A Distant Horizon
by Natsgirl

Summary

It has been a year since Eric and Sookie were formally pledged. The world has become a less welcoming place for supernaturals, and vampires in particular. Against this backdrop the couple is starting a family using the miracle of science. They will face their greatest dangers, never suspecting the real danger comes from within their own community. Sequel to The Far Reach.

Notes

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Chapter 1

Sookie stared out the window of the black car. Owen was sitting in the passenger seat next to James. It didn’t take long, this drive from the airport to the palace, and Sookie found her eye drawn to the buildings they passed. All these years later, New Orleans was still rebuilding from Hurricane Katrina. It was a humbling thought, but at the same time, comforting. Sookie found solace in knowing that in the big flick of things, she could have personal setbacks and frustrations, but every morning, the sun still rose and every night it set again.

“You okay?” Owen asked again. Sookie fingered the heavy gold band on her finger, using her thumb to turn it over and over. She hadn’t said much since leaving Denver this morning, but then again, there really wasn’t much to say.

“Suppose there will be many folks in front of the Palace today?” she asked instead.

“It’s pretty early. Angry folks tend to sleep in,” Owen replied.

Sookie nodded and stared out the window, lost in her thoughts.

The Silent Witness movement hadn’t gone away as so many had predicted. From a few random protesters holding placards, the Movement had grown into crowds that organized rallies and events. The Witnesses held press conferences demanding investigations and blaming Supernaturals, and vampires in particular, for every unexplained disappearance of a human over the past ten years. From what Sookie heard, they weren’t troubled by these protesters in New Orleans to the same extent seen in other kingdoms. Bartlett Crowe had closed his downtown Indianapolis offices. Eric told her the Indiana monarch now had round the clock security at his Fishers home. Rasul, the King in Michigan, and James of Illinois were likewise plagued. Nabila, the Carolinas Queen and Moshup Clan Chief, reported finding herself hemmed in by a crowd of Witnesses who rocked her car, demanding answers. Still, the trouble they had here made for uncomfortable comings and goings.

The low point for Sookie came a couple months ago. Her car navigated through the police barricades that were in place all the time now to keep humans from getting too close to the Palace. It was late afternoon and the weather had been unseasonably balmy for New Orleans. Sookie took a moment to stretch before heading into the building, and for some reason, turned to look at the faces. She saw one she never expected.

Meg was a young woman who had been a servant in the palace. She worked there before the reign of Eric and Sookie, having started shortly after Queen Sophie Ann was killed. Meg proved resourceful, but what was more, she was an optimistic person. Meg had a way of making those around her happy, and Sookie was fond of her.

It was Meg’s face Sookie saw. The young woman was standing against the barricades with the Witnesses. Sookie thought it was a mistake and she took a step toward her, but the young woman raised the bullhorn she held and heckled, calling Sookie a traitor to her race and condemning her for being a ‘blood whore’ to Satan himself. Sookie was so shocked she had just stood stock still on the pavement. Owen, her Were guard, had to almost physically lift the telepath to get her moving from the street toward the Palace door. The crowd took up the chant, ‘Blood Whore! Blood Whore!’ and a couple of people had thrown things at her.

Once Sookie was inside, her housekeeper, Devrah, wrapped her in strong, warm arms. Meg had been Devrah’s favorite, too, and neither could explain what could have caused this.
When Meg left the Palace staff over a year ago, Devrah tracked her down. Devrah had had great hopes that Meg would succeed her as housekeeper, so this sudden change hit the older woman hard. Devrah asked Meg for an explanation, but Meg wouldn’t give her one. It was months later that Devrah recorded Meg on television. Meg was part of the Witnesses by then. The former servant told the television interviewer that during her time at the Palace she was terrorized and bullied by vampires, starting in the days of Victor Madden, and including the current King, Eric Northman. She described Eric as being more of a beast than a man, growling and subject to fits of rage. She said that although Sookie Northman was nice to her personally, the telepath was either too terrified or too stupid to get away from vampires.

When Sookie saw the telecast she felt sick. She couldn’t believe that this young woman that she trusted could betray them in such a cruel fashion. Since Meg had worked in the Palace for so many years, people believed she was telling the truth. Sookie remembered walking into the garden that day; the one encased within the central courtyard of the Palace, shutting the door, and crying until she had nothing left. She refused to have her husband rise to find his wife anything other than dry eyed and even keeled.

It was a matter of pride for Sookie, presenting her best face to Eric. It was her way of giving him her best support. It almost made up for the small slights and outright insults thrown his way because he married her, a woman who was not a vampire.

During the first months of their marriage, Sookie made a point of standing or sitting beside him at the Assizes Court for the kingdom. As Eric Northman’s Queen, it was Sookie’s right to be there, but it was hard to ignore the reaction her presence caused. There were some who didn’t care, but most of those who attended or came before Eric for judgment saw her as anything from a distraction to an object of ridicule. Sookie couldn’t read the vampires, but she didn’t need to. She could see it in their faces and body language. The Weres and others who brought their business couldn’t hide their disparaging thoughts. After the third session, Sookie stood behind a screen, testing to see if she was right. As soon as she was out of sight, proceedings calmed down.

When she told Eric she wouldn’t be attending anymore, he protested, but she couldn’t do it. She wouldn’t be the cause of more trouble for him. In the end, it didn’t seem to make all that much difference. Eric had his business and Sookie had hers.

Sookie’s Great-Grandfather, Niall, the Prince of the Fae, had made her his business agent for his various operations in this world. He also paved the way for her to attend on-line night business courses taught by some of the best professors from universities all over the world to help build her skills and confidence. In addition, Mr. Cataliades, the demon attorney and Sookie’s friend, presented himself as a candidate for her corporate counsel. Sookie readily accepted his offer and between studies and Mr. Cataliades’ skilled coaching, Sookie was starting to feel that she had a contribution to make.

The majority of the Prince’s money was invested in medical or pharmaceutical research. There were also laboratories, like the one now being run as a partnership by Jane, Eric’s former Sheriff, and Dr. Ludwig. Jane had come to Eric through Phoebe Golden, the famed scientist and Queen of Iowa. Jane had received her training in reproductive research in Phoebe’s labs, and now was branching out. Sookie knew that Phoebe, and now Jane, were confident that they had found a way to use bones to allow vampires to reproduce. They were piggy-backing on research being conducted elsewhere involving cloning mammoths. The technique hadn’t been fully tested yet, and Sookie had a suspicion it was because Niall had demanded that Sookie and Eric be the first test subjects.

The laboratory was located in Shreveport, adjacent to the Doctor’s hospital. There were two doors to the offices. There was the public door that humans and others saw, the one with a receptionist, high
ceilings and glass walls, and then there was the second door that opened to supernaturals interested in IVF, or in-vitro fertilization.

The facility had rapidly gained a reputation in the Supe world as being the premier place for Weres with conception issues to seek help with making full Were children. The success was due to a fluke. Jane and her team had been working with a full Were couple who were trying to conceive a second child. It was well-known that only first Were pregnancies resulted in a child capable of changing. Siblings born after the first were incapable, although sometimes a second generation would show up with the ability to shift. In this case, the couple was resigned to having that second ‘normal’ child, but it had been many years, so they were seeking help.

The IVF went well. The surprise was when the child was born and preliminary tests showed it capable of shifting. Results were questioned and all the tests run again with the same result. As word traveled, a second couple presented itself, willing and anxious to try. Their first child had died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. They were both full wolves and wanted to bring a Were child into their Pack. The process was repeated, and the results were the same; a Were baby whose DNA and blood tests demonstrated it would have the ability to shift.

Within a month the laboratory was overrun with requests and petitions from Weres from all over the world. Some presented the same sad story as their second miracle baby’s parents, but most wanted the ability to have a family where they all could live the same lives together.

Jane requested Sookie’s help in screening potential applicants, but after the first few evenings of interviews, Sookie asked them to find someone else. The desire these people felt for children and family was overwhelming. Sookie would return home to Bon Temps, walk past the empty bedrooms, and feel every tick of a biological clock she knew was nothing more than an illusion for her.

Fortunately, the Packs approached her, and Sookie was soon spending at least two weeks every month flying all over the country assisting the Weres in creating a central authority. Sookie being recognized as Sachem, able to truth speak for those present, was considered critical to the talks being able to proceed. The movement organizers were flowery in their praise and clear in their belief that things could not move forward without her personal assistance. It was flattering and made Sookie feel valued for her skills.

The first months of working on creating the Were hierarchy had been so promising. Friendships and promises of allegiance and support were given. Vampires were few; most kingdoms rarely hosted more than a hundred individuals. There were many more Weres, and their world was complicated by the variation in animals represented. It didn’t take long for Sookie to realize there was a pecking order among them. Wolves were at the top of that order and Weres who were able to shift into a Wolf form were taught to view themselves as superior to anyone who shifted into any other type of animal. Once she realized this, Sookie made sure it was addressed early, but the many ways this prejudice asserted itself seemed endless, and many hours and opportunities were lost in the time it took to meet each example of intolerance head-on.

Unlike Louisiana, there were places in the country where Packs were predominantly animals other than wolves. It wasn’t that Sookie hadn’t heard of Packs being like this. The Pack her brother, Jason, belonged to was exclusively panthers. The problem was the underlying assumption on the part of Emil Touissant, the head of the New Orleans Pack, and some of the other leaders of the movement that there was something less evolved about these groups. Sookie had to admit that even she was not immune. She had seen the panther Pack as being somehow defective. She associated the inbreeding of the panther group she knew with their animal form, which was not fair.
Looking back now, Sookie thought the real unraveling started three months ago in San Antonio. The auditorium was filled, representatives from Packs from all over the southern part of the country sitting at tables, working through general rules that would allow them to form a single authority. A group of shifters presented themselves, asking for standing at the convention and were denied. The Weres organizing the event argued that they needed to resolve issues for Weres first. They didn’t bring it to the floor for vote, and it started a chain reaction. The organizers were accused of making themselves de facto rulers of a government that didn’t exist. This happened two days into a conversation that was already strained, and it proved the spark needed to ignite simmering resentments.

The convention was salvaged, but it had taken almost around the clock conversations, and Sookie returned to New Orleans drained and dispirited.

The following week Sookie was due to return to Bon Temps for her monthly training session with Tamsin. Training sessions were exhausting, but just being home tended to revive Sookie, restoring her general optimism. This time was different. By the second day, the telepath still hadn’t shaken the sadness she felt over San Antonio. The following week was her first wedding anniversary and Tamsin contacted Eric. He arrived early and Sookie and her husband spend the next ten days doing nothing but swimming and walking, talking and making love. It was wonderful, and when it was time to return to New Orleans, Sookie felt ready to start again.

She flew to Seattle to meet the team. The tension was there almost from the start, but things seemed to settle down. Sookie didn’t see this convention as creating much progress, but at least no ground was lost. For four days delegates met in groups and then as a great, general caucus. Meetings ran late into the night and Sookie wondered if she got more than four hours sleep together the whole time.

Through it all, Owen and James, Sookie’s Were guards from the New Orleans Pack, were there. Initially loyalties and fealty were questioned. Did New Orleans Pack members mean Sookie was already leaning toward that Pack? Sookie told organizers and those in any host city visited that she viewed these Weres as members of her palace guard and not members of any particular Pack. Emil Touissant helped by making a statement that as their Packmaster, he had released members of his Pack working at the Palace from traditional vows of fealty. Those working directly for the Northmans were to be viewed as agents of the Vampire King and Queen. Sookie wasn’t sure what this meant personally for Owen and James, as well as the others working in New Orleans. What she did know was that she was grateful. After that, questions about her guards settled down.

Sookie returned from Seattle to find a message waiting and within forty-eight hours she was back on a plane headed to Madison, Wisconsin. One trip blurred into another. She cancelled her training week in Bon Temps and headed off to another emergency session. She and Emil laughed about becoming road warriors.

When it became a fourth week of flying, Eric asked her when she thought this would end. Sookie became angry that her husband couldn’t see how important this was and how much was riding on her participation. When she told him she didn’t know, he became angry with her. He told her she was getting too thin and that she was forgetting her other obligations. Sookie interpreted that to mean he was putting her obligations as his feed and fuck partner first and she lost her temper. Eric escalated by dipping into her head, something they realized he could do shortly after their wedding. It pissed Sookie off to no end. It was the first time they had had a knockdown, drag out fight that resulted in them sleeping in different places.

Sookie felt terrible. She was back on a plane the next morning and barely slept the whole long trip to Portland, Oregon. When she landed, she texted Eric, apologizing. She knew he was resting and wouldn’t see her message for hours. She arrived at the hotel to find flowers awaiting her. He had sent them last night and she felt terrible all over again. When Eric called her later, she stepped out of her
meeting and ended up crying over the phone. “You are exhausted, Älskade,” he said, “There are so many of them and only one of you. Please, Lover, consider asking them to meet without you for their general sessions. If you collapse, who will be there when they really need you?”

