's decision by Pam and Karin, who—I'm sure—strongly suggested that the Oklahoma queen not try to do anything to challenge either Eric's kingship or the dissolution of the marriage contract that Appius had constructed with her. Freyda had been, according to Pam, "docile" as Karin put her onto a plane to Oklahoma (with one of Nargal's strongest warriors acting as her "security") and told her not to visit Louisiana again. I figured that Freyda would either listen and take heed, or she would find herself at the end of a sharpened stake.

And—if she came after me or mine—I'd be the one holding it!

As glad as I'd been to see Pam—and to get a dosage of her much-missed snark—I'd been even more anxious to meet Karin. Eric's older vampire child had seemed just as curious about me as I was about her. But I also intuited that it might take us a while to become close. Indeed, it'd been such a long time since she'd spent an extended period of time with Eric that I figured their reconnection as maker/child needed to take priority over the friendship I eventually hoped to have with her.

Plus—given the fact that I had now embraced the idea of being turned by my mate—I knew that Karin and I would have plenty of time to get to know one another (though I hoped she'd keep her "slaughter-ific" stories to herself—Pam's word, not mine).

Not surprisingly, Eric made Pam his replacement for Sheriff of Area 5. Rasul agreed to be Sheriff of Area 1 (Victor's old stomping ground). Eric and I had already decided that we'd share time between those two areas, so we'd have residences in both. For Area 2, Eric promoted Palomino. Areas 3 and 4 (neither of them highly populated) had been consolidated under Felipe's rule, and Eric selected Maxwell Lee to see to those regions.

Karin, as nomadic as her life had been, had agreed to stay on in Louisiana (for at least a decade) as Eric's Second, much to the relief of Thalia, who'd not wanted to be saddled with the job. Instead, Eric had asked the ancient warrior to be his head of security, a duty that Thalia was very well-suited for.

Proving that he would be just as good of a "grandsire" as he'd been a maker, Eric had—as soon as he'd appointed her—sent Pam back to Texas to be with Miriam upon her rising; while she was away, Karin would keep an eye on things in Area 5, as Eric focused on his new duties as monarch.

Indeed, within an hour of his being named king, Eric had all of his sheriffs named and deployed. In
addition, Eric had started about five different projects designed to get Louisiana out of the hole that Hurricane Katrina and Felipe de Castro had dug her into.

I'd been impressed—completely awestruck—by my husband's decisiveness and leadership abilities. But I shouldn't have been.

After all, it was clear that Eric had been born to be a king.

And it seemed as if his tenure as a fair leader in Area 5 had made him many friends. In fact, many vampires who had left when Felipe took over had been calling, emailing, or texting to ask for permission to return to Louisiana.

Apparently, gossip moved faster through the Supernatural world than it did at one of Maxine Fortenberry's parties!

Plus—according to Thalia—there would be even more "refugees" when the sun next set in Europe! She explained that quite a few older European vampires would be thrilled that Eric had finally been able to become a king (thanks to Appius's demise). Some regions of Europe weren't as vampire friendly as the United States, and Thalia shared that many vampires would now be drawn to Louisiana because the state could boast a leader they trusted, the opportunity for a quiet life when they desired, and the allure of New Orleans when they missed the "Old World." I got the impression from Thalia that many of the vampires coming would be great assets to Eric.

And that was definitely fine by me!

Not being able to read vampire minds, I figured it would be best to have faith in Eric, Thalia, Karin, and Pam when it came to determining which vampires would be allowed to settle in the state.

As for those of the Fae-kind—Niall, Dermot, and I had said our goodbyes at Fangtasia after I'd thanked my great-grandfather for speaking up for Eric and me. Somehow, Nargal had communicated to Niall what was happening during the proceedings of Eric's "trial," and my great-grandfather had "popped in"—and been extremely helpful (for a change).

I was also glad that Niall had convinced Dermot to return to the Fae realm with him.

I was even gladder that my great-grandfather had promised to call first if he ever decided to return to the human realm again.

I still didn't completely trust Niall, but I was willing to give him a chance. However, the truth was that I didn't want Niall in my life anymore if he would only be there when it suited him. As for Dermot, I got the impression that he was crestfallen once he realized that I had chosen Eric—body and soul. But—other than a few sad looks from him—things didn't get too awkward.

Except, of course, for the fact that those looks had come from someone who looked like my brother!

Honestly, I hoped that Dermot would do well in the Fae world.

With the operative phrase being "in the Fae world!"

Indeed—despite the fact that I valued family—I figured it would probably be better if all of my remaining fairy relatives stayed out of the human world for a long time to come.

As for Claude, nothing much was said about him during my short visit with Niall and Dermot, but
I got the strong impression that he wouldn’t be an issue any longer.

The kind of impression that indicated that Claude was no more.

I tried to muster up some grief for that; after all, the fairy had been living in my home until the day before! But I found no regret for Claude. Since Claude's continued existence likely would have led to danger for me and my bonded, I was glad that he was in the Summerlands. Indeed, I hoped he'd find happiness there—well away from me and Eric.

Warren and Mustapha had gone home soon after the trial, though they would be on guard duty at the farmhouse at first light. I had a feeling that Mustapha—now that he’d accepted the job as Eric's Chief of Daytime Security—would want to oversee the guarding of his king personally for a long while to come. Warren had agreed to become Eric's "day-man"—with the understanding that a "day-man" was actually much more than an "errand-boy." I knew that—together—Mustapha and Warren would make an excellent team for Eric and me.

Even as many of the other vampires left to go fulfill their new duties to Eric's kingdom, Thalia stayed close to me and Eric. She spoke when she had something to say and stayed alert at all times. I knew that she was not just Eric's chief of nighttime security, but also our main vampire guard.

I felt like my bonded and I were in good hands—both day and night.

Octavia and most of her coven members had left to go to the airport even before Alcide showed up —after agreeing to a meeting date with Eric the next week.

As for Amelia and Bob? They'd determined to come home with me and Eric—and Thalia, of course. There were a lot of decisions that would need to be made in the upcoming days, and Amelia suggested that I'd need an assistant.

I'd asked her!

And—thankfully—she'd accepted.

Bob wasn't left out either. He would be Warren's assistant. Moreover, my witchy friends were already tasked with warding the hell out of many Louisiana holdings!

In fact—given the strength of Amelia and Bob's wards—Eric and I had decided that it would be best to return to the old farmhouse for one last day. After all, our friends' magic had already proven itself there.

Other arrangements for housing would be made and other buildings would be warded beginning the next day.

Another argument for returning to Bon Temps was that I felt that Bill needed to be dealt with once and for all. And I wanted to be the one to do it.

Plus, I had packing to do—and a brother to say "goodbye" to, though I wasn't really saying goodbye.

It was Bon Temps that I was ready to move on from—not Jason. And Eric had already suggested that Jason be given a high-level job related to the reconstruction efforts in New Orleans—if that was what my brother wanted. If there was one thing I knew about Jason, it was that he was good at coordinating an efficient crew, and I admired my brother greatly for that. I had confidence that he'd take Eric up on the offer. But, whether he did or not, I'd be living in Shreveport half the time, so my relationship with my brother wouldn't languish.
When we'd returned to the farmhouse, Bubba had been waiting on the porch with a wide smile on his face. He'd figured that everything must have "worked out like gravy 'cause we'd come back safe and sound."

Gravy—indeed.

Bubba had frowned when he'd reported that "Mister Bill" was "takin' things right poorly." But, as I finished my tea, I determined not to let Bill's attitude put a damper onto the overall events of the night.

Though it was surreal, Eric and I had a road in front of us toward our happy ending. I was determined not to swerve off of that road—especially not for a speedbump like Bill.

Sadly—very, very sadly (since it limited our "quality time" together)—Eric still needed to field a lot of calls before dawn and had set up a makeshift "office" in the living room. Meanwhile, Thalia and Bubba had overseen making the guestroom light-tight and were currently making my own bedroom light-tight so that Eric could stay with me the next day.

Selfishly, I refused to go to sleep without him by my side again!

Maybe that was the possessive fairy in me.

Or just the wiser woman.

My tea drunk, I found that I was still having to concentrate on not being overwhelmed.

Not freaking out!

Once again, I thought about how Eric was a king! And my Supernatural lineage—according to Desmond—would allow my bonded to make me his queen "officially" after he was coronated.

It was a lot to take in!

"From barmaid to queen," I muttered to myself.

After rinsing out my cup, I made my way to the living room.

"Call me later if need be," Eric said into his phone receiver as soon as he saw me.

"I need to talk to Bill," I sighed.

"You're nervous," he observed as he took me into his arms.

I sighed with resignation. My bonded was right. In some ways, what I was about to do seemed more difficult than Eric's trial, though the stakes weren't nearly so high.

"I will go with you," Eric said. "And I promise to behave too," he added.

I chuckled. I knew that Eric would love to witness me "cutting loose" the man I'd once thought that I loved!

The first man who'd ever seemed to really want me. My first "love."

But the first man to betray me and to break my heart too.

I sighed. "Thanks, but I need to do this myself."
"Thalia assured me that Bill is secure in the cubby. Still—please—don't remove his chains while it is nighttime."

"I won't," I promised. "I've asked Bubba to do it right before he goes down for the day. I think Bill will still be too weak to do anything to Bubba then—right?"

Eric nodded. "Yes. And Thalia and I will be close if need be. We can both stay awake longer than Bill can."

I reluctantly removed myself from my mate's arms.

"Just call through the bond if you need me," he said, as he leaned down to kiss my forehead.

"Will do," I swore.

In truth, I didn't think that Eric would have agreed to leave me be alone with Bill if he were not secured in the cubby and under the leather-coated silver chains.

"I know this will be difficult for you," he'd whispered. "But it is for the best."

He was right.

Difficult, but necessary.

"I know," I agreed with him before leaving to do the chore I ought to have done a long time before.
Chapter 57: A Can of Whoopass

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove.

O no! it is an ever-fixed mark

That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is the star to every wand'ring bark,

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle's compass come;

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If this be error and upon me prov'd,

I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

—William Shakespeare, Sonnet 116

BILL POV

"Hi Bill," Sookie said as she lifted the trapdoor to the cubby and looked down upon me.

Of course, I'd known that she was home. Whatever had been covering her scent before had been lifted. She now smelled like she usually did.

Beautiful like the sun.

But also reeking of Eric!

"Did Eric force a new bond with you?" I asked as she sat cross-legged on the floorboards next to the cubby entrance. Still, from where I'd been put, I could see her face clearly.

She shook her head. "We didn't need a new bond. I love Eric. I once thought about breaking our bond; I'll admit that. But, in the end, I accepted the bond for what it is."

"And what is that?" I asked through clenched teeth.

"The bond is something the Eric and I can use to express our love—and to help each other," she said.
I shook my head. "Eric is using the bond to control you. You must see that!"

Sookie sighed and looked at me with a mixture of pity and derision. "That's what you have always wanted me to think. You wanted me to see the bad in Eric, but I'm done allowing you to influence my thoughts about him—or anyone else."

"But, Sookie, I love you!" I returned fervently.

"No, Bill. I don't think you do. After all, 'love is not love which alters where it alteration finds,'" she whispered.

"Shakespeare?" I gasped. "Really Sookie? What do we have to do with Renaissance poetry?"

"A few months ago, Eric recited that poem to me—Sonnet 116. I didn't realize it then, but Eric and I are a 'marriage of true minds' and you are an 'impediment,'" she said crossly—and so unlike herself.

"Sookie, I don't know what you are talking about!" I said.

"You want to alter me, Bill," she said quietly. "You always have. You want—I think—someone like your human wife was, but you have always failed to recognize that I was not born in the 1830s."

"Sookie?" I asked.

"You liked my manners—and, let's not forget, the way I taste—but I don't think you really like me, Bill," she clarified. "I don't think you even know me."

"You don't know what you are talking about, darling," I returned. "Eric has poisoned you against me."

"What do you like about me then?" she asked curiously.

"You are mine!" I returned forcefully.

"Why do you want me?" she followed up.

"You are innocent. You are pure," I replied.

She snorted in an unladylike fashion. "I'm neither of those things. And—what is innocence anyway?" She shrugged. "Yeah—you broke my hymen and took my virginity, but there was nothing innocent in that act. You were still lying to me about who you were and what you were doing in Bon Temps. I was naïve then, Bill. I'm not naïve now."

"Like I said," sticking out my jaw stubbornly, "Eric has poisoned you against me, but he will soon be gone. And you and I will work on repairing what he has broken between us."

"Why would Eric be gone?" she asked.

"Felipe will not allow . . . ," I began.

"Felipe is dead—finally dead," she returned flatly.

"What?" I asked dumbfoundedly. "Don't tell me that Eric . . . . Sookie, we must get out of here! The Council will . . . ."
Once again, she interrupted me. "The Vampire Council has appointed Eric to be the King of Louisiana."

"What?" I demanded.

"Felipe wanted Eric dead—or sold off to Oklahoma like some kind of sex slave. And it almost happened that way," Sookie said in an almost haunted tone. "If I had broken our bond like I'd thought about doin', Eric would have lost hope—I think," she added. "He would have taken that as a sign that I didn't want him, and he would have allowed himself to become chattel—Freyda's property—for the next hundred years." She shook her head as if shaking herself out of the possibility of a future she could not have borne.

She was—indeed—terribly confused. But I knew that—with time and patience (and just a bit of my blood to nudge her along)—I could help her to find her way out of the traps Eric had clearly ensnared her in.

"Sookie, Oklahoma is a beautiful queen. Eric is lying to you if he has told you that he does not want her," I tried.

She practically growled at me. "It is words like those that prove that I will never be able to trust you, Bill. And words like those which tell me that I don't want you in my life anymore."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Sookie! Please! I want only what is best for you. You must see that Eric has manufactured this situation to get his mitts on not only Louisiana but also Arkansas and Nevada!"

Sookie frowned. "I don't know what evidence you've ever had to doubt Eric's honor," she said wearily. "Even when you and I were a couple, he behaved better than he would have—if he'd been a lesser man. He didn't pull rank or try to steal me."

"But Longshadow and Dallas . . . ," I began.

She shook her head. "Eric hired me and paid me for both of those jobs. And—since I'd said I was yours—he paid you too. Yes—Eric flirted with me back then. But he did nothing to force me to trust him or to be with him."

"In Dallas, he manipulated you to take his blood," I insisted.

"No. He gave me a choice. He asked me to help him remove the silver from his body. He even suggested—when I looked squeamish at the thought of sucking the silver out—that I get a knife from the kitchen to do the job. If you had told me about all of the potential effects of vampire blood—you, not him, Bill since I was supposedly yours at the time—then I might have gone for the knife. As it was, I took his blood, but—despite my previous fears—I know that Eric never used his blood against me."

"You really are naïve," I said with a shake of my head. "And foolish. You need me, Sookie! Don't you see? You need me to help you navigate the dangerous world you have found yourself in."

"And you are patronizing," she returned bitterly. "And a hypocrite, considering that I've found myself in this world only because you led me into it!"

"I could take you away from it too!" I implored.

"I don't want to go anywhere with you—or anywhere away from the Supe world," she said with a little smile on her face as she looked away from me. When she looked back, the smile was gone.
"In the past, I worried so much about what Eric might be doing with his blood because I instinctively knew that you'd been trying—probably succeeding to a certain extent—to manipulate me with your blood since the night the Rattrays beat me. Tell me, Bill. Did you glamour them to attack you—and then to beat me up a couple of nights later?"

I gasped. "Sookie—of course—uh—not! Eric! Eric's putting lies into your head!"

"Your stuttered response is the only answer I needed," Sookie sighed with resignation. "I'm done, Bill. I'm done overlooking the bad in you in order to try to cling to what I once thought of as good."

"Sookie, Eric is to blame for everything! He has turned you against me! Just look at the situation! He has taken over three states and will use you until he finds it more profitable to sell you to the highest bidder!" I yelled out. "And—even if he doesn't barter you away—do you really think that he will be faithful to you?" I challenged. "No! He's probably already fucking Freyda and many others, even as he lies about being faithful to you!"

SOOKIE POV

I sighed as I looked at the vampire below me.

I could feel Eric's concern through the bond, and I was certain that he was close enough to be hearing all that was occurring between Bill and me. I could have asked for some privacy, but—truthfully—I was glad that my Viking was near. And I was even more grateful for the comfort and support being spread through our bond—both ways. For, indeed, even as Eric was doing his best to unobtrusively get me through the "Bill thing," I was sending my support about the "king thing."

Who knew that a vampire of Eric's age could be nervous about a new job?!

But the fact that he was made me love him all the more.

I sighed as I frowned at Bill. "Just so you know, Sandy Sechrest has been made the queen of Nevada. It is hoped by the Narayana Clan that—with the Nevada kingdom no longer thirsting for power and territory at the expense of other clans—the equilibrium of vampire relationships in this country will be reestablished."

"What do you know of that?" Bill asked, his voice steeped in surprise and superiority.

Bill was, I acknowledged, always excellent at condescension.

And patronizing me.

"I know what my bonded has told me," I returned.

"And Freyda?" Bill tried. "You cannot have forgotten about her claim on Northman."

"Freyda's claim has been found illegitimate," I responded with a little smirk. "My claim, however, had been recognized."

Bill's whole face changed. "What? No! Appius required Eric's marriage to Oklahoma! A maker's orders are absolute!"

I frowned. Bill was close to grating on my last nerve.

"Eric is mine!" I shared forcefully. "And Freyda is on her way back to Oklahoma."

Good riddance.
"What of Arkansas?" he asked me, seemingly grasping for geographical straws—Nevada, Oklahoma, and now Arkansas. "Is Eric claiming it?"

I shrugged. "There's not much left up there, other than land."