Sookie promised her husband things would slow down. Of course, she returned home to Meg and Silent Witnesses. When he rose to her, Eric knew immediately something was wrong, but to give him credit, Eric didn’t ask questions. He just held her. They spent that night in their retreat within the Palace, lying on soft rugs in front of the gas fire. Sookie felt the coil within her start to loosen as she watched this magnificent man in the fire’s glow reading the words of John Donne. When he wrapped her up and carried her to their bed, all was right with the world again. He waited until the next night to tell her of the troubles with the Witnesses in the other kingdoms.

Three days later, Sookie packed for Bon Temps and Eric packed for visits with the Amun rulers, first in Detroit, and then in Indianapolis. The vampire kings and queens were gathering to discuss the troubles and come to common agreement as to what should be done. Sookie thought Eric wanted to ask her to come with him, but in the end, he didn’t. He kissed her and asked her to try and relax in Bon Temps. He reminded her she had missed her prior month’s training and that promises were worth keeping. She had smiled for him and felt incredibly alone as he pulled away. She realized that some part of what she was feeling might have been Eric.

It had been a good week in Bon Temps. She and Eric talked every night. She could hear he wasn’t telling her everything. Mostly they talked of other things. He told her about the candidates presenting themselves to Rasul as potential Queens. Rasul told him he was holding out for Sibyl of Alabama, who rarely traveled from her kingdom these days. Sookie told Eric about Tara and J.B. DuRone’s latest dust-up with the police over allowing Supernaturals to dance in an All-Supe Nights at Hooligans and Bit’s latest escapade.

Bit was Jason and Michele’s middle son. He was precocious and terrifyingly fearless. While his oldest brother, JC, worshipped vampires in a fanboy kind of way, Bit seemed to think he was a vampire. He approached those few vampires he encountered in Bon Temps or the surrounding areas, like a short, blond bee to a blossom. He would engage them in his earnest way, and so far, most found him amusing. Of course, his starting every conversation by asking if they knew his uncle, Eric Northman, might have had something to do with the tolerant reaction he received.

Last month, Bit took it into his head that if he tried really hard he could fly like Uncle Eric. He gathered materials and created a kite of sorts for himself. He managed to use the hay hoist to haul it up onto the flat roof over the tack room at Sookie’s house in Bon Temps. Bit went to the house almost every day with JC and Rob DuRone. The boys were there to care for the horses, and Michele sent Bit along most days. Michael Eric, Jason and Michele’s youngest, was little more than a year-old and running his momma ragged.

Boys being boys, Bit had plenty of alone time to construct his contraption. How he’d managed to get it up on the roof, then strap himself in without his brother being the wiser would be the topic of plenty of conversations in the Stackhouse residence for some time to come. Michele had no idea how long Bit had been on the ground, hollering before JC found him. When she asked, both boys gave her the same pushed-out lip, round-eyed defiance she recognized from both Jason and Sookie’s faces. Michele blamed the ‘wild Stackhouse blood’ as she described the incident to Sookie. Bit had broken his leg and the cast slowed him down for all of a day.

When Sookie told the story to her husband that night, Eric roared with laughter, telling her he understood Michele’s dilemma, having been a victim of that wild Stackhouse blood himself from time to time. Sookie scoffed and scolded, but she was pleased. Sookie felt the pull to be with him, even though she knew her magic had suppressed any trace of bonding sickness. She slept in the large
bed that filled the doored area in their third floor suite. It was the same bed that had been in Eric’s lair in Shreveport in the Time Before.

The Time Before was what Sookie still called those days after Eric left for Oklahoma and she married Sam Merlotte. It was a funny thing about memory. Over time the memory of the pain you experienced softened, and your belly no longer clenched at those odd moments that reminded you of the person who had made your life so hellish. Sookie could still find the evidence if she chose. The scar over her lip where her tooth had come through when Sam beat her was still there.

Several months ago, Eric found her tracing the scar as she looked at herself in the mirror. He offered to remove it for her, but she declined. Somehow, she had to hold onto it. It reminded her of how far she had come and what could be waiting for her if she ever went back to who and what she had been.

After hanging up with Eric, Sookie held the pillow that was his, wishing she could smell some part of him. Finally, when it became overwhelming, she got up and walked into the closet. She buried her nose in first one suit and then another shirt, seeking him. She woke up the next morning lying in a nest of his clothes on the closet floor. She knew it wasn’t the bond. She was just missing her husband.

If Tamsin knew of Sookie’s troubles, reading her mind in that way Fae did, she didn’t say anything. They were working on growing things. There were so many permutations to be mastered. Sookie knew these lessons would lead to shaping organic materials, but for now she was still working with plants. She could make seeds burst, sending lanky stems and two pilot leaves to the sun, but her creations were not robust. Tamsin would set long lines of various seeds in the ground and Sookie would spend hours focusing on trying to make them not only sprout but include the material of a fully mature organism. It was exhausting.

Then there were other lessons. There were horseback riding lessons and training with wooden swords. Tamsin handled most of the training herself, but she would bring other Fae from time to time to help out. The most recent sword lessons involved learning steps for her feet, ‘forms’ they were called.

For Sookie, learning sword forms was like learning an elaborate dance. She remembered dancing in long lines, the steps complicated, but beautiful in her Great-Grandfather’s hall as they celebrated her and Eric’s handfasting. Sookie hadn’t known the steps, but Eric led her through them.

Feeling nostalgic, she asked Tamsin about the dances. That led to a visit from other Fae. There was a male fiddle player and two women who served as dance partners. Tamsin told her dancing was a way of worship for any Fae and that if Sookie wished it, dancing would be added to their monthly lessons. By the end of the evening, Sookie was laughing and gasping for air. She went to bed that night and slept without waking. When she rose, Tamsin was awaiting her in the kitchen, singing as she sat in the sunlight. Sookie asked to add dancing to their regular lessons.

By the next week Sookie was back on the road.

The trip to Denver with the Pack leadership was considered pivotal. Delegates were selected from all the regional conventions. The list of reservations was long. It would be the largest gathering to date. The first read-through of a proposed set of rules would be made and opened for comment in general sessions. Hopes were running high. Sookie hadn’t seen Eric in several weeks. Of course, they talked, but he hadn’t returned from his latest trip in time to see her off.

On the way to the hotel, Owen turned to her and said, “You should not put too much hope into this, Majesty. It should be considered a victory if the Were's emerge from this convention resolved to try
again.” It was the first time either of her guards had offered an opinion on the work being done.

“Do you feel this way, too?” she asked James, who was driving.

“I think you should slow down,” James told her, not taking his eyes off the road.

Almost from the first, the warnings Owen made seemed to bear fruit. There were scuffles at the registration desk among delegate groups. The restaurant that night looked like a divided camp. Delegates were sitting together by animal type or by region. Sookie could hear the anger and distrust simmering just below the surface. In the past, she was able to pull groups past their suspicions and differences by revealing concerns she plucked from their heads and then used that information to facilitate open and honest conversations. For the first time, that strategy back-fired.

The first meeting between the leaders of the areas was held the second night. Sookie was seated at the head table, as always. She waited to be introduced to those she had not previously met. It all seemed the same as every other convention. Talks started, and Sookie was asked to present her truth speak, revealing the needs of the group. When Sookie started to talk, a member of the Montana delegation protested. She stated that she had no confidence in any woman who was not a Were. What’s more, Sookie being married to a vampire King should have disqualified her since any creature married to a vampire couldn’t be assumed to be neutral. “You have no authority here!” the Montana Were said in a strident voice.

The organizers pointed out Sookie’s status as Friend of the Pack. They spoke of her work so far and her undisputed skills as Sachem. “She is a large part of the reason we have all come this far,” one of the organizers protested. That hadn’t stopped the Montana delegate’s protests and then she was joined by a delegate from Missouri who accused Sookie of working with witches. He accused her of not having the skills she claimed through natural means, but instead of having gained them through witchcraft. He went on to accuse Sookie of being in the thrall of witches. He told the delegates that it was well-known that Sookie Stackhouse had welcomed witches to live with her in her past.

The noise escalated after that. There was so much tension around them that several of the delegates started shifting. Owen walked up behind Sookie and abruptly pulled her from her chair. With a hand wrapped around her upper arm, he quick-stepped her out of the meeting room and toward the elevators that would take her to her hotel room. They were overtaken by angry Weres halfway down the hall, demanding to know who Sookie was really representing. Owen placed himself between the telepath and the angry Weres, but there were so many.

Sookie was tired and summoning the sword that appeared in her hand was instinctual. The cry went up that Sookie was herself a witch and it took the organizers and hotel security in addition to both Owen and James to get Sookie to her room and then out of the hotel altogether.

As the car glided up to the Palace, Owen’s prediction this time proved false. There was a good-sized crowd in front of the Palace for all it was early afternoon. The protesters tried to press in around her car before it cleared the barricades, but it was only a moment of hands pressed to windows and they were through. Sookie sighed. It was hard to remember sometimes that for most of New Orleans, she and Eric remained the golden couple that was their own. They could still go to restaurants or museums and have people cheer and ask for photographs. Sookie knew Eric and Maxwell Lee made a point of going into the city to listen to jazz on a regular basis.

“It’s not fair!” Sookie said.

“Majesty?” Owen asked.

Sookie had not really meant to say the words out loud, but since she had, she explained, “That a
Owen nodded, “It’s true. They don’t represent most folks, but they sure do make a racket.” He smiled in that way he had that made her feel safe. “What do you say? Ready to take the walk to the door?” There had been a suggestion that an awning be put in place over the door. Sides would be fastened and the occupants of vehicles could pull up and exit without their identities being revealed to those on the street. Sookie had weighed in, calling it cowardly and giving in to harassment, but at this minute, emotionally bruised and feeling fragile, she would have liked nothing better.

Pulling up her big girl panties, Sookie lifted her chin and stepped out of the door that Owen opened for her. There were still those who were there hoping to catch a glimpse in the way people liked to see celebrities, but those thoughts were quickly drowned by the chanting of “Blood whore! Blood whore!” from across the street. Sookie almost darted toward the door, then feeling her temper rise, purposely turned, pasted on her Crazy Sookie smile and waved at the angry faces. “Hey, y’all!” she called. “Happy to be back! Always nice to see you!” and she winked before turning and deliberately strolling to her own front door.

Owen chuckled beside her, “You are something!” and he shook his head.

Once inside, though, her bravado evaporated and she felt what she was; sad, dispirited and hollowed out by travel and too much tension. Devrah walked down the corridor, waving at Weres to retrieve luggage. Owen helped Sookie get out of her coat and another Were took it from him. “There’s food in the kitchen for you,” Devrah told the Were guards. “Go grab something and the car will take you both home.”

Owen and James nodded as they walked past Sookie. James wasn’t married, but Owen was. Sookie knew this travel had been a hardship on both him and his family and she murmured her thanks. When the telepath turned back to Devrah, she could see the older woman’s concern. “I’m fine,” she said automatically.

“No, you ain’t,” her housekeeper replied.

Sookie felt her smile tremble. Devrah was right. “Is he home?” and she could hear the tear in her voice, so she bit her lips.

“No, not yet,” and Devrah wrapped the shorter woman in her arm, “But he is due sometime tonight. Why don’t we get you settled upstairs on the roof? It’s a pretty day and you can get you some sunshine.” Devrah squeezed Sookie’s shoulder before saying, “And we both know how much a certain Mister likes that!”

Sookie leaned against Devrah, feeling comforted by the woman’s touch. Saul, the Were who ran their private lift, got off his stool when they approached, “Well, look who’s back from her adventures! It makes my heart happy to see you, Mistress!”

“I am happy to be back,” Sookie replied. She could hear the Were’s unwillingness to give in to the pain that he felt in his knees and joints. Sookie had heard that Weres’ lives were shorter than humans, the process of shifting causing stress in their joints that accumulated over time. “Especially happy to see you,” she added warmly.

Saul smiled over his shoulder, “You turn my head, Majesty. You save your flirting for the King!” and he winked before adding, “Not that I blame you none for being attracted to Weres. We are devilishly handsome!”

“Devilishly something!” Devrah scolded. When they arrived at the top floor, Devrah helped Sookie
up the steps to the rooftop garden. She settled Sookie on the chaise lounge under the pergola, and then said, “You wait here just a minute. The new chef downstairs made something special just for your lunch. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Sookie settled back and shut her eyes. She must have fallen asleep because she opened her eyes to Devrah saying, “What the hell? You get out of here!”

Sookie blinked and sat up to see her housekeeper grab a stick and wave it at something in the air. Sookie looked again and realized she was looking at a drone. The housekeeper swung at the drone again and it evaded her, taking off into the sky. “How long was that there?” Sookie asked, and then stood up. “I think I’ll eat inside now.” She held onto the bannister leading down from the roof. She wasn’t hungry anymore. She didn’t want to be in the city anymore. She wanted to be in Eric’s arms, stretched in front of the fireplace in Bon Temps, his naked body stretched out and his hands stroking her as only he could.

Devrah followed her into the suite, then said, “Oh no, you don’t!” when Sookie started toward the bedroom.

“I’m tired!” Sookie protested.

“You’re worn out,” Devrah countered, “There’s a difference. Now, you are going to sit down right here and eat something. I am going to run a bath for you and once you finish, you can take a nice, long soak. There’s a woman I’m going to call who will come up here and give you a massage, and then we are going to have a civilized conversation and a couple normal hours before the King arrives.” Devrah met Sookie’s defiant look with one every bit as formidable. “No one else is going to say this, so I will. You need to set some boundaries with this Were thing. You are making yourself sick. You have other things in your life that are just as important, and they are suffering. You’ve barely been married a year and you’ve spent less time with your husband than folks that are divorced.”

“Eric understands!” Sookie bit out.

“Your husband is missing you!” Devrah fired back. There was something in how the housekeeper said it that made Sookie feel guilty. Devrah must have seen the change because she added, “He watches the doors on the nights you are supposed to come home. He checks his phone for your texts. He’s proud of you. He doesn’t want to interfere with what makes you happy, but he doesn’t understand. Thalia has left him. Pam is gone. He and Max get along, but it’s not the same. He doesn’t open up to Max the way he did with that nasty little vampire of his. And now? Now you’ve left him, too.”

“I love Eric!” Sookie said.

“I know,” Devrah pushed the tray of food toward her, “and it’s time to show it.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell Devrah to mind her own business. Plenty of couples had busy schedules. Eric always said she was a modern woman, and this work with the Weres had made her feel so good about herself. They needed her. The Weres really needed her. It was something only she could do.

Sookie looked at the food in front of her. She looked at her wrist and couldn’t help noticing how thin it was. She knew her hip bones were protruding again and her collar bones rose from her flesh like angel’s arms. Eric never said anything about it, but the last time they were together, he had drawn his fingers across her pointy bones, tracing the places that were no longer soft or yielding. It was possible that her days with the Weres were over anyway. How could they resolve the melt-down in
Denver? “I’m ready to just be home,” Sookie said out loud.

In hearing the words, there was a part of her that felt she was admitting defeat, but there was another part of her that seemed to sigh, ‘thank goodness, at last!’
Eric drifted in the silence of twilight. He knew he was in his travel coffin. If the schedule was in order, he was in the hanger in Shreveport awaiting loading onto his Anubis flight to Detroit. Somewhere nearby, Thierry was resting in his coffin as well.

Thierry had done well. Everyone had complimented Eric on having chosen him. Eric knew he should feel a deep satisfaction in this, but he found it hard to think beyond his homecoming at the end of this trip and what that would mean.

The French vampire was Eric’s Sheriff in western Louisiana. He handled most of the day to day operations for Eric’s energy holdings. Eric Northman was heavily invested in natural gas extraction wells and wind farms. The plan was to use the quick cash generated through gas extraction, or fracking, to create the investment capital needed to build the more expensive wind turbine farms. Over time, the entire enterprise would transition from fracking to more viable, long term energy solutions. The most expensive part of the operation so far was installing the miles and miles of electrical lines capable of carrying current produced by either source. There were co-generation plants, two so far, co-developed with Stan Davis, the Texas King, and Sandy Seacrest, the Oklahoma Queen, and the plan was to rent use of both the lines and plants to others to repay the start-up costs. This cross-kingdom venture was already showing a slight profit for all involved and Thierry deserved much of the credit for bringing it along. His Sheriff was clever, strategic, but detail-oriented enough to not mind getting his hands dirty. Paired with his sharp wit, Thierry was proving an invaluable resource. Yes, Eric knew he should have been feeling a great deal of satisfaction, but he wasn’t.

This trip involved stops in both Detroit and Indianapolis. Eric could have asked Thierry to join him in Indianapolis. Both Maude of Minnesota and Sandy were there, and they were the official reason for bringing his Sheriff. But business wasn’t really why Eric brought Thierry. Eric brought Thierry to serve as a shield between him and his friends; to put a smiling face on the growing depression Eric Northman was experiencing.

In the past, Eric heard people refer to him as an optimistic vampire. They would remark on his ability to laugh, even in dark times, joyously turning problems over and over until he found a solution. That had stopped when he married Freyda. He was so unhappy he tucked away all that was him and hunkered down, willing to wait for two hundred years to find his freedom and his happiness if it meant Sookie Stackhouse would be safe.

But fate had been kind in many ways. Within six years he was free of Freyda. He was named the Regent of Oklahoma under Felipe de Castro, and then the miracle happened. Through a series of
events he was reunited with Sookie Stackhouse. She was Sookie Merlotte then and recovering from an abusive marriage. What was more miraculous was she claimed him for her own. There were challenges, but they met each of them together. A year ago they were thrice married; they were pledged by vampire custom, married by human custom, and joined in a Fae ceremony. The one woman who had helped him to reclaim his frozen heart was truly his.

Eric regained his enthusiasm. Life was sweet and it was because he experienced it through Sookie.

They should have lived happily ever after, but instead they had fallen into a routine of busily separate lives. Eric didn’t understand why managing her Great-Grandfather’s business concerns and standing with him in matters of their kingdom were not enough for his wife. She made a token effort at being his Queen, appearing with him in Assizes. She stood by his side, but when those in Court challenged her, she didn’t snarl back, asserting her position. Instead she withdrew. Within a few months Sookie informed him she had other concerns that were more important to her. He was hurt, but he couldn’t find the right words to challenge what she was saying. It was as if she was saying one thing, but she really meant something else entirely.

The Weres’ effort to form a central government was not a new endeavor. Emil Touissant, the New Orleans Packmaster, had approached Sookie about helping the Weres realize this dream shortly after the couple arrived at the Palace to take up the reins of the kingdom. Now that effort was gaining traction and Emil approached Sookie again, asking her to become part of the leadership team and to function as the organizers’ Sachem. His wife threw herself into the project. She was like a woman on fire, the light of her determination shining for all to see. She walked and talked with purpose, and Eric was proud of her. What he didn’t appreciate was that this new purpose left little time for them. With barely a thought for what it would mean for him, she presented her travel schedule, prattling on for hours about who she would meet and the challenges that would be faced.

Before Nebraska, it wouldn’t have been possible. Their bonding and their bonding sickness would have demanded they remain in close physical proximity to each other. But that had changed.

When they initially bonded, Eric and Sookie could separate for periods of time, weeks, without feeling the pull to each other. If the bond was ignored, though, the pull could transform into physical pain. As time passed, their ability to remain apart diminished. By the time they were human married, a separation of hours triggered the need to reunite. Eric remembered feeling some little annoyance at the tight nature of their bond, but his primary focus was on figuring out how to change his life to accommodate her standing beside him in all things. It had felt, well, satisfying.

That was not Sookie’s reaction. Sookie was angry. Eric knew his wife well enough to know she hated being dictated to by anyone, even her own body. She railed against it. Eric was sure that in time, she would bow to the inevitable and then they would walk the world, hand in hand.

Eric had not taken Niall, the Prince of the Fae, into consideration. The first piece of magic instruction the old fairy had his wife’s teacher give Sookie was a way to suppress the bond. The experience was less brutal than the time the witch, Amelia Broadway, had ripped their bond away. He didn’t feel that great breaking that made him think his heart would start again. Instead, the bands that held them softened, and then become distant, and then stopped, like a candle that burned itself out. Sookie was triumphant. Eric felt abandoned.

It was in talking about the bond separation on their return from their handfasting that Eric and his wife discovered the other piece of Fae mischief. Eric could read Sookie’s thoughts. Eric was trying to explain his objections to blocking the bond. Sookie was telling him they would just try it and see if they could adjust, but she was thinking she would be perfectly happy leaving the bond in mothballs indefinitely. Eric challenged her on not being wholly honest with him and they realized he could
Sookie was furious, but Eric knew it was fury fueled by fear. Sookie was used to being the only one who knew things. Granted, vampires were silent to her, but every other species were her open book. She used their thoughts to make herself feel confident. Now it was her thoughts that were open, and although Eric knew she trusted him, her fear of exposure ran deep.

Sookie threw the phone against the wall when the well-mannered Fae on the other end informed her that her Great-Grandfather was not taking calls, but they really didn’t need confirmation. They knew it was Niall’s doing.

Sookie cried, and then rounded on him, demanding Eric’s promise that he wouldn’t dip into her head without her express permission. Eric argued for a concession that if the situation was a life safety concern he could imply her permission. It formed the basis of their agreement on the matter.

Eric couldn’t think of anything Niall could have done that would have driven a wall between them faster. For days afterwards, Eric could see Sookie reviewing everything he said, testing to see if it carried even a hint of having come from her thoughts. Eventually, Sookie settled into an easier watchfulness, but she never fully relaxed with him now.

It was the same night of this fight with Sookie that Thalia informed him she wished to see the world again. Although Eric suspected his oldest friend was becoming restless, he wasn’t prepared for the request. Of course, he agreed. He could do no less. He owed Thalia his life and Sookie’s, but he asked if she would give him a month to assess the vampires in his state for battle-readiness. It was something he wished done, but nothing that needed to be done. Eric knew his friend saw through his delay tactic for what it was.

“All will be well, Viking,” Thalia told him and gifted him with one of her rare smiles.

She was gone the next night, moving back to Area 5, telling Eric it made sense since it was more centrally located. Eric heard that Karin, his daughter, joined Thalia there. They were both staying with Indira, his Area 5 Sheriff. Most of the news he received of their work was good. Official reports delivered by email were filled with descriptions of skills and deployment-readiness. A recommendation was made that Sheriffs arrange bi-monthly mandatory training for all vampires in the kingdom, kind of a physical fitness program, in exchange for a reduction in their regular tithe. Maxwell Lee, Eric’s new second, was implementing that change with his usual efficiency.

In addition to the official reports, Eric also received unofficial reports from Mustapha Khan. A long time ago Mustapha had been Eric’s day man. More recently, Mustapha stepped forward when Alcide Herveaux was disgraced. Eric’s former employee was now the Packmaster of the Long Tooth Pack.

Mustapha let the Viking know that Fangtasia Shreveport had become the place to be. People were flocking, sometimes from great distances, to see both Karin and Thalia. When Eric read the report he scoffed, but Maxwell Lee showed the King both Facebook and Tumblr accounts dedicated to both women. They were the darlings of the emo and science fiction sets. There was a petition floating through cyberspace to have Thalia and Karin invited to participate in the next Comic-Con as themselves.

Of course, Karin’s presence in Area 5 meant that she was not with her mate, Thomas. Thomas was Eric’s Sheriff and de facto Regent in Arkansas. When Karin was injured, losing her hand, Thomas traveled halfway across the country to retrieve her. Eric knew his headstrong daughter loved the Sheriff, but he also knew she was fiercely independent. While it was possible Karin might settle down, Eric continued to view it as an unlikely possibility. Thomas’ belief never wavered.
It was Thomas and Karin’s relationship that Eric’s found gave him inspiration. The Viking asked himself what he would be willing to endure to remain bonded with the woman he loved. Were days of happiness worth the long periods of separation? Of course, there was a critical difference between Thomas and Karin and his own bond with his wife. If Eric or Sookie were ended, the other would wither and die. It was the nature of their bond and Eric didn’t question it.

And so, Eric Northman resolved that he would cherish the moments he had with his stubborn wife. He would treat each second they had together as a gift and allow her to leave him on her adventures with as much grace as he could muster. He arranged Registry donors on a rotating basis. He organized the remaining palace tours, even showing up from time to time until the contract expired and he shut them down. He found ways to fill his nights that didn’t involve holding his wife, or sharing time in the sanctuary he created for them in the room across from their sleeping chamber. He stepped in to manage the household bills and discuss the replacement of human staff with vampires or Weres with Devrah, their Palace housekeeper.

Most evenings Eric was able to rise to the challenge. Other nights he would do what was necessary and escape into downtime, his mind at rest.

Eric told himself things were going reasonably well and it seemed they were until the time Sookie returned from a convention in San Antonio. She was so tired. Eric could no longer ignore the smudges under her eyes or the way her vertebrae rose, a dragon’s spine, poking through her skin. She was leaving almost as soon as she arrived home and he despaired. He wondered if this was what she truly wished, to be done with him and to live in the world beyond instead. He dipped into her head without her permission and she caught him. Her fury was outsized, the way only a truly exhausted person can rage. In spite of his best efforts, he got caught up in it and vented his own frustration. Sookie headed down the hall to the room that had been Pam’s and slammed the door behind her, leaving him sitting alone in their retreat.

Several hours later, he opened the hall door. Charles was standing guard at his chamber and James stood outside Pam’s. Neither guard met his eyes. He texted her, not wanting to escalate their anger any further, but she didn’t answer. He searched for her again, not caring if it made things worse, and found the quiet that told him she slept. He arranged flowers to be sent to the hotel where she would be staying along with a note of apology. When he rose the next night, she was gone.

Things improved after that. They spoke more often, even if they didn’t physically see each other. It was in the timbre of her voice when she said hello and the slight tremor when she said goodbye. He had almost asked her to come with him on this trip. He thought it would do her good to see friends who wouldn’t demand things of her. Unfortunately, it was also Fae training week in Bon Temps.