"What will happen to it?" Bill asked, suddenly even more curious. There was a look in his eyes that showed me that he was planning a strategy of some kind. It immediately struck me what that plan was.

Eric was right. Bill was predictable.

"Why? Are you interested in being Regent of Arkansas?" I found myself asking incredulously.

"I doubt Eric will allow me to stay in Area 5," Bill said bitterly. "However, even he cannot ignore the fact that I have proven my worth many times over. I could serve him in Arkansas and still be close to . . . ."

His voice trailed off.

"Still be close to me," I finished for him with a shake of my head. "No, Bill. Eric would never consider giving you Arkansas—or anything else of his," I emphasized. "He doesn't trust you. And, for the record, Arkansas isn't his. King Bartlett of Indiana and Russell Edgington are gonna take care of it for the foreseeable future. And—also for the record—I don't trust you either," I added with a sigh.

"Sookie!" he practically panted out in shock—probably because he'd just picked up on my declaration that I was Eric's.

I shook my head. I might still be uninformed in some ways, but Bill was utterly clueless at times!

"Also—just so you know—Eric never wanted Nevada or Arkansas, and he's taking Louisiana mostly to keep me safe. However, I—and I'm not the only one—believe that he's gonna be a magnificent king!" I said with pride. "So, your claims that Eric is ambitious to the point of exploiting me just don't hold water."

"But he is a king now!" Bill reminded. "You cannot simply take his word that he's doing it all for you."

I smiled a little as I thought of my mate. "I hope he's not; I hope that he's doing it for himself too. Now that Appius is gone, there is nothing to hold Eric back. And—just so we're clear about something—Eric has my full support when it comes to anything he wants to do for himself. In fact, I will be by his side the whole way—as his queen."

"What? How?"

"I have finally accepted what I am as well as my place in this world," I responded.

"Your place?"

I nodded. "I am a Supernatural. A fairy. And I have Dae blood too."

"What?" Bill asked.

"It's a long story, and—quite frankly—a lot of it isn't your business, Bill."

"You are my business!" Bill said insistently.
"That's an unfortunate choice of words," I sighed. "After all, I was only a business interest to you for a long time after we met. But, even after the horrible events in Jackson and after I learned about your assignment for the queen, I was still willing to be your friend."

"We are more than that!" Bill returned feverishly.

At that moment, I began to wonder if my ex would ever overcome his denial.

I figured some hard truths might help him, and—even if they didn't—it would make me feel better to say them.

I shook my head. "No, Bill. And we never were much of anything—now that I think about it. Really think! What we had when we were a couple was a lie. Still," I sighed before, taking a deep breath, "I feel obliged to thank you for your part during the Fae war—for helping Niall defeat Lochlan and Neave. You helped to save my life, and I owed you—at least until tonight."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I saved your life tonight, Bill," I responded. "Eric is not killing you—despite the fact that you betrayed him by being Victor and Felipe's spy. He is restraining himself for me, even though I can feel through our bond that he is worried about letting you live since you can't seem to find your way out of your denial in regards to me."

"Eric is lying to you if he says that he won't kill me," Bill said almost desperately. "He'll just wait for his opportunity and then make it seem like my death's an accident! Please, Sookie! Think! He is a monster! You must listen to me!"

I shook my head. "Where you are concerned, I mustn't do anything," I practically seethed. "Any debt I owed you has been paid. Any affection I once held for you is waning with every word you speak—and with every action against Eric that you perform."

"Sookie," he whispered. "He's poisoned you against me."

I lifted my chin proudly.

"The only poison here is you, Bill. Listen and listen well: I am Eric's. His! By choice! I love him. And that leaves you in quite a predicament."

"How so?" he asked, suddenly worried about his own well-being. He was right to do so.

"You have tried again and again to undermine my relationship with Eric. You betrayed your Sheriff. And—now that Eric is king—you are no longer welcome in our state," I returned as strongly as I could.

"Eric is banishing me?"

"I insisted that he do it—me!" I emphasized.

"But my home! Your safety is . . . ," Bill began.

"Sell your house—or give it to the Bellefleurs. Or let it rot!" I interrupted him. "But you won't be able to live in it." I took a deep breath. "Sandy would have agreed to take you in Nevada; however, the database profits have practically run their course, and she doesn't believe that the project should have ever existed in the first place. Therefore, you won't be able to go there either."
"What? No! My database makes millions a year!" Bill argued.

I rolled my eyes. "You forget, Bill—Sandy handled Felipe's finances. So she's seen the profit margins. You haven't seen them. Felipe simply gave you a salary—not a percentage—according to Sandy. And the database isn't selling as it once did. She doesn't believe you are worth the salary anymore. Feel free to start a new database elsewhere."

"But—uh—it's mine!" Bill stammered.

"No. It belongs to Louisiana, commissioned and financed by the late Queen of Louisiana. It belonged to Sophie-Anne and then Felipe—never to you."

"But the updates!" Bill insisted. "There will be great profit in them!"

I shook my head, feeling a little pity for Bill; he just seemed pathetic to me now. "The vampires you already have in the database know better than to give you any more personal data. The ones you don't have in it are either too young to be relevant or too old to be indiscreet about their lives. But—even if your database was still profitable—I want to make it clear that Eric would still kick you out of Louisiana."

"He cannot stand that I am his competition!" Bill spit out. "He cannot stand that you love me."

I exhaled roughly. "You haven't been competition for a long time. But—you are right that Eric doesn't like you. However, that distaste is because you were willing to help Victor and Felipe undermine him and steal me. Believe me when I say that his dislike no longer has anything to do with how I feel—actually how I don't feel—about you. In fact, after this conversation, I'm even more glad that you're gonna be out of our lives."

"You cannot mean that, darling," Bill insisted.

"You said that Peru is nice," I said, standing up. I was tired of going around in circles with Bill, and I'd said what I'd come to say. "You should consider going back there. I'll make sure that you don't have to sleep in those chains so that you won't be too weak to leave Louisiana before midnight tomorrow night. If you don't leave, Eric will kill you, and I won't shed a fuckin' tear. Goodbye, Bill," I added before closing the trap door and leaving the room.

"Sookeh!" Bill yelled after me.

"Sookie," I corrected as I leaned against the door, somewhat drained from the encounter. "Don't come back once you're gone, Bill. You won't be welcome," I warned—knowing that Bill could still hear me—before seeking out my bonded.
Chapter 58: Labor & Love

ERIC POV

I'd felt various levels of Sookie's tumult all night. But I knew better than to try to belittle or delegitimize what she was feeling by using our bond to take away her emotions. Of course, I had not ignored her tumultuous feelings; indeed, I'd made sure that she could sense my own fears and anxieties too, for—like the good in our lives—I had realized that the bad had to be shared between us too. Of course, I had offered to soothe her at times through our bond, and—once in a while when she was particularly nervous or weary—she'd even let me.

But I was careful not to be sneaky in my attempts to calm her, nor would I ever try to "creep" an emotion into her. I wasn't about to undermine the trust between us in that way.

That being said, I had relished—both on a physical and an emotional level—the sensation when she'd accepted my help through the bond. Physically, our bond had reverberated with our connection, strengthening itself like a human muscle being worked out. Emotionally, I had been warmed by the trust within Sookie as she'd allowed me to take the edge off of her nervousness.

And—when she'd begun to send me comforting and supportive sensations? I'd welcomed every damned one!

Yes—it was safe to say that I loved our bond. As a matter of fact, I'd savored feeling Sookie's emotions—feeling her life—when we'd had only our blood tie.

As confused as I'd been after Hallow's spell, I'd never been confused about one thing: being able to feel—down to my very core—that Sookie existed in the world was one of the greatest gifts I'd ever been given.

I'd just been an idiot when it came to showing her that.

And—as I ventured into a committed, full-time relationship for the first time in my existence—I figured that I'd continue having moments of idiocy, but I was determined that they would never again hammer at the foundation of my bonded and my love for one another.

I turned my focus from checking on Sookie back to the pile of plans before me.

Yes—I'd outlined many ideas for Louisiana even before I killed Felipe.

Perhaps, that preparation had been merely wishful thinking.

Or just something to do as I'd waited to strike down my enemies.

Some would have cautioned me against making any plans—for fear of "jinxing myself."

But I didn't believe in such curses. I believed in forecasting contingencies until I'd exhausted every possibility in my mind. Indeed, as soon as Sookie had truly made herself my partner in all things, I'd proceeded as if I would be king.

Of course, I had prepared Sookie for the possibility that I might be executed, though I'd thought my chances to live on and be made king were better than a coin flip. Ironically, it was Felipe's
relationship with and similarities to my maker—as far as corrupt authority went—that had ultimately swayed some of the Council members to favor me.

Even Michelina, who hated Karin, finally had to acknowledge Felipe's delegitimization of his own crown! A good monarch—and all the monarchs on the current Vampire Council were good at what they did—would never undermine his or her own sheriff! It just wasn't done, nor was the overtaxing of subjects without legitimate cause. Indeed, all monarchs had to sign a contract—more like a covenant—to serve their vassals and to endeavor to their utmost to deserve their fealty.