The great Were Convention, which was how Eric thought of the effort to create the central government, had interfered with her schedule last month and when Sookie cancelled her training. Eric received a message from Niall within days, reminding the Viking that he had a contractual obligation to encourage his wife to attend her training every month, and not just when it proved convenient. In spite of his own desires, Eric reminded Sookie of the importance of her training. Driving away from her had been very difficult. It was as if a part of him stretched and stretched until it gave way.

When the plane touched down, Eric found Detroit to be every bit as gritty as he remembered. There was a kind of strong-armed bravado about the place. You knew this was a city that knew how to work and how to play. Rasul was settling into his role as monarch, but there remained much of that funny, capable guard Eric first met in New Orleans in the days of Sophie Ann. Eric and Thierry arrived to find vampire transportation awaiting them at the Anubis charter terminal. The palace staff was ready for their arrival. Thierry was shown to the donor pool while Eric was shown to a room
with a registry donor. Unlike donor pools, feeding from someone who came through the federally administered Registry Donor program did not involve having sex. The Viking knew some registry donors were open to fucking, but those were the exceptions. If a registry donor did hint at more it was something that could be easily ignored.

Once they were settled, the three vampires headed out with a coterie of guards to enjoy jazz and the other nightlife the city offered. The swagger in their step told Eric that feeding had not been Rasul and Thierry’s only activity in the donor pool. There were jokes and Rasul told the story of how he took the then Sookie Stackhouse along with Andre and Sophie-Anne to her cousin Hadley’s apartment for an ectoplasmic reconstruction. The New Orleans Queen had been engaged to the Arkansas King at the time, an engagement that was already riddled with mistrust and deceit. One of the King’s spies arrived and so the trio pretended their purpose in being at the apartment was for group sex. Rasul described Sookie’s unconvincing performance in such round terms that even Eric was smiling.

Rasul took them to a karaoke bar and the Michigan monarch and Thierry had the whole bar standing and singing along to ‘Sweet Caroline.’ They moved on to ‘Wild Thing’ and then ‘I Can’t Get No Satisfaction.’ Eric guarded the table until they started singing ‘I Have Friends in Low Places’ and the Viking found himself standing beside the other vampires, singing in his true baritone to a wildly enthusiastic crowd. It was the first time he felt so carefree since the week he spent with Sookie celebrating their first wedding anniversary and the realization made him miss her again.

The next evening, they spent together discussing the Witness movement. Rasul initially destroyed those new vampires abandoned in his kingdom, but now was deporting them to Canada. It was self-serving, but with stepped-up surveillance from the Witnesses, it seemed the only prudent move. He warned Eric their singing last night would likely be featured in local news stories, so if he needed to tell someone, he should do so. Those media outlets in favor of vampires would highlight the fun had by all. Those news channels that were favoring the Witnesses, the more conservative stations, would suggest there was some nefarious purpose in the vampires being out and about. Rasul shrugged, “It’s a matter of deciding whether or not we should go back into hiding or stand up for ourselves,” the Michigan monarch concluded. “What I am tired of doing is ignoring them and hoping they will go away. They won’t, and not answering them makes sure the only voice heard it theirs.”

They spoke of the upcoming Amun Summit. The initial plan had been for Wisconsin to host, but Roland had a sudden change of heart and declined. Rasul stepped up and the event was to be staged on Mackinac Island, far to the north. It was a resort island and they would be a bit off season. “Your progeny feels the quiet of the place will be a welcome change for many of us,” Rasul said with a wink. “Besides the accommodations there are splendid and some of us could do with some quiet communing with nature.”

Eric knew his daughter, Pam, was involved. Pam was living in Minnesota now and running both the Fangtasia club franchise and the newly-created Fangtasia Events Ltd. Eric had staged a public break with his daughter shortly after his marriage so that she would be free from any taint of being associated with him. Secretly, he asked her to gather information about the nomads. He knew with the controversy surrounding his pledging to Sookie, Pam wouldn’t be able to move freely among the kingdoms if she was too closely tied to him. The Viking received her reports in roundabout ways. Pam was convinced there was some single arm behind all of this, but whether the money was coming from the west or the east was something she still hadn’t been able to determine.

“It won’t be a problem, will it? You and Pam in the same place?” Rasul looked concerned and Eric felt some small satisfaction, realizing that even those who were closer to him believed the fiction.

“Pam and I are cordial,” Eric replied with a shrug as if to say, ‘she is nothing to me.’
“That’s good,” Rasul nodded. “Your friendship is important to me, Northman. I wouldn’t wish to jeopardize it over something like organizing a Summit. Since the Triple E went under, there just hasn’t been anyone else.” Rasul was referring to Extremely (Elegant) Events, E(E)E, the former event-planning and catering company preferred by Supernaturals. When John Quinn, a Weretiger and the CEO, became incapacitated, the company took a hit. Service slipped and there were complaints. Pam, and Maxwell Lee, her silent partner, stepped into the void with their new venture, Fangtasia Events, Ltd. It was the right business at the right time. Their company was now the premier party and event planning operation in this country. Eric had heard through Maxwell they were planning on using their Fangtasia club franchise’s international connections to branch out even further.

“You have nothing to worry about,” Eric assured him. “I released her many years ago. She is free to live her own life and should she reconsider her attitude toward my choices, I would be pleased. She will always be my child. What Maker can truly disown their progeny?” and the Viking punctuated his speech with a wink.

Rasul smiled thinly. Eric could tell he was still worried, but that was all to the good. There were only a handful of people who knew that this break between Eric and Pam was manufactured. Sookie knew, and Thalia. Eric suspected that Maude of Minnesota also knew. Maude was a close friend and Pam’s mentor. Pam chose the Minnesota Court as her current base of operations. Knowing Maude, Eric doubted Pam was able to keep a secret from her for long. No one did.

As dawn approached, Rasul waited until Thierry preceded them to his rest. The Michigan monarch knew Eric’s next stop was Indianapolis, and so as they headed for their chambers, Rasul pulled Eric aside. “Bartlett Crowe is in trouble,” Rasul told the Viking. “His mate, Russell, is worried about him, but he is afraid to suggest Bartlett step down as Clan Chief. He doesn’t want to be the one to say it, but it needs to be said.”

“Is it as bad as all that?” Eric frowned.

“Worse. It’s as though the nomads and Witnesses have made Crowe their pet project. You’ll see when you get there. I’d suggest you take guards, but I know Bartlett will send them to you anyway. It’s like entering a war zone,” and then the Michigan monarch smiled. “You’ll be glad you came here first. No night life in Indiana, that’s for sure!”

Eric thanked Rasul but as he turned to continue to the rooms Rasul arranged, the vampire laid his hand on Eric’s arm, “And what about you, my friend?”

“What about me?” Eric shrugged.


“It is nothing,” Eric told him, but that night he looked at himself in the mirror before lying down for his rest. There were lines beside his eyes and a paleness to his lips that was new. He was sure it was the strain of these past few months. ‘Only a few more days and I will be home. All will be well,’ he told himself.

Rasul had not exaggerated about Indiana. Noise barriers along the highways were scrawled with anti-vampire graffiti. The compound walls surrounding the residence where Russell Edgington and Bartlett Crowe lived in Fishers were covered with placards of sad faces and splashed with paint meant to represent blood. The crowd of Witnesses blocking the drive was larger and louder than those that stalked the Palace in New Orleans. Eric also noticed the personnel maintaining order looked like private security. They had to be costing Indiana a pretty penny. “Where are the police?” Thierry asked beside him.
Their drivers honked and the security force formed a cordon, pushing the angry faces back from the remote gate. Eric recalled the gates from his prior trip were gracious, separating in the middle to swing in on long arcs. Now the gate was tall and solid. It slid quickly behind the wall and just as quickly moved back into place as their car cleared it.

As they pulled onto the apron in front of the tall house, Bartlett Crowe and his mate, Russell Edgington walked down the steps, every bit as welcoming and gracious as if the mob outside was well-wishers and not terrorists brandishing stakes and hate messages. “Well, you’ve made it!” Bartlett bowed. “I am so pleased to see you again, Eric. I heard all kinds of stories about your wedding celebrations. I have to say, you don’t do anything by halves. I told Russell that now I feel as if our own pledging was too simple an affair. Sandy was just telling us about Nebraska. Did you really get to participate in the Great Hunt?”

“Slow down, Bartie!” Russell laid his hand on his mate’s arm. “Let our guests come inside.”

“It is good to see you as well,” Eric replied as he bowed in return, and he realized it was. These were his friends and he felt comfortable among them. Russell and Bartlett were responsible in many ways for his ascension to his throne. They supported his marriage to Sookie and acknowledged her as his Queen. They took personal risks for him and he was grateful.

Eric noticed the way Russell wrapped his arm around Bartlett, supporting him. He saw the way the Indiana monarch leaned into his mate and thought of his Sookie. Once inside, the other visitors greeted them. Sandy Seacrest nodded to Eric and then turned to Thierry, “I am so pleased to see you again, Sheriff. I was reviewing our quarterly reports and everything is ahead of schedule and below cost. I believe you are the reason and I am most grateful.” The Oklahoma Queen turned back to Eric, her intelligent eyes crinkling under her short, grey curls. “You do know how to pick them, Northman. He is a real credit to you. Even Stan sings his praises, and you know what a cautious boy he is!”

“I half expected to see him here,” Eric glanced toward Russell. Stan Davis had once been a frequent and welcome guest here, but lately the Texas monarch was rarely seen.

“Stan finds that his duties as Zeus Clan Chief keep him too busy to gad about, offering advice about problems that are truly not his concern,” Russell said, examining his fingernails. Eric interpreted that to mean that Stan, ever the opportunist, had cut his beleaguered friends loose. Eric was close enough to the Texas border to know that any trouble Stan experienced in dealing with nomad vampires or Witnesses was minor. For whatever reason, the Witness movement had not taken firm root in the Lone Star state, and few, if any nomads, made it past Eric’s sentries in Arkansas or Louisiana.

Eric’s policy on nomads and the progeny they made and abandoned was elimination. Abandoned offspring were systematically gathered and killed. Any nomads captured were tortured and then killed as well.

In their first days, a new vampire was disoriented, particularly if it rose with no Maker to order it, bringing it calm, helping it discover its purpose. New vampires were easily spotted and either staked or staked out for the sun to clean up the next morning. Eric offered a bounty for these orphans, and a richer bounty for capture of the nomads. The activity of hunting and staking turned into a popular pay for play opportunity for Weres, vampires, and a certain kind of enterprising human. Eric felt it was inevitable that the Witnesses or law enforcement or some other do-good group would stumble across the plan. When that happened, there would be a loud protest and a possible, indeed, probable investigation.

It was why they were all here, to discuss what should be done about the nomads and their offspring.
“I know you don’t care, and you know she won’t say it, but Pam sends her love,” Maude walked up and hugged Eric, who took more than a second to return the embrace. Thierry was grinning widely by the time the Minnesota monarch released her much taller counterpart. “Tell me how your Queen is doing. I half expected to see her here with you,” and Maude fixed the Viking with a considered look.

“Sookie is in Bon Temps,” Eric said briefly, turning his face from her. Maude’s eyes narrowed and he could see that he was hiding nothing of his condition.

“Tamsin is there with her?” Sandy asked. Sandy had attended Eric and Sookie’s hand fasting at Eric’s invitation. Nebraska was neutral ground for them and Eric had felt the need to clear the air with the Oklahoma Queen.

Eric had agreed to form an alliance with their common foe, Felipe de Castro. The Viking allowed himself to be pressured into the agreement in front of witnesses. It was not his best moment, and Eric worried about Sandy’s reaction. The Oklahoma monarch was more than an ally and business partner to Eric. He counted her a friend. As much as it would have run against everything he believed, he offered to break the alliance for the sake of their friendship. It was an offer that would have placed Eric in more danger from his peers and at a time when he was already finding himself mired in controversy.

Sandy did not ask it of him. Instead she asked that he work to broker reconciliation between herself and De Castro. Her ability to place her personal agenda aside for the sake of business was one of the things Eric admired about her.

One of the side benefits of being in Nebraska was that it allowed Sandy to witness both the pageantry and machinations of the Fae. It was something that few creatures and fewer vampires would ever see in their lifetime. The Fae were secretive by nature, one of the few Supernatural groups that refused to ‘come out’ to humans. Eric asked Niall, his Grandfather-in-law, if that would change, but the Fae ruler had smiled and changed the subject.

Eric forced his tight smile to become more natural, “Yes, Sookie is training, as she agreed.”

“That’s quite the contract the Prince put together for you,” Bartlett said with a raised eyebrow. When Eric looked surprised, Bart chuckled, “The old bastard had it posted, and surely you knew that! It’s in big old electronic black and white, welcoming any and all readers. As your Clan Chief I considered it my duty…”

“Don’t listen to a word of it,” Russell interrupted. “He read it out loud one night for me, complete with hand gestures. I’m afraid we both had a good laugh at your expense, Eric. For a fairy, Niall certainly figured out how to grab you by the short ones.”

“Niall is a superior strategist,” Eric agreed, “but weak in the long game. He prefers grand gestures. It will be the death of him some day.”