"Deserve" was a word for which Felipe had forgotten the meaning over the years.

Indeed, when Sandy made it known that Felipe had been part-architect of my marriage contract with Freyda—and that Appius's motive had been to strip me of both my dignity and happiness—I knew that the monarchs who held my fate in their hands would overlook that I had killed my king (not to mention the fact that Victor's death looked damned suspicious as well).

It was one thing for a king to punish an unworthy or disobedient subject. But I had been neither, even where my bonded was concerned. Had Felipe negotiated a reasonable working arrangement with Sookie, I would have supported that. Hell—I'd even sent Felipe a proposal for Sookie to work in Las Vegas for up to one month per year as long as I could be with her and she had ample daytime protection. I'd never even heard back from him. The fact that Felipe had never even tried to negotiate with me over Sookie's services had told me all that I needed to know—that he eventually intended to take her.

Similarly, it was one thing for a maker to punish an unruly child. What Appius had done to me during my first few centuries as a vampire had been enough to demonstrate that he was a monster, and—even back then—most other vampires of a certain age thought that Appius had gone too far in his ill-treatment of me.

Vampires, by rule, did not make children just to hate and torment them. Even those as twisted as Lorena made children in order to thrust their insane versions of love—not hate—upon them. And—even Appius—showed that he could make such a child out of "love." As fucked up as Alexei had been, he'd also been an object of Appius's deep affection.

I had never achieved that status.

Honestly, looking back, I posited that Appius had finally let me leave his side at least in part because other older vampires had begun to question him about my ill-treatment. After all, by that time, I was not disobedient. In fact, after my first decade, I did not even fight my maker's commands—even when he asked me to participate in things that I did not wish to do. Yet, still—after many centuries together—he had enjoyed, upon occasion, punishing me for no reason and/or humiliating me in public.

I knew that, despite the obedience I showed him, Appius had sensed that he could never break me completely—that my will was just too strong to fully disappear—even if he could compel my body to do whatever he wanted.

But one night—one of the most important of my long life—Appius had become frustrated because he did not "feel" enough reverence from me. We'd been in Italy at the time, traveling from one court to another; Appius would barter my services for an opulent, though temporary, home for himself.

On that particular, significant night, he stripped me and whipped me in front of the King of Florence and his courtiers, before chaining me down with silver for anyone who wanted to "use"
me. I had been almost four centuries old at the time—and already respected by many important
vampires for the work I'd performed for them as a warrior.

I was raped many times that night before I heard a voice questioning why Appius was punishing
me. Though I did not know him at the time, that voice had belonged to Stan Davis's maker,
Domingo. When Appius had been unable to state a reason for my punishment, Domingo had given
me an odd look.

"What is your child's name?" he'd asked my maker.

"You don't need to know that to enjoy him," Appius had leered. "And he doesn't deserve his own
name at this point," he added with a cruel laugh aimed at my battered and used body.

Domingo had bent down a little in order to look me in the eye. I had not seen pity in his gaze. I'd
been surprised to see respect.

"I am sure that I will hear your name spoken eventually, Viking. Your work for the Prussian king
was remarkable," he said with a slight nod before finishing his check-in with the Florentine king
and leaving the court.

Indeed, my work in Prussia had been noteworthy and had earned Appius much gold.

The night after my "punishment"—inexplicably—Appius had sent me away from his presence,
claiming that he was bored with me. Likely, he'd really done that in order to avoid potential
conflicts with vampires like Domingo—those who had enough honor to question his brutal
treatment of a child.

Indeed, one of the reasons why I'd enlisted Sookie to aid Stan Davis in Dallas was because I felt
that I owed Stan's maker—though I'd still never formally met Domingo.

However, for Appius to reappear in my life—after centuries—in order to damage me was an even
greater transgression (according to vampire tradition) than his early treatment of me. And—for
Felipe to participate in Appius's plans was even worse in some ways! After all, it was well-known
that I was loyal to both my maker and my king.

Indeed, I had never spoken ill of Appius. Moreover, every decade, I would send him an appropriate
tribute as my wealth increased—as was expected by vampires of Appius's age. I made sincere
attempts to make the situation with Felipe work as well. The only occasion when my actions might
have been questionable involved the pledging. However, since I wasn't a monarch then, I needed
no permission to pledge with Sookie as I had. Indeed, no vampires had to inform their monarchs
when they made such personal decisions as blood ties, bonds, or pledgings—unless they could
negatively affect the crown. And my increased connection with Sookie only solidified her
connection to Felipe through me. At least, that was how I'd presented the situation.

Of course, in truth, the bond in and of itself ought to have made both Felipe and Madden back the
hell off when it came to Sookie! Fuck! Even calling her "mine" would have been enough for an
honorable vampire! Hell! Even Andre had backed off when I'd bonded with Sookie!

I shook my head. Madden, de Castro, and Appius were all gone now, and I refused to allow them to
haunt me. That was one of the reasons I wasn't keeping any of the sheriffs that de Castro had
appointed in the state, though—other than Madden—they had proven to be competent. Indeed, the
Sheriff of Area 2, Brian Bartlemy, and the Sheriff of Areas 3 and 4, Sharon McDowell, had never
been anything other than professional and pleasant with me. But that didn't mean I was ready to
trust them.
According to Palomino and Maxwell Lee—who had already met with Brian and Sharon—there were no signs that there would anyone fighting in the name of Felipe de Castro in Areas 2 through 4.

Rasul was on the way to Area 1 to gauge any potential problems in New Orleans, but I couldn't imagine that Madden would have generated much loyalty among the vampires there; indeed, it was very likely that any of Victor's true supporters were slain with him at Fangtasia the night before. In fact, I had recognized one or two of Victor's guards as paid mercenaries, which meant that he had not even enjoyed enough loyal supporters to employ as guards!

He'd needed to outsource!

I shook my head. It was really no wonder that neither Madden nor de Castro had much loyalty from their subjects in the end. Felipe had lost his "shine" because of his policy of over-taxing his subjects. And Madden was just an asshole.

I noticed a new email from Sandy and saw that she'd offered both Brian and Sharon positions in Nevada, for she knew them to be competent vampires. I was pleased to see that both had accepted the opportunity to return "home." All that they asked was that I pay them for the week of time that Sandy had required they spend helping their replacements understand their bookkeeping systems. Sandy vouched for the two, guaranteeing that they would not undermine Palomino or Maxwell Lee. I quickly sent her a text, accepting the offer of Brian's and Sharon's help and promising both the week's pay and a generous bonus if Palomino and Maxwell Lee reported that they had—indeed—helped to foster a smooth transition of power.

Almost immediately, I received a confirmation from the new Queen of Nevada, as well as copies of the latest financial reports Felipe had received from all areas of Louisiana other than my own—which, of course, I already had.

I looked at Area 1's report first. I wasn't surprised to see that Madden (given that he spent a great deal of his time and energy trying to fuck with me in Area 5) hadn't generated the kind of income that such a region as Area 1 should have. I was pleased, however, to see that Area 2 and Area 3/4 were performing almost as well as they'd been doing before the takeover. Of course, Felipe had demanded financial success, and—to their credit—the sheriffs he'd installed had produced, despite the pressure. Or maybe they had produced because of the implicit threats that Felipe made if they did not. And then, of course, there were Madden's more explicit threats.

Seeing the confirmation of the rate at which Louisiana's vampires had been being taxed, I immediately sent out an email to Rasul, Maxwell Lee, Palomino, Karin and Pam giving them instructions.

I smiled to myself as I recalled a lesson that my human father had once taught me about being a good leader: Never do something that will make your subjects resent you.

Machiavelli later wrote down a similar lesson in The Prince—that a leader was doomed if he was hated.

The author may or may not have been discussing the issue with me the night before he wrote that particular passage.

Indeed, many of the precepts my father taught me about leadership were ones I'd used to rule my little corner of Louisiana. But I also knew that I could no longer isolate myself in my leadership; I would have to look outward in order to help my state to thrive as it had in the heyday of Sophie-Anne's rule.
No—actually—I wanted to do better than Sophie-Anne had done.

And I knew that I could too! And that wasn't me being arrogant—though I was certainly capable of arrogance. No—I just somehow knew that I would be a good king as long as my queen was with me.

I smiled at that thought.

I already had many ideas about how to help Louisiana right away, and the first was not to bleed my subjects too much of their wealth when I offered nothing to show off of it! A monarch could determine how much tribute to ask for, but there was a certain percentage that was common—except during times of emergency.

Though Louisiana was in something of an emergency because of Felipe's mismanagement, I would still be returning Louisiana to the standard rate.

However, I would also encourage any vampire that wanted to contribute to Louisiana's Regrowth Fund (the LRF)—a charity which Cataliades was setting up—to do so.

Donations would be tax deductible, of course.

In addition, donations would also be tracked so that the donor would be able to see what happened to his or her money.

In fact, one of Warren's main duties would be to operate the LRF, and Molly would ensure that its effects were reported online. And I had already seeded the fund with some of my own considerable wealth to set a good example for others. The vampires in my state would see my contributions and feel the effects upon their businesses, and then their loyalty would grow.

So would their willingness to voluntarily contribute.

As my phone beeped, I looked down to see that I'd received a text from Jacob, an 800-year-old vampire of my acquaintance who was currently living in Canada.

I chuckled. It seemed that the Supernatural rumor mill was working quickly.

Like anyone who lived for a very long time, vampires went through certain stages. At times, we liked to be active in business pursuits. Other times, we spent stints in studies. Sometimes, we enjoyed seclusion. Rarely, even monarchs got tired of dealing with the politics involved in running a nation, and transfers of power were made. Though the vampire texting me had never been a monarch, he had been the right-hand man of the French king for several centuries, which was how I met him.

Jacob was asking if he could relocate to my state. He was tired of Canada's cold weather and had been considering asking Russell for permission to move to Mississippi; however, he preferred the idea of moving to New Orleans. I immediately okayed his request.

I knew that many vampires would be intimidated by those of Jacob's age wanting to enter their territory, but I was not. Certainly, kingdoms could and had been taken over from within (I'd done just that earlier that night!), but I simply wouldn't accept any older vampires who would do something like that. Hell—if Jacob wanted a territory, he would simply ask the Vampire Council for a kingdom and bide his time until one—like Arkansas—was available. And Jacob certainly wouldn't undermine a friend!

I shook my head. It was difficult for me to understand why some monarchs—like de Castro—had
never wanted to surround themselves with the strongest and worthiest of our kind. And—even when Felipe did find himself in the company of worthy vampires, like Sandy Sechrest—he did not know how to work with them effectively. Instead, de Castro's choice of "older" friends had been limited to vampires like my maker—vampires who would never have been allowed to rule a kingdom (at least, not for long) because they would have been the worst kind of tyrants.

Of course, Appius had never sought to be a king. He was just too damned selfish to take on that kind of responsibility! He'd much preferred to be a parasite upon other vampires' courts.

Yes—Felipe's bad choice in friends had been one reason for his downfall. After all, with friends like Victor Madden and Appius, who the fuck needed enemies?

I knew down to my bones that I would be a better king than Felipe had been—partly because I didn't suffer the company of sycophants or maniacs. And, of course, my bonded would be by my side to keep me grounded.

My phone rang.

I looked at the caller ID and smiled. Speaking of a good friend . . . .

"Rasul," I greeted. In many ways, my new Sheriff of Area 1 had the hardest job to do in Louisiana—as he had to fix Victor's messes. For that reason, I'd sent several others, including Indira (whom I knew to be his beloved), with him.

"I have arrived at the State Residence," he informed.

"Any resistance to my taking the throne?" I asked.

"None," he responded. "As we thought, the only ones truly loyal to Victor were killed alongside him at Fangtasia. Even those who had been faithful to Felipe had their issues with him. Most have promised fealty to you and have already pledged to me as Sheriff of Area 1. A few have requested to leave the state."

"And you granted those requests?" I asked.

"Yes," he returned, "just as you instructed should be done. They have a week to complete any business they have in the area, and I've informed them that they must check in nightly and will be watched until they are gone."

"Good—what of Victor's books? Sandy sent me his last official report, but I cannot imagine it's accurate," I commented.

"The young vampire you sent with me, Molly, has already broken into Madden's computer in his chambers. And I have already changed all the passwords I have on electronic devices," he chuckled. "As you hypothesized, there are two sets of books—an official one and the one reflecting how Victor was skimming from his subjects and misreporting the profits of his businesses to Felipe. Molly will email you copies of Victor's real financial reports, and she is already working to hack into his personal data to find his bank accounts. She believes that she will be able to secure his money by dawn."

"Excellent," I said with a little smile. "Have her transfer any funds she can access directly to the LRF, and feel free to draw upon it as you see fit to help New Orleans recover. Begin with vampire interests."

"On the plane ride here, I began compiling a list of Area 1's vampires who are most in need of
"help," he responded with a sigh. "There is still much to be done in New Orleans to help her recover. Sophie-Anne was trying to get the city back on its feet when Rhodes occurred. However, Madden wasn't interested in helping the humans—or the remaining vampires in the area, for that matter. But you already know this. His 'real' books only confirm his personal ambitions and lack of attention to the people he ruled over," Rasul said with distaste.

"Tell me your immediate plans," I requested of Rasul.

As I listened to my sheriff's full report, I monitored my bonded, as had become second nature to me. After we'd returned to the farmhouse, she'd spent some time with Amelia, discussing the warding of other properties, and then she'd done some packing.

Now, she was speaking with Compton. She'd wanted to be the one to tell him that he was no longer welcome in Louisiana; however, I could tell that the situation was a difficult one for her. But—mostly—as she'd spoken to him, she'd been annoyed.

I wished that I could spare her any additional pain or annoyance from Bill Compton, but she had insisted that she needed her closure. Of course, if Compton ever entered Louisiana again after the next night, I would take him out myself. I also had a suspicion that Thalia would eventually be solving the Bill issue once and for all—whether or not the side-burned shithead actually behaved.

I hung up my call with Rasul and then quickly checked in with Pam and Karin before heading to my bonded's room, which had been made light-tight by Thalia and Bubba—also at Sookie's insistence. As I sat down on the bed and took off my boots, I found myself steeped in memories of my nights spent in Sookie's farmhouse.

My bonded was anxious to leave behind most of her old life, but I knew that this house would always be special to her—and to me. It was where we first made love—and where we reconnected after I got my memories back.

It was where she fell in love with Eric Northman, the man. It was where a cursed me had given himself over completely to an emotion that the un-cursed me been too cautious to acknowledge at the time because Appius had still been alive.

I shook my head. It was ironic that the witch's curse had been necessary to both Sookie and me in many ways.

I used my senses to assess the house and the property outside. I quickly confirmed that there were four vampires patrolling the property—Bubba, Thalia, and two others in my employ.

I knew that Calvin, two other werepanthers, Mustapha, and Warren would arrive near sun-up.

But—in truth—the witches had already proven that the house we were in was warded tightly enough that the guards were simply back-up.

Thinking of Bob and Amelia, I noted that they were sleeping soundly. Earlier, they'd had a rigorous fuck session. Given Sookie's modesty, it was likely better that she'd not been able to hear Bob calling Amelia his "goddess."

Sookie was still speaking with Bill, so I moved to the shower. I'd gotten bloody during the battle, and I was anxious to eliminate the scents of Felipe and his guards from my body before I shared a resting place with my bonded.

I closed my eyes and enjoyed the hot water hitting my body.
Not long after I got into the shower, I heard my bonded tell her first lover a final goodbye, one that made it very clear that Bill Compton would no longer be welcome in our lives.

I could hear her footsteps as she made her way into her bedroom. I could feel her anticipation as she determined that I was in the shower. The soft sounds of garments being discarded made me smile, as did the scent of her arousal as she entered the bathroom.

She stepped into the shower behind me, her arms twining around my waist.

The hot water had made me warmer, yet I still sighed at the heat of her flesh against mine. I was glad that she seemed to enjoy my cool just as much.

She was completely still for several minutes, and I laced my fingers with hers.

I felt her relief.

I let her feel mine.

Our struggles were not over, but our lives together had truly begun.

SOOKIE POV

I felt comfort from Eric. Comfort and confidence.

Through our bond, he "felt" like everything that a king ought to. But he also felt all man to me.

And—most importantly—he felt like home.

There was a time when accepting Eric Northman for all that he was had frightened me. Now, it was only the idea of losing him that truly scared me.

I reached for the soap and began to lather up his strong back before moving downward to his marvelous bottom. I leaned down to wash the backs of his legs before allowing my hands to return to his bottom and using my fingers to stroke his rear entrance and then his balls.

"Sookie," he moaned. "Look what you do to me," he growled, turning around to show me that his "plenty" was very "gracious" indeed!

Gracious and ready.

I smiled coyly at him before taking one of his hands and leading it to my entrance, which was wetter than the water raining down upon us.

"And look at what you do to me," I whispered as he dragged his fingers through my folds and drew circles around my clit.

His talented fingers were obviously capable of doing a fine job without mine guiding them, so I put my own fingers to better use by gripping his shaft.

For a moment, Eric looked unsure.

"What is it?" I asked, feeling his uncertainty.

"I don't know whether to use my fingers, tongue, or cock to satisfy you, lover," he smirked. "All options would please me."
I giggled. "What time is it?" I asked.

He closed his eyes. "Twenty minutes before sunrise."

"Then use your cock," I said wantonly, even though I felt my blush burst forward at my forwardness. "But your tongue and fingers owe me a raincheck."

He growled and hoisted me upward. In the next moment, I was sandwiched between the cool wall of the shower and the cool wall of Eric's chest. And he was buried inside of me.

"Gods—I love you," he whispered right as he began to move in and out of me.