“Pshaw!” Maude waved her hand, “To the bold go the rewards. Big brass ones, in my opinion.” When Eric looked her way, she nodded, “Pam and I both read it. You have to figure that there are a lot of us who have. After all, you two are news and your father-in-law pretty much posted it on the Supe front page.”

At Russell’s urging they moved from the hall into the sitting area. There was a fireplace merrily blazing at one end of the room. A vampire in an evening jacket stepped forward, offering everyone blood. Bartlett looked up expectantly, “Do either of you need a donor? I must admit, we are maintaining several here again. I know it’s a risk, but it’s just too difficult to get Registry at the
Eric shook his head. He would make do with Royalty or bagged blood until he returned to New Orleans. It was a promise he made to himself, that he would not go beyond feeding from any living being other than Sookie. It was not difficult on most days, but if the donor had a hint of Fae or some other odd combination, and was physically aggressive, Eric could find he became hard. It was troubling. He had not had this problem in all the years of his marriage to Freyda. He thought about the changes he saw in the mirror. He was a vampire. He was never supposed to change, and yet, he had.

When Thierry also declined the offer of a trip to the donors, the monarchs settled down.

“Why don’t you drink some Royalty while I finish my story?” Maude smiled at Eric. “I was just telling everyone about your daughter and how she’s taken over my city,” and Maude turned so that her remarks were aimed away from the Viking. While Maude described Pam Ravenscroft as a peacock stranded in a snowy, frozen wilderness, Eric drank first one glass of blood and then another. Now that he was aware of it, he could feel it, the thinning within him. It was an odd sensation, subtle but truly foreign.

The Viking felt the first tendril of concern. There had been times in this existence that he had been damaged. Many times. He thought of the pains and aches he had experienced. This was different. He considered silver poisoning. No, this was not that either, although it had some features in common with poisoning.

“Eric? Eric!” Sandy’s voice called and Eric realized with a start that he had slipped into downtime again. The monarchs were looking at him.

“Sorry,” Eric said briefly. He jerked his chin at Thierry and the Sheriff began to describe the precautions they had taken in the kingdom to deter the nomads.

Thierry talked of the interlocking grids of sentries and cameras that were being used to patrol his borders. “It is a great deal of territory,” Thierry said, “But much of the terrain is not conducive to easy travel. It is puzzling that in this day of mass transit, these creatures travel almost exclusively on foot. It is odd, but if you eliminate main thoroughfares and those high traffic areas from those areas you search, the opportunities to intercept them increases.”

“The other thing we discovered was that they form nesting sites,” Eric added. “We stumbled across our first over a year ago. We have since discovered several more. They are near cities in rural areas. They find sandy soil. Several nomads will use the same site. New nomads will know of the location and use these sites as well. We still don’t know how they communicate this.”

“We think they have common Makers,” Bartlett said. “There are characteristics, ways of talking that you almost unconsciously take from your Maker, especially when you are newly made. It is their influence over you.”

“That’s a scary thought,” Maude shook her head. “If they are all coming from one place…”

“We don’t have proof,” Russell shook his head. “It’s just a feeling,” and he laid his hand over Bartlett’s.

“Are you destroying the nesting sites?” Sandy asked Eric.

“No,” the Viking replied. “We maintain them. We have placed surveillance cameras on them. We intercept nomads as they leave. I offer money for the fangs of the newly-risen. Were...
patrol the places. They know there are cameras so they are pretty good about following the rules. They take them some distance before they destroy them.”

“Bounty hunting?” Bartlett shuddered. “For vampires?”

“New fangs are easy to spot. Fortunately, these nesting spots are rural. I know there are more than the ones I’ve found. We have more of the newly-made staggering into towns, creating havoc.”

Russell nodded, “We get calls here on a regular basis about vampire incidents. Feelings are running high. It makes our Sheriffs’ jobs almost impossible.”

“And once we do catch them we can’t just eliminate them,” Bartlett stated. “We are under constant surveillance now. Witnesses and everyday people take photos of everyone. We are watched. If we are caught just eliminating our own, how do we argue for justice in their system? Killing some but demanding due process for others is a slippery slope.”

“We have a similar issue,” Eric agreed. “We have moved around collection sites, making them remote and controlling how they are publicized, but it’s a short term solution.”

“If you don’t eliminate them, then what?” Sandy asked.

“We will need to find a way to assimilate them, or we will have to reach out to the human authorities for assistance,” Bartlett sighed.

“You know I don’t agree with that,” Russell shook his head. “Once we invite breathers into this, in particular law enforcement breathers, we’ll never get them out of our affairs.”

“There are places where we have vampires as members of their police forces,” Thierry pointed out. “My own Area has three vampires now. Their presence has made a difference, although their colleagues still treat them differently.” When Sandy asked about it Thierry elaborated, “Police forces tend to be a band of brothers. They socialize with each other. The vampires on the force are not invited to participate. People are polite with them, even cordial, but the bonding one might expect is not there. Promotions and certain jobs are not made available.” There were nods around the table. This was not really news.

“It would be better to be on the inside of these things,” Maude agreed.

“Good luck here,” Bartlett said bitterly.

“Actually, this is a perfect test case,” Eric’s eyes narrowed. “We have an equal rights advocacy group in New Orleans. They are building a national network. There are usually openings for police forces advertised. We all know vampires will pass their physical fitness requirements…”

“Too easily!” Russell laughed.

Eric nodded, “As soon as you hit a barrier, we turn to this group and hand it to them. They are looking for something to ignite their cause. What I passed through outside was worse than anything I’ve seen in a hundred years. Understandable if not forgivable in view of attacks by these orphans, but how do our critics argue if we are trying to get vampires on the police forces to help humans deal with the problem according to their laws?”

“SHUER,” Thierry supplied.

Eric nodded. When he saw Maude’s puzzled face he supplied, “Supernaturals and Humans United for Equal Rights.”
“That’s a mouthful,” the Minnesota monarch laughed.

“They are well-funded. They have attorneys. They have asked Sookie and myself to become involved as spokespeople, but I think an introduction to you,” and Eric nodded to Bartlett and Russell, “would give them a more interesting face.”

“Because we’re gay,” Bartlett shook his head.

“It is trendy,” Eric smirked, “And something that humans can understand more easily than the nature of my mixed marriage.”

“She’s looking more Fae these days?” Sandy asked, but her tone was light.

“Only when she’s angry,” Eric sighed.

“Well, don’t we all!” Russell sighed dramatically as well and was rewarded for it by his mate swatting him on the arm.

The conversation turned to news of friends and gossip from around the kingdom. They talked of the upcoming Amun Summit. Eric and Thierry talked about their visit with Rasul, and Eric texted them the video of Rasul and his Sheriff strutting on the stage in Mick Jagger mode. They talked of the Moshup Summit that would be held weeks before their own. “Are you attending?” Maude asked Bartlett.

“No,” the Amun Clan Chief replied. “I just can’t right now. I will want to send a delegate, though.”

Russell looked at his mate with concern, “Our famous house guest will be there, though. There is going to be a media event and a teaser showing of the famous film,” and Russell turned his eyes to look at Eric speculatively. “Perhaps they would welcome the appearance of the Viking that inspired it?”

Eric shook his head as Thierry laughed aloud. The palace in New Orleans was being overrun with photos and posters of the upcoming saga, ‘A Viking’s Bond.’ The tall, blond actor who was portraying Leif in the movie had captured the imagination of both young and old. He had recently been named one of America’s sexiest men. There were many in New Orleans who felt that Eric Northman deserved that award, too, and they were not shy about superimposing Eric’s face on the actor’s body and posting it with captions like, “Love the Original!” or “I Want A Real Viking!”

“I have no particular business that would suggest I attend,” Eric said briefly.

Dawn was approaching and Eric was grateful the evening was over. It was a quick visit, this one. By tomorrow evening he would be back in the airport and on his way home. Sookie would be there, he hoped. Eric excused himself, stood, and followed the servant to the chambers that had been set aside.

“Does he look right to you?” Maude asked Russell after the others had gone.

“No,” Mississippi replied. “I was going to talk with him tomorrow night about taking over as Amun Clan Chief. Now I’m not so sure.”

Maude shook her head, “It is a shame, but I understand. Bartlett is under such pressure. Perhaps this plan Northman suggested will help.” She waited a second before adding, “Don’t count the Viking out yet. Let me make a call.” Minnesota frowned, “It could be some kind of old vampire thing or the result of some prank. I’ve never seen vampires torture each other for fun the way Eric and his progeny do. I don’t know whether to laugh or wince.” and Maude smiled broadly to give the impression that it was probably nothing important.
When she reached her chamber she checked the time and then placed a call to Pam Ravenscroft. She knew Pam was in another time zone to the West, so she would still be up. When Pam answered, Maude sighed, “It’s so good to be right all the time!” Pam snorted, but before her friend could say anything more, Maude said, “I have something to tell you, Pam, and you need to let me know if you’ve seen this before or if there’s anything you know.”

Maude described Eric’s appearance, the haggard expression, the distracted way he presented himself. Because she was vampire, she could describe each clue in precise detail. She could hear Pam’s voice catch, “I should come back,” the younger vampire said, her voice stressed.

“Don’t be crazy,” Maude scolded her. “You have both worked hard to set this up. You come running home now, you’ll ruin everything. There has to be someone you trust who can check him out…”

“Amy Ludwig!” Pam interrupted. “She’s a doctor. She’s a piece of work, but she can bully Eric into letting her take a good look. I think she scares him.”

Maude laughed, “Something tells me I need to meet this woman!” Pam texted the phone number and Maude called.

“What?” a snappish voice demanded.

“I am Maude, the Queen of Minnesota…”

“I don’t need an episode of Biography,” the sharp voice on the other end cut Maude off. “Who gave you my private number so I can cut them off my patient list?”

“Fine!” Maude snapped back, her tone equally sharp, “Eric Northman looks ill. He will be returning to New Orleans tomorrow evening. I trust you will look into it.”

“Is his breather sick too?” the voice asked, the tone a bit nicer.

“I wouldn’t know,” Maude replied. “She’s not with him.”

The sound on the other end of the phone could have been disgust and the voice said, “Lose this number!” before hanging up.
Pam Ravenscroft stood at the large, light-tight window. Technology continued to improve. She could admire the neon pageantry of the Las Vegas strip with very little distortion. She was already dressed for the evening. Angie and Felipe de Castro would be calling to collect her soon. She had to hand it to the Narayana Clan Chief; the accommodations in his new hotel/casino were first-rate. He might be an oily snake-charmer, but he could also stumble into sophisticated from time to time.

Pam had been in Las Vegas for over a week. Her original purpose in coming was to oversee the retooling of the local Fangtasia nightclub.

When Pam took over as Sheriff of Area 5 and Eric Northman headed to Oklahoma to be married to Freyda, one of the things Pam inherited was the Fangtasia franchise. At the time, that had consisted of exactly one club and a name. Pam was sure there was a wider audience for the kind of experience the club provided. She partnered with Maxwell Lee and together they approached their then king, Felipe de Castro.

Looking back, Pam realized in some ways it was those years when she was Sheriff that were among her best personally. She had a reputation as both a fighter and effective Sheriff. Her intuition and business savvy were paying off. She was standing on her own two feet and not behind her Maker’s equally impressive shoulder.

Pam had returned to Eric Northman when he was Sheriff in Area 5 and serving Queen Sophie-Anne LeClerq. Together they built a decent living and enjoyed the benefits that came with being big fish in a small pond. No one had to say it, Eric was the de facto ruler of northern Louisiana, but he wasn’t burdened by any of the responsibilities of rule. What’s more, he and the Queen were friends. It was a comfortable existence. Things changed when Felipe de Castro staged a takeover, killing the Queen and becoming King himself.

Life under Felipe, or more specifically under Felipe’s minion, Victor Madden, was not good. Victor was a greedy, cruel bully who enjoyed making those who intimidated him squirm, and that meant everyone. It was a given he would hate Eric Northman. The Viking was successful and admired, everything Victor Madden was not. Looking back, Pam was surprised it took as long as it did for her and Eric to manufacture Victor’s assassination.

Needless to say, that didn’t sit well with the King. It wasn’t that Felipe minded. Pam and Eric knew that their eliminating Madden was doing De Castro a favor, but no King could allow his Regent to
be killed and do nothing without risking other vampires thinking him vulnerable.

Within months, Eric Northman was bound up in a marriage contract his Maker, Appius Livius Ocella, drafted with Freyda, the Oklahoma Queen. As Eric’s King, Felipe might have freed the Viking from the contract, but there was that punishment to mete out. Eric negotiated as well as he could. He made sure Pam was named Sheriff and he traded away an extra hundred years of indentured marriage to make sure that Sookie Stackhouse, his ex-wife, was protected from any further interference by vampires. That’s how things should have stayed, but no one figured on Freyda being so jealous and Sam Merlotte, the man Sookie married after Eric left, being such a bastard.

Five years later, Felipe de Castro was King of Oklahoma too. His influence stretched across three Clan territories and fortune favored him. Eric was his Regent, Pam was making money, and then things changed. Fortune’s wheel turned and it was Eric who was King in Louisiana and Arkansas. Sandy Seacrest became Queen of Oklahoma and Felipe de Castro was back to being King of Nevada, disgraced, and teetering on the brink of financial ruin. But there’s a saying, ‘You can’t keep a bastard down.’