As his fingers joined into our dance and began to circle my clit again, I moaned. "Don't think this lets those fingers off the hook tomorrow night."

He chuckled. "I wouldn't dream of it, lover," he groaned as he hit the sweet spot inside of me and my internal muscles tightened around him.

"I'm so close," I said after he'd been thrusting in and out of me for less than a minute.

He was just that good!

"Me too," he shared, as he continued his movements with both hand and cock. The pressure in me built and then burst forth, and within moments, he was yelling as he filled me with his release.

He bit into my neck, an action which caused my orgasm to elongate and strengthen in intensity. Instinctively, I bit into his pectoral muscle, my blunt teeth enough to create a wound just deep enough to draw a little of his blood.

A stream of words I didn't understand fell from Eric's lips as he continued his thrusting into me. In moments, I had orgasmed again. A minute later, he took me over the edge yet again and he followed.

I took a second to thank God that vampires had such a quick recovery time.

From his expression, I figured that Eric was doing the same.

Though my legs were shaky as he put me down so that we could use the shower for its "official" purpose, I smiled up at him.

"I love vampire stamina," I blushed.

He chuckled as he washed me. "And I love you, min kära. Plus, one does not have stamina alone," he added, waggling his eyebrows. "One needs an able partner."

I giggled as he turned off the shower and then moaned as he took great care in drying me off.

It was quite a while after the sun came up before we were done "taking care" of one another.
Chapter 59: Snake in the Grass

BILL POV

Thalia and Bubba had come into the guest room only minutes before sunrise. Bubba had taken the silver chains from my body, while the older vampiress had watched.

Apologetically, Bubba had informed me that the chains would be reapplied by Sookie before I rose, but that they'd be put on very close to sunset so that I would be weakened as little as possible.

And so that I would be strong enough to leave the state as ordered the next night.

Bubba had looked regretful as he'd shut the door of the cubby.

I was weakened, but I still managed to reach into my pocket and take out the pouch with my father's silver watch inside.

Despite the pain, I gripped it.

And I stayed awake past sunrise.

Past Thalia.

Past Eric.

ANCIENT PYTHONESS POV

Sadly, the tipsy feeling that drinking Claude's delicious blood had given to me had begun to wear off.

My handmaidens had made sure that I was in a secure place for the day, but the fairy's blood would act to keep me awake for several hours longer—even beyond what I was generally capable of because of my advanced age.

I meditated upon what my visions had told me about the very moment that I was existing within.

I knew that I could have prevented what was about to occur, but I also knew that some things needed to happen without my interference.

Bill Compton needed to try to kill Eric Northman.

So I let it happen.

SOOKIE POV

I woke up with a smile on my face and glanced at my clock. It was 10:03 a.m., but—though I'd been asleep for less than three hours—I felt well-rested. I stretched and left the bed—after giving my Viking a little peck on his lips—to use the bathroom and wash my face.

I "heard" Bob and Amelia puttering around the kitchen, trying to be quiet. I also "heard" Calvin and Mustapha on the porch. Warren was nearby too, likely in his sniper perch again. I was happy that his work would be changing to something less "splintery" in the upcoming days. A couple
more werepanthers were also nearby.

I felt three other voids—beyond Eric's. One was in the cubby—Bill. A second was near Bill—Bubba. A third seemed to be under the house.

I shook my head. No matter how many times I'd told Thalia that she should stay inside, she seemed to insist upon resting in the ground.

I chuckled as I got dressed and made my way downstairs.

In truth, I practically skipped down the stairs!

Amelia smiled at me as I entered the kitchen. "You look happy," she commented. "And you haven't even had coffee yet," she added with a smirk.

I laughed out loud. "I am happy. But if there's coffee made, I'll be even happier."

Amelia giggled and pointed toward the blessed caffeine-making machine.

"Get your coffee. We have a lot to do today!" she ordered good-naturedly, even as Bob nodded in agreement. Both had their laptops out. (Thanks to Eric, I'd gotten WIFI months before.)

"So," Bob said, "I've found the ingredients we need to ward the Shreveport home you and Eric want to make your main residence in Area 5. Amelia and I will leave to collect them this afternoon, and then we'll head over to the house to get set up, but we'll need you and Eric present to complete the ward."

I nodded. "Okay. We can be there—say—an hour after sunset? Eric already gave you a code to get in—right?" I asked.

Bob nodded in confirmation.

"Before lunch," Amelia said between gulps of coffee, "I figured we'd look through the royal residences. Rasul emailed me a list of seven estates owned by the crown in the New Orleans area."

"Seven!" I exclaimed.

"Sophie liked collecting property," Amelia informed with a shrug.

"She liked collecting, alright," I muttered. Though I'd eventually liked the former queen well enough, it was her desire to "collect" me which had sent Bill Compton into my life in the first place! But—then again—without Bill, would there have been an Eric? I shook my head and refused to imagine my life without my Viking.

"Well—let me drink that cup of coffee and get something into my stomach, and then we can start looking at those properties," I resolved.

**BILL POV**

Before I made even the slightest of movements, I waited until Sookie had woken up and was in the kitchen with the two witches who had betrayed me.

I was willing to allow Amelia and Bob to live—so that Sookie would eventually forgive me for what I was about to do. But I was not going to allow Eric to live.

Not now that I had found the perfect chance to kill him at long last!
Also, I felt confident that Sookie would get over Northman soon enough after their damnable bond was finally gone.

When Eric was finally dead!

The silver I was clutching had done its job by keeping me aware of all that was around me.

Keeping me awake in spite of the sun.

"To spite and to smote my enemy," I whispered, feeling the strength of fate on my side at long last.

I secured the chain of the silver pocket watch around my wrist, wanting to have both of my hands free if needed and knowing that the pain of the burns would be well worth the trouble.

Silent as a mouse, I lifted the cubby's trapdoor, the hinges of which I'd oiled well upon its creation. I rose from the space cautiously, only to see that the room had been made light-tight—just as I'd suspected based on the hammering I'd heard the night before. I was disappointed when I saw that only Bubba was dead for the day in the room.

I'd been hoping that Thalia would be there too.

I quietly searched the room until I found a suitable weapon—an old wooden ruler. I dropped fang and used my most lethal weapons to sharpen the end of the ruler into a point. The taste of the wood was not pleasant, but I quietly spat out that which I'd "whittled" off so that I would not ingest any of the potentially lethal substance.

I stood for a moment next to the bed, knowing that I could stake Bubba. I would not have hesitated to kill Thalia. But Bubba was another story. I recalled how he'd supported Sookie and my relationship, even after she'd ended it.

Still, he'd helped Eric to restrain me the night before. But—then again—Bubba was a simpleton, unable to think for himself. I was certain that—once Eric was out of the picture—Bubba's friendship with me would take precedence in his life once more.

And—undeniably—he had been a good friend to my Sookie.

Spotting a pair of gloves and the silver chain which had kept me subdued the night before, I determined that I would return to tie up Bubba with the silver after the others in the house had been secured (or killed—in the case of Eric). And then I used my senses to confirm the locations of all of the creatures in my vicinity.

Eric was in Sookie's room, a fact which would have elicited a growl from me if I'd not been intent upon being as silent as possible.

Another vampire seemed to be right below the house.

Even though the scent was hard to be certain of since the vampire was under the dirt, I figured that was Thalia.

I closed my eyes, weighing my options. I could glamour Bob and Amelia to dig up and kill the ancient vampiress before nightfall. Or—better yet—I could burst through the floorboards and dig into the earth to get to her myself. Yes—the sun was up, but only limited light would reach the crawl space under Sookie's home.

Speaking of sunlight, I knew that I would have to face at least a little as I jetted from the room I
was in to get to Sookie's room, where Eric lay helpless. That being the case, I took a quilt from the upper shelf of the closet and wrapped it around my body. After making sure that the pocket watch chain was still securely around my wrist, I gripped my makeshift stake and the quilt edges in one hand.

I figured that—once Eric was dead—I'd simply make a little noise in Sookie's room. That would draw Sookie and her witches to the room, where I'd be waiting. Though I was still weakened from having been in silver chains all night, I was certainly strong enough to easily subdue three mostly humans. Then, I would regain my strength by drinking from one or both witches. Hell—I might even drain the male one—since he was not as important to my beloved.

Then, I would plan how to take out Thalia in a way that would limit my exposure to the sun's rays.

I did not have to worry about the guards outside for the time being. I smiled to myself. The witches' wards, which Sookie had obviously used to keep me outside and clueless about the true happenings within the house, would now be working against those who had arranged for them. The guards would not be able to hear any commotion or complaints from the witches or Sookie.

Yes—Sookie would be very angry at me for killing Eric. However, it would be only a matter of time before she realized that her feelings for him were all illusions. And—as for the fact that I would be killing a king? I couldn't imagine that the Vampire Council would punish me. I would tell them that I was avenging Felipe's murder and that I'd not promised fealty toward Eric as my king.

Both facts would be true.