Years passed and Felipe was flying high again. In a series of moves that were still shrouded in mystery, suspicious deaths led to his becoming King of California and Nevada. His stooge ruled in Oregon and the ruler of the only other state in Narayana Clan, Washington, had withdrawn from public life. Felipe de Castro was Narayana Clan Chief and powerful once more. He also took the bold step of making peace with Eric Northman, requesting an alliance.

It was during the years of Eric’s marriage in Oklahoma that Pam and her partner, Maxwell Lee took Fangtasia forward. At the time, Felipe’s support had been limited to approving their plan to expand and demanding that the first new club open in his home base of Las Vegas. It had taken every cent Pam and Maxwell could scrape together, but Fangtasia on the Strip became a reality within the year. It wasn’t in the best location, all the way at the top of the strip, but it became an immediate success. Tourists and supernaturals alike flocked to the chic surroundings that carried that hint of danger. The lines became legend and the celebrity passes were a hot commodity.

For six years the club provided revenues that rivalled and often exceeded its Shreveport namesake. As the years went by and other Fangtasia clubs were opened in other top destination cities, Fangtasia on the Strip became less important. The past two years had seen profits slipping, but then again, the club was overdue for a major renovation and retooling. Had the club been located in any other city, the upgrade would have happened already, but this was Las Vegas. Until recently, this was technically enemy territory.

Even with their supposed partnership, Pam hadn’t known what to expect when she called her former King five months ago, requesting permission to enter his territory and conduct the work. Felipe surprised her. He offered to send his private jet to pick her up when the time rolled around. He insisted on housing her in the best suite in his newest hotel. Pam was given open access to contractors at Felipe’s own preferred terms, and the monarch asked whether she would be interested in allowing him to become a limited partner in the refurbished club in return for his investment. He hinted that as each of the west coast clubs in Narayana came due for rehab, that he would be willing to invest capital in return for a modest stake in future profits.

Then, Felipe sweetened the deal. He told Pam he knew she was getting into the events planning business and he wanted her to handle his future events. Pam was sure there was a catch; after all, she was squeezing out a competitor that was likely co-owned by De Castro.

Extremely (E)legant Events had held a virtual monopoly on Supernatural event planning, including
Summits and ceremonies for as long as Pam could remember. John Quinn, the former CEO, had personally been many things to Felipe de Castro. At one point, John owed the King, working off his mother’s debts by fighting in De Castro’s pits. Other times, Quinn functioned as a spy and handled other dirty work for the King. Pam didn’t know it for a fact, but she believed Fangtasia Events Ltd. was taking money from De Castro’s pocket. It was inconceivable that E(E)E’s demise was painless for the King, but within days of the call, Pam was provided specifics on an upcoming event and asked to send her contract.

Were it anyone else, Pam would have taken the offer at face value, but this was Felipe. It was hard not to see the pleasant words and enthusiastic support as not-so-subtle strong-arming. Pam kept expecting the fangs to descend, but so far, there had been no sign.

Pam was so keyed up as she put the event together, she thought she would give herself a stroke. De Castro wanted something to reward his whales, those gamblers who spent obscene amounts of money at his tables. These men and women were a combination of human and Supernatural so their tastes were complex. The King also wished to showcase some new fighters so Pam was asked to incorporate this activity into the evening.

Pam and her team transformed one of the upper floors in De Castro’s casino into a Victorian men’s club. There was staff in period clothing and real gas lights. Furniture was vintage and the music and instruments authentic. The fight was set up down the corridor, the seating intimate and the action close enough to feed the adrenaline of all who watched. At the other end of the floor was a green door that led to a bordello catering to every taste. In other words, there was something for everyone. It was a surprising success. Since the event three nights ago, De Castro had received commitments from most of the attendees to return and some inquiries from big spenders known to frequent other casinos on the Strip. Angie, De Castro’s second, told Pam she was sure her Maker would be looking for several more events in the future, and then Angie offered sex. Pam declined. It wasn’t that Pam didn’t have an itch that needed scratching, in fact she had several, but she couldn’t imagine getting naked and vulnerable with this woman. She simply couldn’t trust her.

The first thing Pam did this evening, as she did every time she returned to her suite was sweep for bugs. Unless Felipe’s technology was far superior to her own, which Pam doubted, the room was clean, but Pam hadn’t survived this long by being less than meticulous about these things.

When the call came, Pam went downstairs to meet Felipe and Angie near the Registration Desk. Together they headed out for an exclusive blood club just off the Strip. “I wanted to thank you again,” Felipe purred, settling back against the soft leather seat in his limo. “My reservations concierge tells me that the compliments continue. We had another inquiry from a potential client who plays almost exclusively overseas. If she does come stateside, it will be quite the coup. You were one of my best Sheriffs, and it is clear that your talents have only improved. I look forward to continuing our relationship as friends,” and Felipe tipped his glass in Pam’s direction.

“Brainy and beautiful,” Angie purred, and Pam smiled as was expected.

“I have to say, Pamela,” Felipe continued, “As much as I appreciate your Maker, it occurs to me that it is during these times when you are more independent that you shine,” and the King flashed her his even-toothed smile from beneath his thin mustache.

Pam had been waiting for this conversation. It was only natural that Felipe would be curious about her supposed break with Eric Northman. She and Eric had worked out the logistics, staging their heated argument in front of witnesses at an Assizes Court. Eric publically removed her as Regent of Arkansas, and they left enough unsaid to fuel speculation. Everyone knew that vampires were inveterate gossips, and within hours, the story lit up the Internet lines. Pam made a point of
publicizing her move to Minnesota by sending out change of address notices to all her business associates and personal acquaintances.

The real reason Pam was appearing to be footloose was Eric’s plan. He wanted her to have the freedom to poke into the changes that were happening all around them. There were incursions by strange vampires, moving across state lines, leaving havoc in their wake. There was the Silent Witness movement. Felipe de Castro had told them he was nervous about Mikhail, the King of New York, nervous enough to seek alliances with former enemies. De Castro wasn’t the only one. Nabila, the Mosup Clan Chief and Queen of the Carolinas also appealed for assistance in containing the New York King. Eric was certain there was something at work, something that they needed to understand. With Pam’s connections coupled with her ability to move freely in service of her business, he was sure Pam was in the best position to ferret out the truth.

Still, it had been a wrench. Pam understood Eric’s reasoning. It was flawless, as usual, but it still stung. She was his child, and he was her Maker. It was a relationship that even now, after Eric freed her, commanded a level of respect and subservience. Eric didn’t demand her obedience. Eric’s own Maker had not been so generous, and frankly, Eric would have been within his rights to demand her obedience if he wished. It was one of the things Pam loved most about him, that the Viking treated her fairly. It was what lay at the root of her unsettled feelings now. Eric had treated her like a pawn. He hadn’t discussed this decision with her in advance as he might have in the past. He didn’t include her in his planning. Instead, he announced it and simply expected her to go along.

So, Pam smiled her best, carefree grin at the King, and replied, “I’m glad you noticed. I was just thinking the same thing myself.”

They pulled up to the long, low building. A few photographers were outside and cameras snapped as they posed on the carpet. After a few minutes of turning this way and that, Felipe gestured and they walked through the door that opened as they approached. The restaurant lighting was subdued and clean, filtered air was piped in. This was a space that catered exclusively to vampires. Blood here was fresh and expertly mixed to provide the diner with a subtle variety of taste and texture. The environment was carefully monitored to suppress any distraction from the experience and soon Pam was sipping from one glass after another, enjoying the pleasure that came from what was really a simple concept.

“It’s marvelous, isn’t it?” Felipe asked, “So freeing being in a place that truly appreciates us for what we are.”

“There’s even free range in the back,” Angie laughed.

Pam glanced at a door Angie pointed out. It reminded her of the green door in the fantasy she had created for the gamblers. “Complete with all the amenities?” Pam asked, keeping her voice teasing.

“Interested?” Angie asked, her eyebrow arching in a way that told Pam the offer of sex was still on the table.

“Interested?” Angie asked, her eyebrow arching in a way that told Pam the offer of sex was still on the table.

“Perhaps… later,” Pam shrugged noncommittally.

“I missed you, Pamela,” Felipe laughed, his face a mask of delight. “Subtle, expressive. You were, without a doubt, my most able Sheriff. Of all the regrets I have of that time, you are certainly the greatest. I should have found a way to seduce you away from Northman years ago.”

Pam smiled, “You are most kind.” She noticed a narrowing in Angie’s eyes, almost a wince. Pam recognized it immediately. It was rumored that although she was his second, and his child, Felipe did not reward Angie in the way he rewarded others. Pam found herself feeling sympathetic toward this
woman and then scolded herself for being foolish. She knew Eric valued her, but she couldn’t stop
the small stab of jealousy she felt when she thought of Thalia and Sookie Stackhouse.

Felipe was on a roll, “If the strictures were different, I would have offered a marriage contract. A
monarch would be most fortunate to have you standing beside him.”

“As I recall, you were anxious to marry me off to Sibyl,” Pam smiled. The threat had come at a low
point in the relations between Eric, Pam, and Felipe. It would have been a hellish arrangement. Sibyl,
the Alabama Queen was waspish and bitter. Had it come to pass, Pam figured she would have found
her final death because she certainly would have killed the Queen.

Felipe threw his head back and roared. “Oh, yes! At the time I was most unhappy with your Maker. I
couldn’t think of anything that would have punished him more than seeing you so unhappy!” and
then the monarch wiped the traces of blood tears from his eyes. “You realize; it was nothing
personal. If you were not so valuable, so talented, it would not have been an effective punishment. It
is only when one plays with the best that the stakes are high enough.”

Pam had to hand it to him, Felipe was smooth and she found she was genuinely charmed. “Why do I
have the feeling you didn’t bring me here just to exchange compliments?” Pam asked.

“Talented and perceptive,” the King saluted her, “I do have another purpose.” Pam tensed. She was
glad she was in a booth with her back to a solid wall. It would make an assassination attempt
difficult. She had a clear range of vision into the rest of the room. No one looked too interested in
them, and there were few other diners. It didn’t feel like an ambush, but stranger things had
happened. Felipe’s expression turned knowing, “Relax, Pamela! I would like to propose a new
venture, something we could co-own. I like your style and you’re lucky. You are not like Northman;
you don’t find your luck only to have others wish to take it from you.” He gestured to Angie and she
pulled a couple of papers from her jacket. Felipe spread them out on the table. They were crudely
sketched and the numbers were hand-written. Pam was surprised. She hadn’t taken Felipe for
someone who got his own hands dirty, even for something like this.

“I believe there is a market for a chain of sex clubs,” the Ruler stated. Pam’s mouth turned down.
This did not sound promising at all. “Hear me out,” Felipe continued.

The King spent the next hour talking through his idea. He had done his market research, although
when Pam pressed him for his sources, there were several she found less than credible. Felipe’s hotel
had recently hosted an adult entertainment convention, and he was adamant that the information he
collected through interviews with attendees was something that should be considered. What struck
Felipe was the change in attendees. While in the past the people who attended these functions had a
type and age range, this most recent convention had been different. Felipe was convinced the
popularity of Fifty Shades of Grey and similar stories signaled a shift in mainstream sensibilities. “It
is no longer taboo for humans to explore less conventional sex,” he stated.

De Castro then went on to describe the current swingers and sex clubs available in Las Vegas. “It is
a little different in some countries in Europe and Asia, but for the most part, the current venues fail to
cater to this new clientele.” When Pam looked skeptical, Felipe pressed, saying, “I will be happy to
take you on a tour of the best Las Vegas has to offer. We are, after all, the City of Sin. There are
many to choose from and they are successful at what they do, however, they will not appeal to our
new voyagers.”

“And why don’t you think these newcomers will patronize the places available?” Pam found she was
becoming intrigued in spite of her own misgivings.

“These are people new to the lifestyle. They are curious, but shy. This requires a product that titillates
and tempts, but without offending tender sensibilities. If they run screaming from their first encounter, they won’t come back.”

“I’m not interested in creating another Vampire’s Kiss,” Pam said flatly. Vampire’s Kiss had been the nightclub Victor Madden opened to hurt Fangtasia’s business.

Felipe nodded, “Nor am I. I am curious though. What exactly was it about the Kiss that you found offensive?”

Pam settled back, “It was all so blatant. It was selling sex with vampires, and living on the edge with vampires. Everything was loud and confrontational. Mainstream wants to feel naughty, not shocked. It’s a fine line.”

“You sound as if you have ideas,” Felipe was grinning and Angie leaned forward as well. As she heard the words, Pam realized she did have ideas. She still thought the concept would never be as popular as Fangtasia, but it could serve a particular niche.

“I see a club where the initial impression is modeled something along the lines of the new Fangtasia,” Pam started, “A calm bar, relaxed. The lighting and colors muted, like here,” and she gestured at their sophisticated surroundings.” No red and black, more greys and blues, like the sea. Oh, and no buffet! People are there to be doing things with their hands. Why would anyone eat food that’s available for anyone else to touch? I’m thinking a jazz quartet and several concierges trained in talking novices through what’s available and making introductions.”