Hell—they might even make me the King of Louisiana! For—though I was young—I'd proven my worth to my kind many times over.

Steeling myself, I slowly turned the doorknob. As quietly as possible, I opened the door and sped through the ambient light of the house to Sookie's room before opening that door and going inside.

The bathroom door had been left open—and the bathroom light had been left on.

But even without that, I would have been able to see my enemy lying in Sookie's bed. He seemed to have a smile on his face.

From both the bedroom and the bathroom, I picked up the scent of the sex I'd heard in the hours before and right after sunrise. I scowled and approached the resting vampire.

I inhaled.

He smelled of Sookie as if he'd purposely marked himself with her. Her blood was inside of him. Her sweet smell was gracing the surfaces of his body.

I drew the sheet off of him and celebrated my power over him.

He was vulnerable.

Helpless.

He had no idea that a foe—his fate—was standing over him.

In that moment, I appreciated just how exposed and weak a vampire was when he or she slept.
Eric was lying on his side, one of his long arms stretched out as if Sookie's body had been trapped underneath it until she'd arisen and freed herself.

I would free her even more permanently!

Not surprisingly—because he had no shame—Eric was naked. I frowned as I flipped him onto his back and noticed that his cock—even flaccid—was larger than the size of mine when I was fully aroused.

"No matter," I thought to myself, even as I became aroused as I looked at the Viking in all of his glory. Lorena had taught me that being with men could be pleasurable, and—in a different life—I might have enjoyed Eric fucking me. But—despite Eric's physical beauty—my arousal stemmed mostly from the thought that he would soon be dead by my hand and Sookie would be mine, even if I had to use force and/or blood to make her that way.

Given her latest actions, there were lessons that she needed to learn, and I recognized that I had to take a firmer hand with her going forward—for her own good.

I raised the stake, ready to win at long last!

SOOKIE POV

As I sat in the kitchen with Amelia and Bob, I felt my happiness absorbing me.

Yes—I knew that Eric and I had trials and tribulations ahead.

But—for the first time in my life—I felt both comfortable in my own skin and hopeful for what the future would hold for me.

Amelia and I giggled as we looked at the more opulent of the State residences. I immediately determined that three of the seven were not going to work for Eric and me. One of them would, however, do quite well for Rasul. The one that Sophie-Anne had lived in primarily would certainly work for Eric's headquarters—though I wanted to talk to my bonded about redecorating portions of the building if we were to live there.

Though nice enough, I decided that the house that Victor had been staying in should be gutted and sold. After all, who knew what that snake had left behind.

The last house we looked at was the one that I liked the most. It was located in the French Quarter. Indeed, I found myself wondering if Eric and I could stay there when we were in New Orleans and just use Sophie's old residence for work. As a bonus, there were tunnels connecting Sophie-Anne's old palace with the residence in the French Quarter, so people could be led to believe that Eric and I lived in the palace!

I smiled. I liked the thought that our residence and our workplace could be kept separate and the idea that Eric's resting place would be even more secure.

I'd just told Bob and Amelia to plan to ward Sophie-Anne's old royal residence and the French Quarter home (and the tunnel between them) when I felt the hair on the back of my neck rise as if a breeze had blown inside of the house.

Quickly, I used my gift to determine if there was a threat outside.

"What is it, Sookie?" Amelia asked with concern.
Having "heard" and felt only who should have been outside, I shook my head. "Maybe nothing."

"Maybe?" Bob asked.

"It's a feeling. A bad one," I whispered, pushing out my telepathy as far as I could, but still hearing no threats.

"Trust any feelings you have," Amelia encouraged, even as she gripped my hand.

The immediacy of her thoughts because of her touch worked to bring my telepathy back inside the house itself.

I heard Amelia's loud concern.

I heard Bob's curiosity.

I heard . . . .

I heard . . . .

"Something's not right!" I exclaimed, standing up quickly.

"A void's not where it should be!" I yelled out before my whole world seemed to become fuzzy. I couldn't say for sure what happened next, but I was in my kitchen with Amelia and Bob one moment and in my bedroom looking at Bill holding a stake over Eric's chest in the next.

I barely registered the "pop" sound that accompanied my change of location or the pain that I felt for having—clearly—teleported for the first time.

Bill looked up at me in surprise.

"Sookeh," he said, "I must do this!" I could see his arm rising as high as it could go, and I knew that it would soon drive downward and thrust the wood into Eric's heart.

Time seemed to pause for a moment, though I didn't need it to. There was no soul-searching to do. There was only protection to be done.

"Bill Compton, I rescind your invitation!" I yelled aloud and with my whole heart at the same time. I'd never meant any words more!

Bill seemed to freeze in the already seemingly frozen moment, and the look on his face was one of horror and surprise. Immediately, the arm with the stake in it was wrenched towards the door as if it was anxious to be "first out." I was fine with that. After a moment, magic drew the rest of Bill toward my bedroom door, and I moved well away so that he could not grip me.

Moved between him and my bonded.

Bill was fighting against the magic, even as his hand opened the door so that he'd move into the hall.

I heard a slight sizzle as ambient light met his skin; I followed behind him, closing the door to my bedroom in order to protect my bonded from that light.
"Sookie!" Bill cried out in pain, as he dropped the stake from his hand. It was a ruler I'd used throughout my schooldays.

Fashioned into a murder weapon intended for my Viking!

As Bill staggered backwards, still fighting the magic of his recension, I picked up the ruler, ready to stake him if he somehow succeeded in resisting the magic that was leading him toward the sun.

"Sookie! What's happening?" Bob yelled out with concern from near the entryway.

"Stay away from Bill!" I yelled loudly, but coldly. "And keep Ames back!" I added, as I continued to watch Bill's backward progress.

"Sookie," Bill gasped, "please. Invite me back in."

"Never again, Bill," I said, looking directly at the face of the person who wished my mate dead. I memorized that face so that I would never again forget what a true enemy looked like.

A snake!

"Sookie! Please! I'll die!" Bill yelled as his hand turned the lock on the front door. He couldn't stop himself, though he was trying his hardest.

"I know, Bill," I returned unfeelingly. "That's the idea," I added as the hand that had been holding the stake turned the knob.

"You can't mean that!" he yelled, even as the sunlight from the windows in the living room were making his skin smoke.

"I mean it with everything that I am," I said sincerely.

Once he had opened the door—had been forced to open it—Bill flew back from the house.

I took a deep breath and followed. Maybe I wanted to witness Bill being gone for good, given what he'd planned for Eric. Or maybe I wanted my unremorseful face to be the last thing Bill saw.

Either way, the vampire was beyond Amelia and Bob's spell when I stepped out onto the porch. Calvin and Mustapha were both looking on silently, and Amelia was soon by my side, gripping my hand.

"Don't let that snake try to slither away or dig!" I commanded the guards.

The werepanther and Were both nodded as they kept their eyes on Bill.

"Sookie!" Bill screamed, as the smoke on his body turned to flame.

"Goodbye, Bill," Amelia said from next to me—her voice registering her shock at what was happening.

"Good riddance!" I seethed as Bill continued to yell out my name; unblinking, I watched the sun burning through him.

It looked painful.

And I found myself—glad.
I sat down on the porch steps with Amelia by my side.

And we watched a vampire "meet the sun."

Of course, I'd been the one to introduce Bill to that fiery orb when I'd uninvited him from my home.

Despite that—I knew that Bill's screams would not give me nightmares.

Seeing someone suffer like Bill was suffering should have yanked at my heart-strings, and I even heard Amelia crying from next to me as his body slowly lost its shape.

But no compassion was raised within me when Bill Compton finally stopped fighting against the fire and became dust on my lawn.

As the flame of Bill's demise disappeared as if into the ground, Mustapha looked at me with shock in his eyes.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know how, but Bill was awake. He had a stake. This," I said lifting the ruler, "and he was going to kill Eric." I shook my head and scoffed. "Bill Compton ran himself out of chances."

Mustapha nodded.

"Yes, he fucking did," Amelia said, even as she brushed her tears away.

Calvin walked over to Bill's ashy remains and used a handkerchief to pick up an old-looking pocket watch. "Silver," he said.

"Could have been using the pain of it to keep himself awake," Mustapha suggested.

"I didn't know that was possible," Amelia frowned.

"Could have been with him," Calvin reasoned kicking the dust a bit.

"It doesn't matter," I said calmly as I stood up. "Gather his dust. I don't want the remains of that snake on my lawn. And bury what's left of him and that watch next to his marker in the cemetery. Then go through his house. Make sure there is nothing there that can cause any additional damage to Eric and me. I want Bill Compton completely gone from our lives before Eric rises tonight."

Calvin nodded. "I'll see that it's done, your majesty," he said with a certain amount of awe and respect in his tone—maybe because I was "letting my fairy show."

I smiled at the werepanther. "Thanks, and it'll always be just Sookie when it's just family and friends around. I'm gonna sit with Eric till he rises," I announced.

"I'll knock with lunch," Amelia promised.