“I can see it!” Angie nodded, leaning forward, “What about a light menu served a la carte that changes frequently? Chocolate dipped fruit and sugary desserts?”

“That would work,” Pam agreed. “Top line blood for supernatural guests and a careful policy about co-mingling. Once a novice works up to it, there could be two paths. One takes you to an area that features romantic music, private rooms and more intimate play for you and your friends.”

“And the other?” Felipe smiled, his fangs on display.

“The other is rock music, a dance floor, and access to a dungeon. Again, nothing too intense. Feather whips and soft leather. This is about initiating, not scaring.”

“A place that draws you in and allows you to tip yourself down the rabbit hole,” Angie smiled.

“Then there could be separate venues that cater to a particular taste. The larger club becomes the marketing arm for the more specialized clubs,” Felipe was warming to the task.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Pam cautioned. “There is a lot of liability here, and it’s not just the capital investment. We would need to figure out all kinds of logistics. For example, what would be the training program for our concierge role? I can see an advantage to having both male and female. It would need someone helpful and wholesome looking with just the right amount of enthusiasm.”

“When can you start designing?” Felipe laughed.

“When can you come up with money and location?” Pam shot back.

“Done and done,” and Felipe then said a little more soberly, “But, of course you are right. Let’s get past the planning stages first.”

Together they headed over to Fangtasia on the Strip. It was prime time, the hours before midnight,
but the club was not filled to capacity and the bouncer at the door was sitting. Pam flicked an annoyed look his way. Even though there wasn’t a line tonight, there was no reason to not look as if one were anticipated. Once inside Pam greeted the manager and then took all of them on a walk through the club, talking through the planned renovation. The space here was good and the Strip was looking to expand. There was no need to move a re-tooled Fangtasia back to the action if the action was coming to Fangtasia. The entire place would be stripped to the studs. Multi-level seating would be installed along with a more sophisticated sound system. There had been improvements that would allow the music to permeate without requiring that the volume be deafening. Colors and surfaces would become sleek and metallic. Maxwell Lee had spent extra time and energy on the design and Pam felt it was one of his best, modernist, spare, but enticing. It smoldered sin, and what else could be wished for in Las Vegas?

Pam took a few minutes to confirm plans. The club would shut down in three weeks. The renovation would take a few months and the grand opening was scheduled to coincide with the premiere of ‘A Viking’s Bond,’ the vampire-human romance movie loosely based on Eric Northman and Sookie Stackhouse. The trailers were everywhere and advance reviews were calling it the perfect date movie with an edge.

“Will you keep the staff on payroll?” her manager was asking.

Pam thought of the lazy bouncer. “You can offer half pay to no more than five,” she said sharply, “Make sure you pick your best. Two weeks before we open, I’ll come back to help screen potential staff. New look, new vibe.” Her manager looked shocked and Pam thought, ‘That’s right, buddy. You could be part of the out with the old.’

When they arrived back at the hotel, Angie stroked the back of Pam’s arm, “Are you sure I can’t interest you in a late night snack?”

“It’s tempting,” and Pam allowed her eyes to warm, “but I am traveling tomorrow. There are preparations to be made.”

“Back to Minnesota?” Angie sighed.

Pam one-arm shrugged, “It suits for now.”

“You must look like a tiger among the kittens,” Felipe teased.

“Maude has her own style,” Pam smirked, and then said in a sly way, “just not mine!” and then Pam laughed to lead the others.

“Will you be coming to Moshup?” Angie asked. Pam had to hand it to her, Felipe’s child was doing her best to be pleasant.

“I will,” and Pam leaned forward just a bit. “There are a number of events for the movie in addition to the Summit. Boston is a wonderful town and my Fangtasia there has done very well. Always a good idea to check in.”

“So you have your permission from the de facto Clan Chief?” Felipe watched her closely.

“Nabila? I cleared things with her almost a year ago,” Pam kept her voice neutral.

“I meant Misha, the real Chief in the East,” Felipe persisted.

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at,” Pam worked to look puzzled, “he didn’t say anything to me one way or another. Of course, I have two clubs in the City and he’s already invited me to stay at his
Felipe actually looked angry, then regained his composure, “You’d do well to keep your eyes open,” he said smoothly, then turning to Angie said, “Come, it’s time to go.”

Pam waited until they were out the door before she walked to the elevator that took her to the top floors. Pam was happy to strip off the jacket she had purchased for this trip. While it was eye-catching, it was also not entirely comfortable. Pam had learned long ago the importance of dressing for the company and business you anticipated. ‘Setting the stage,’ was what Eric called it. No sooner had she deposited the black leather with its chains and pearls on the bed than her phone rang. She could see from the caller ID it was Maude.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Pam asked.

“Are you appreciating your quiet?” Maude responded. It was their code asking whether they could talk freely or if Pam needed to move to a more secure location. When Pam gave the ‘all clear’ response, Maude told her friend about Eric.

Pam felt her heart clench as she read between the lines. She knew Maude would never have called her if it wasn’t serious. “I have to come back!” she exclaimed, flipping through the flights that regularly ran between Las Vegas to New Orleans in her mental rolodex.

“Don’t be crazy!” Maude scolded her. Minnesota asked Pam for the name of someone who could check out Eric’s condition, and Pam gave her Amy Ludwig’s private emergency number.

Amy Ludwig, Doctor Ludwig, was a cranky, cantankerous part-Fae gnome of a woman, but she was brilliant when it came to supernatural medicine. What was more, she was convenient to New Orleans and had a soft spot for Eric Northman. Pam trusted Amy. If the doctor concluded the problem was nothing, Pam’s breaking cover and running to her Maker’s side would be wasted time and resource. If it was something, it would be better to find out exactly what was happening, and then make appropriate plans with a level head and all the facts at hand.

Pam finished her packing and dressed carefully. She would sleep in her travel coffin tonight. Tomorrow, during the day, the Anubis crew would use her special code to gain access to her room and she would wake in Minnesota in the home of Queen Maude.

XXxxx

“I’ve only met Angie once,” Deirdre gave Pam a sidelong glance, “and I kept wondering where’s the woman? Looking at her was like looking at a shadow, she was so thin!”

“I can’t imagine what you say about Twy,” Pam rolled her eyes. Twy was Pam’s sometimes lover. Twy was in Boston working on the Moshup Summit event.

“You sure like them skeletal,” Deirdre huffed. “Why not just freeze some blood on the end of a stick and call it a day?”

Pam laughed out loud. Deirdre was not Maude’s second, she wasn’t even a vampire. She was Maude’s business manager, but like her boss, she called things like she saw them. Deirdre frequently stayed in the Palace, particularly when she worked on a new product, and that was what she was doing now. Maude’s money came from agriculture. She developed plants and vegetables through careful cross-breeding aiming to improve taste and hardiness. While many of her competitors were embracing genetic engineering, Maude resisted. ‘I don’t want stray genes screwing up my food supply!’ Maude would say.
The other part of the Queen’s operation involved prepared foods. Everything from canned to frozen, simple ingredients to full meals, the Minnesota Queen’s labels were a by-word for those who wanted interesting flavors and healthier choices. ‘If it tastes like dirt, who’s going to eat it?’ Maude would challenge her team.

Deirdre’s background was chemical engineering. She used her science to anticipate how combining certain foods would hit the human palate. She combined that knowledge with a healthy curiosity about ethnic food and ancient recipes. The results were making Maude a wealthy vampire.

Unlike virtually every other vampire Pam knew, Maude actually enjoyed the smells of food and cooking. Although she couldn’t eat, the Minnesota monarch maintained that smell was as strong a sense as taste. She claimed she didn’t have to eat something to tell if it would be pleasing.

The experiments today were featuring combinations reflecting traditional Thai food and Pam couldn’t imagine they would meet with Maude’s approval.

When the Queen swept into the kitchen, her nose wrinkled, “What is that?” she challenged.

“It will be the combination of lime leaves, fish sauce, and mint,” Deirdre replied. “It is a unique scent signature. Give it a minute.”

Pam hoped the monarch would demand the strong-scented sauce be dumped, but instead she sat down and asked, “So, how’d it go? You and Felipe all chummy now?”

“He wants to go partners on a sex club venture,” Pam kept her voice level, not wanting to commit herself either way.

“Of course he does!” Maude snorted. “Wonder if he stops thinking about his dick long enough to consider other deals?” The Queen lifted shrewd eyes to her friend, “You going to do it?”

Pam shrugged, “I need to explore it further. It could work.” She grimaced as Deirdre added garlic to the pan on the stove, “Besides, it could prove a fertile place to collect information.”

“So is Fangtasia!” Maude replied. “What’s your gut telling you?”

“My gut is telling me that the sex club thing could make money,” and when Maude rolled her eyes, making it clear she was asking about the other issue on the table, Pam smiled and added, “The nomads are part of a plan. I can’t imagine what the point is, but it’s too strange not to be something. The Silent Witnesses are not connected, at least not directly. I think they are a natural outcome of the trouble the nomads are causing. The nomads make the orphans, the orphans emerge hungry and undisciplined, humans are hurt, and humans jump to the conclusion that vampires have always hurt humans. With the Internet, it doesn’t have to be that big an incident to get a lot of attention.”

“It’s been a number of years since we’ve been out of hiding,” Maude looked doubtful. “Why would humans think this has been going on so long?”

Deirdre spoke from beside the stove, “Because it has.” When the two vampires turned her way, the redhead continued, “I’ll grant you there are more incidences now, but stories of vampires killing humans have been around forever. Just because vampires came out of hiding, it didn’t mean the stories went away. And let’s face it, even after The Reveal, there have been plenty of incidents.”

“But it’s different now,” Maude shook her head.

“Maybe from your perspective,” Deirdre lifted the pot from the burner and carried it to the metal counter. “For most humans it just means that all their worst fears were true. You know we used to
dress up like vampires and Werewolves on Hallowe’en? You were the stuff of legends; the scary stuff. Romantic, dangerous men and terrifying, blood-soaked women. I grew up with spook stories and some of them involved vampires. Now, every time there’s a death it reignites that primal fear.” Deirdre glanced at the two vampires sitting at the table, “I’m sorry, I hope I didn’t say too much. I hope you don’t think…”

“Thank you for speaking up,” Pam assured her, “Sometimes we need a different perspective. I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“Eric Northman thinks we should push our way onto human police forces. He thinks that vampires stepping into conventional law enforcement roles will make breathers see us as being interested in their well-being.” Pam was surprised by Maude’s words. It was just like Eric to come up with a plan like this one.

“You don’t think it will make humans more wary?” Pam asked. “They don’t trust us as it is, and what makes anyone think they would welcome us as enforcers of their laws? I know some of us have found places with their police, but not many.”

“He believes we should be prepared to push it as a civil rights issue,” Maude replied. “I think the bigger question is whose law would we be enforcing, ours or theirs?”

“Smart,” Deirdre nodded, “Vampires fighting to protect humans and others could help change perceptions,” and then the day manager’s eyes became thoughtful, “but isn’t the law the law? Why would they be different?”

“Human rules are made for living people,” Maude sat back. “Humans think nothing of putting people in jails. They think that after some period of time, punishment is done. Prisons and vampires rarely make sense. Sitting in some place for a vampire is nothing. We can go into downtime indefinitely. Prison without physical distress has little meaning for us. We will never die in prison without some intervening event. Torture is the only way to truly discipline vampires. We feel pain but we regenerate. And life in prison? No country could support the cost of that! We are immortal. We would outlive the prisons themselves!”

“Do we have to talk politics?” Pam rolled her eyes. Once Maude was on a roll, the conversation could go on for nights.

“With your willingness to participate in business, I would think you would be interested in this debate,” Maude looked disappointed.

“I prefer those points of law where we all already agree, contracts and money,” and Pam shrugged before asking, “Any words of advice about New York? You mentioned you met him.”

Maude nodded. Less than a year ago Maude’s great friend, Lydia, the Lady of Sanctum, had passed. During the funeral, Mikhail, the King of New York and now the rest of New England, had attended. It wasn’t the first time the two monarchs met but the first in many, many years.

Maude was now responsible for the retreat in Connecticut. Lydia left it to Minnesota in her will. The work of the sanctuary continued. It was a place that welcomed those select few Supes who were lucky enough to be sponsored and accepted for treatment. It was the human, Barbara, who sat with guests now, offering therapy and a road to recovery. The harsh reality of the Supernatural world was that few survived bad fortune. Even fewer were fortunate enough to be considered worthy of saving once severely damaged. Sookie Stackhouse was one of those few. When she survived her abusive marriage, she was given a place in Sanctum to recover. Pam knew Sookie credited her with saving her life, but Sanctum with saving her soul.
Pam could see the shadow pass over Maude’s face. She doubted the Minnesota Queen would ever truly get over Lydia’s death and thinking about New York had served as a reminder. Never being one to dwell on unhappiness long though, the monarch shook her head, smiled, and said, “Oh Pammie! You better be on your best pointy shoe toes with that one! He is a slick customer!”