I nodded and then tossed the stake toward Calvin. "If that fucking watch still works, break it with this. And bury the stake with Bill too," I practically snarled before turning to go to my love.
Epilogue: The Good Life

ERIC POV

ONE YEAR LATER

Sookie and I made a point of making sure that we made plenty of time for one another, despite our commitments to Louisiana.

In fact, one night a week was always completely ours, and our competent sheriffs knew better than to disturb us unless the shit had well and truly hit the fan.

Happily, it hadn't, but I was ever vigilant as a good king—a good husband—had to be.

Of course—every other night too—my bonded and I made it a point to enjoy time with each other.

Indeed, I'd come home early—after rushing through a series of meetings that could have been taken care of via email—and found my bonded sitting on the balcony of our bedroom in our Shreveport home.

Out of necessity, we spent quite a bit of time in New Orleans, but we both preferred the quiet that came with country living, and—though the estate we occupied most of the time had a Shreveport address—our closest neighbor was three miles away.

"Everything good?" she asked as she moved forward on her lounge chair so that I could take my place behind her. She nestled against me like the kitten I'd gotten her for her birthday nestled against her.

"Yeah. Freyda still thinks she's being sly with her takeover plans, but our spies are keeping tabs on her. If she becomes dangerous, the Council is ready to act against her. Hell—I think they want her to initiate her plan so that she can be removed. But do not worry. Karin and Thalia won't let her get close to either of us."

Sookie sighed. "I know. It's just too bad she couldn't just accept things."

I said nothing, kissing her neck and sending comfort into the bond.

After all, I didn't think it would be "too bad" for Freyda to die at all.

"It's been a year since you were made king," Sookie commented after a few minutes of silence had passed.

"I know," I whispered.

"And what a year!" she chuckled.

I nodded in confirmation, even as I continued my ministrations on her sweet flesh.

Our coronation had gone off without a hitch. A certain amount of backlash had come when Sookie had been named my queen instead of my consort, but that had died down very quickly after Sookie had thwarted a plan by the newest incarnation of the Fellowship of the Sun church before a summit in California. Needless to say, Agnes was a big fan.
Louisiana had been "anxious" to thrive. And so she did. The vampire population had nearly doubled following my coronation, and my newest project was a series of levies that would protect the city—even the poorer regions—from Katrina-like storms.

Rasul was doing very well as Sheriff of Area 1 and had bonded with Indira.

Arkansas was still a poor vampire territory, but—then again—it always had been. Russell and Bartlett had agreed to keep it and saw it as a "pet project" for them to work on together.

Nevada was taking longer to rebound than Louisiana, but—when the extent of Felipe's mismanagement had become known—that lag had not been a surprise. He'd been ensnaring Louisiana for only a little while compared to what he'd done to Nevada! And—of course—when his plans for the other territories along the Mississippi River had been made known among vampires—no one lamented his death. Indeed, many vampires had thanked me for it—privately, of course.

Despite all of Nevada's problems, however, Sandy was gaining respect because of her Herculean efforts, and I had little doubt that she'd succeed in completely recouping her state with time.

"Jason called," Sookie said. "Michele and his engagement party is Monday night. He wanted to make sure that you could make it."

I chuckled. "Who knew that your brother and I could ever become cordial."

She jabbed her elbow backwards good-naturedly. "Don't pretend that you don't love hanging out with him."

I chuckled. Indeed, once I'd gotten to know Jason Stackhouse—and once he'd begun treating his sister as he ought to (after a little gentle prodding from me)—I hadn't minded the young man (a fact which had surprised me more than anyone else).

Sookie leaned into me even more. I could hear the cat's purr; I was content enough to do the same, and—from the feelings coming through the bond—so was Sookie.

"A new werepanther was born today," Sookie commented lazily.

"Calvin's group is flourishing," I commented.

"Thanks to you," she returned.

"I am not breeding for them," I chuckled, though I was quite pleased that the melding of werepanther and wereleopard groups that I'd arranged had worked out well. Calvin had become a very close ally, and his own wife was expecting a second child.

In addition, a group of Weres near New Orleans had become useful to me too, and a portion of a large Texas pack had broken from the main group and had settled in the Shreveport area. Their packmaster was a woman. To say a female Were-leader was an anomaly was an understatement. In fact, though I'd heard of a few, she was the first I'd met in my thousand years, which likely explains why she was expelled from her original pack for proving to be a better strategist than her misogynistic packmaster. She was respected by her people, and Sookie liked her quite a bit.

And a telepathic stamp of approval was enough for me.

Meanwhile, Alcide Herveaux had left Louisiana with the remnants of the Longtooth group. They'd settled in Montana.
As for the other Supernaturals in our lives, some things had gone as expected, and other things had not.

Niall had actually stayed away for the past year—though he sent Sookie an occasional letter from the Fae world through Desmond. Niall assured my bonded that Dermot was staying put, and her uncle had even found a fairy mate whom he’d already impregnated.

That news had made me glad. After all, the last thing that Sookie had needed was for Niall to begin thinking of her at his heir! Niall had Dillon, his son, but I was pleased that there were now more Brigants in the Fae realm.

Even as the Fae had stayed out of our lives for the most part, the Dae had become a very common feature.

Indeed, the Dae in my life were more like in-laws than anything else. Desmond had stepped into the role of a father for Sookie—and Jason—and my bonded loved the part-demon very much. Diantha had become Sookie's personal daytime guard, something that I appreciated very much. Nargal and his family flittered in and out of the picture as Sookie had get-togethers or hosted holiday celebrations.

I found that I did not mind welcoming the Dae into our home—though Nargal's wife and most of his children carried Dae features that would not have made them welcome in the human world.

But what was a horn or two here or there? Or a forked tail for that matter?

And Sookie loved her new Dae family very much. She'd become especially close with Nargal's wife, Klonna.

Like Rasul, the other sheriffs I'd appointed in Louisiana were working out extremely well. Even the most inexperienced, Palomino, had doubled the earnings of her area. Meanwhile Rasul, Maxwell Lee, and Pam seemed to have made deals with the devil, given the increase in their own areas' revenues.

Not that I would have minded Lucifer's involvement. Though a rogue, he was entertaining.

As long as he stayed away from my bonded!

For that reason, it was probably better if he stayed out of Louisiana.

Pam had franchised Fangtasia in Dallas (something that pleased Stan Davis since he made money from the venture as well). My younger child took delight in the fact that she was earning more revenue than I ever had as the Sheriff of Area 5. I was simply proud of her and made sure that she knew it with regular shoe deliveries. Her child, Miriam, was coming along nicely as well. And I could tell that Pam was extremely content.

Karin, too, was adapting nicely to life in Louisiana. I could not ask for a better Second-in-Command. I did not micromanage her—instead letting her roam around the state as she felt she needed to do.

Thalia had settled happily into the old Bon Temps farmhouse. Strangely, Molly and she had formed a romantic attachment, and—working together—they oversaw much of the security in the state remotely, though Thalia would occasionally "make a visit" to someone she felt needed an "attitude adjustment."

As for Bubba? Well—he'd taken to living wherever Sookie and I were at any given time (though
there were strict rules concerning Sookie's new kitten). Sookie enjoyed having her friend around—though I made sure that she had additional guards with her at night.

Bubba was great, but I'd learned my lesson with the fairies, Neave and Lochlan.

Of course, arguably, Sookie's guards were now superfluous. Sookie, when she did venture from our warded homes, was most often with her witch friend and assistant, Amelia.

And Octavia had taught Amelia to cast protective shields without the need of a cauldron.

Plus, Sookie had learned how to "pop" whenever she needed to—or wanted to.

Which had made for some very entertaining games of hide and seek between us.

I did so love to hunt!

"Oh—Ames and Bob sent us a postcard from their honeymoon," Sookie chuckled. "Though Amelia is against naming their next kid after you, they wanted me to make sure that I thanked you again for paying for their week in Barbados. Amelia even said that she was forcing Bob to leave the bed tomorrow so that they could see the island," she grinned as she flamed red.

That was okay. Ericka—Bob and Amelia's first child—was an adequate enough namesake. The unexpected child had been born two months before and had traveled with her parents on their honeymoon—though I'd paid for a nanny to accompany them as well.

"Would you enjoy a honeymoon?" I asked my bonded.

Yes—I'd asked for Sookie's hand in "human" marriage as soon as the Supreme Court had ruled to uphold marriages for any consenting individuals above eighteen years old (human or vampire).

Luckily, I'd had an easy time proving that I was older than eighteen.

Sookie and I were due to have a Christmas wedding.

"How about we go north—somewhere where the sun isn't up for very long each day?" she suggested with a purr that rivaled her kitten's.

"Mmm," I sounded, "but I thought you would enjoy somewhere tropical. Somewhere that you could sunbathe."

Sookie shrugged. "We can vacation at the beach another time, but—after we get married—I think I'd rather be pale and well-loved, versus tan and waiting for you all day."

I kissed a freckle on her neck. "Then I shall make sure that you have exactly what you wish."

She moaned into my touch. "You always do."

the end

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