“Care to elaborate?” Pam asked.

“Well, he thinks a lot of himself,” Maude settled back in her ‘storytelling’ posture. “He is shaped like a barrel, all chest and arms. He’s short, but so are you. He’ll probably top you by his fancy-pants hair.” Pam raised her eyebrow and Maude chuckled. “You know, that New York snobby hair, kind of long around the back to make the most of his ‘king of all I survey’ expression.”

“Don’t hold back!” Pam chuckled, “Tell me what you really think!”

“I’ve seen pictures of him,” Deirdre volunteered. “He’d fit right in at some book signing or opera night.”

“Until you see his crooked nose,” Maude sniffed. “He started life as a gutter rat and he has the scars to prove it.”

“Is he really as bad as all that?” Pam wondered if she should back out of staying with the King. It would be tricky, making the appropriate excuse. Maude wasn’t saying she didn’t like him, but she clearly wasn’t fond of him either and Pam trusted her mentor’s intuition about these things. “I have to check in. I have too much business in his territory, but maybe…”

Maude shook her head, “You are bright, capable, and smart as they come. Mikhail hasn’t survived and prospered this long by being a thug. Remember, I’ve known him for over a hundred years. Vampires do change. You aren’t the same person you were when you were made.”

Pam grinned, “Oh, don’t I know it! I still shimmy down drainpipes from time to time,” but then she said “But I have improved,” and it was decided.

Pam pulled up her itinerary on her phone, but was interrupted when the phone on the wall rang. Maude was one of the only vampires Pam knew who maintained a landline in her residence. Deirdre answered, then turned to the Minnesota Queen, “It’s for you, Majesty. A Doctor Ludwig.”
Bill Compton watched Bartlett Crowe walk out of the study. “Don’t follow him,” Russell told Bill. “He’s going through a difficult time.”

The Kings returned from Indianapolis two days ago, their faces sad. The anti-vampire sentiment in the city seemed to grow every day. Someone got close enough to the Fishers house to shoot out a window. Bartlett released several statements asking for discussions with local government and law enforcement aimed at bringing an end to what he called, ‘their mutual enemy.’ All his entreaties fell on deaf ears. The blow that finally sent the Kings back to Mississippi was the Renaissance Faire Board asking for Bartlett’s resignation.

The Renaissance Faire in Fishers was a matter of pride for Bartlett. He and his mate, Russell, were major contributors to the Faire, both financially and socially. Many of the sets and exhibitions that helped grow the event were because of the Kings. For Bartlett, it was a labor of love. He had been turned at the height of Elizabeth’s reign. The costumes, music, and general frivolity reminded him of happy times. Recently, the Kings had single-handedly funded night lighting, an investment that allowed the Faire to increase its attendance. To be thrown aside without the courtesy of forewarning or discussion had taken the heart from Bartlett.

Russell knew his mate would rebound, but for now, the quiet and more gracious tempo of Jackson was preferred.

They arrived home to find Bill Compton, their guest and de facto housekeeper, waiting for them. Since being evicted from his home in Bon Temps, Bill had moved back to live with the Kings. It was hard to determine exactly what formed the basis for their ability to so comfortably coexist. The Kings enjoyed history and antiques. Bill enjoyed computers and writing. They discussed books and they argued about music. The Kings adored Blues and jazz. Bill’s idea of jazz was Michael Bolton, an artist Russell abhorred. They would good naturedly debate what should be considered modern music and they had been known to all dance to Barry Manilow with joyous abandon. It was not any one thing, but at the end of the night, they just worked.

“I’m sorry to see him this way,” Bill said quietly. “He’s a good soul. He doesn’t deserve it.”

“No,” Russell agreed. “He doesn’t. He’s done nothing but his best to be a good neighbor and a model citizen. It isn’t right that the actions of a few bad vampires should turn everyone against him,” and the Mississippi King quickly turned his face. Russell was rarely emotional and the sight deeply affected Bill.
“I’ll check on things at the gate,” Bill excused himself. He knew Russell believed him to be gracious, politely allowing them more privacy. The reality was Bill felt guilty.

During the Kings’ absence in Indiana, Bill had invited Matthias, a vampire from James of Illinois’ court, to visit a couple times. Bill met Matthias at the Amun Summit last year, the same Summit where Eric Northman had locked up Sookie Stackhouse by publicly pledging to her. Bill had been angry and his anger found a friend in Matthias. Their mutual disdain of humans started the conversation and when Bill became restless in the Jackson house, feeling his isolation and self-pity, he recalled the vampire and their interest in seeing each other again.

The first time Matthias came, they made their way to Northern Alabama. For two weeks they traveled, killing nomad vampires and unsuspecting humans along the way, ‘playing’ with their food. It was bloody and primal. Bill wasn’t worried. They were in Sibyl’s territory and she was lazy. She wouldn’t have Sheriffs out this far. The most she would do was complain in her whiny voice to her neighbors. Bill made sure they were far enough north and east that if the Alabama Queen did come, she would suspect the vampires of Isaiah in Tennessee or Charles in Georgia. She would be unlikely to look toward Russell Edgington’s kingdom.

Once upon a time, Bill had worked for Sophie-Anne LeClerq, the ill-fated Louisiana Queen. As a member of her Court he had come to know Sibyl well. The Alabama Queen would doubtless stamp her foot and demand compensation, but no one would honor such a demand without proof, and Sibyl had neither an army nor an effective Sheriff’s Network to find it. She was a holdover from another time, an embarrassment to them all.

While they traveled, the two vampires slept in the dirt, something that appealed to Bill on a deep level. When Lorena, Bill’s Maker, had been with him, she had insisted they sleep in the dirt at least twice a month. She impressed upon Bill that it was important to remember that they were vampires. ‘Earth to earth…’ she would smile before ordering him to dig.

Bill found he was relaxed with this vampire, and one night, drunk on blood and violence, Bill confessed his frustration with Eric Northman’s high-handed tactics and Sookie Stackhouse’s weak-willed acceptance. Bill vented every complaint, every hurt that had been done him as a result of Sookie. He talked about her allowing others to touch her, even though she was clearly his pet. He talked about her resistance to glamour and the problems that created. He railed about her opening her legs for Northman, and Quinn, and who knew who else. Bill told Matthias how he revealed Northman’s treachery and deceitfulness in the days before the Viking finally left to marry his rich Oklahoma Queen, and how instead of opening her arms and bed to him, Sookie turned to a shifter instead.

Matthias had growled. He told Bill the words he wanted to hear. He told Bill that any human who couldn’t understand the gift she was being offered was beneath him. He told Bill he was the most noble to have continued to care past the time she was truly worthy of his notice.

When Bill showed some signs of regret, Matthias reminded him about the book. What more touching and telling tribute could any creature create to make clear to this creature her place with him? It was their history! It pointed out what should have happened! Then he reminded Bill that these were the same creatures that were the reason he was living in Mississippi, exiled from the home he had worked so hard to reclaim.

“And what was your reward, Bill? She took her Fae blood and stood before the Pythoness. She violated all our beliefs and would call herself above us! She is not worthy of you, Bill. Not with all her bastard blood!”
Toward the end of their road trip, Matthias captured a blond woman. He made her up and presented her to Bill, demanding Compton show him what he would do to Sookie Stackhouse when the time came. Bill rose to the occasion several times, and ended by killing her with a snap of the neck. Matthias cheered him on, but the incident left Bill shaken.

They returned to the house in Jackson, spent and sated. Bill knew he looked terrible. It was reflected in the sideways looks the guards gave him. Two days later, Matthias returned to Illinois. Their parting was cordial and the courtier was convinced that Bill was ‘one of us.’ He suggested they get together again soon, and Bill agreed, although he had no intention of making good on that promise. Bill kept seeing the tearful face of that girl, the one that looked so much like Sookie. He would hear her cries every night before he rose. If he was capable of dreaming, Bill would have thought he was having nightmares. Bill told himself that he was disgusted with his behavior and he resolved never to call the vampire again.

Days passed and with them, the guilt. The haunting memories ended. Bill remembered some aspects of those lost weeks with the Illinois vampire had been satisfying. They reminded him of his days with his Maker, and now, being back in Jackson in the home where Lorena met her final death; Bill found he had moments of extreme nostalgia.

Bill recalled evenings during which Matthias told him that he and others like him, considered themselves throwbacks. The Illinois vampire told Bill he was part of a growing movement. They were calling themselves ‘Vampires First.’ Matthias spoke with the same fervor Bill saw on television with some human fundamentalists. Vampires First refused to drink bottled blood. They preferred to sleep in the dirt. These vampires viewed humans as donors and hunting as a vampire’s right. Vampires First didn’t want to go back into hiding, they wanted to take their rightful place as top predators. In their view of the world, killing and glamour were meant to be theirs. Vampires’ ruling was the natural order of things and the time had come to take that next logical step.

Several months had passed before Bill received the call from Portia Bellefleur. Through it all, Bill had maintained his relationship with the Bellefleurs. They were his family, his kin, descended from his own daughter. Over the years, he helped rebuild their ancestral home. He made sure they had money and he did what he could to support and encourage them. It had been difficult for the children, Andy and Portia, to accept him at first, but now Bill was a treasured member of their family.

When Bill thought of his relationship with the Bellefleurs, it was separate from his vampire life. They represented the human life that was stolen from him, the one he should have had with his beloved wife, Caroline. When Bill was with the Bellefleurs, he could forget that he was a vampire. These were people who welcomed him. When he was allowed to live in Bon Temps, before Eric Northman exiled him, Bill had the Bellefleurs to his home and he was regularly invited to their homes. Family parties were held at night so he could be included. Bill was there for the births of their children and there was a place set for him at the table for Easter and Christmas, Thanksgiving and Memorial Day. Bellefleur babies called him ‘Papaw Bill’ and begged him for stories. When Bill was with the Bellefleurs, all the noise and blood of Lorena and everything that happened after seemed very far away. They were his quiet place, which was why Portia’s call upset him the way it did.

Portia was expecting. This would be her second child and she asked why Bill went away. “Please tell me you are coming back soon,” she said, a tear in her voice. “The kids ask about you, Bill. They miss their Papaw. When are you coming home?”

In that moment, Bill heard the cries of Caroline, standing on the front porch of their home, his children clutching at her skirt. She was staring into the night, waiting for her husband to return, not
realizing that he had been taken in a way that was less merciful than if he had fallen to a bullet on some forgotten battlefield during the War. Lorena had brought him close just after he was turned, letting him smell the enticing aroma of their blood. It was her way of convincing him he could never return. He could no longer be trusted with his own wife, much less his own children.

Bill found out that his son, Thomas, died a few years later of some disease. The thought that his not being there might have contributed to that death haunted him. He imagined his Caroline, weary and old before her time, burying that small body. He saw her work-gnarled hands and bowed back, a woman in a world that did not allow women to earn a living. As a widow in the South, she would have been expected to return to her family with her children, living on the charity they allowed, but Caroline had no family. There was only her husband who was gone, and so she had lingered in a house where there was no money to maintain it. It was fortunate their daughter married well.

“I am busy right now, Portia,” Bill had choked out, careful to keep a smile on his face so she wouldn’t hear how upset he was. “The movie will be coming out shortly and it is more convenient for me to be here at the moment.”

“But you will be coming home soon, won’t you?” she persisted.

“Yes,” Bill promised, “Of course I will. As soon as I can.”

That night, Bill broke things. It was not like him. He valued his place here with the Kings and the idea of damaging any part of the trust they gave him was unimaginable, but Bill’s fury consumed him.

As he sat in the middle of the wreckage that was his space over the garage, it occurred to Bill that he was two people. There was the vampire that wrote, the vampire that discussed politics with the Kings, and showed up at the Bellefleurs’ functions. Then there was the fanged, bloody pariah that Lorena made, the monster that lurked in the darker places of his mind. Bill remembered someone once saying that Lorena had been mad. He believed it. His Maker took great pleasure in inflicting pain. He had seen her be presented with experiences that would have brought others quiet joy, and watched her dash them to pieces, laughing in her wild-eyed way. Bill wondered if madness was something that could be passed through the blood.

Bill called the contractors to repair his rooms and the furniture store as well. Fortunately, the furnishings here were not antiques. Those that could not be exactly matched could be explained away. Once the calls were made, Bill stalked into the night, determined to calm himself. He walked the boundaries of the estate and stalked the surrounding woods. Dawn approached. He rested and awoke, still enraged. Before dawn of the second night, he picked up the phone and called Matthias. By the end of the week the Illinois vampire arrived and together they headed north, looking for easy pickings.

They were gone almost three weeks. Bill wasn’t sure how many states they crossed, all he knew was that they left a trail of death behind them. This time, though, they did not part on the best of terms. Bill found there was a limit for him. When Matthias challenged him, calling him weak, Bill had not taken the bait. Instead, the southern vampire agreed with Matthias. Bill told him he had no stomach for this life and he needed to return home to consider the path his undead life should take.

Matthias left him, taking their vehicle and driving into the night. Bill started home toward Jackson on foot, walking until he felt the pull of dawn, digging himself into the ground, and then emerging the next night to do the same thing.

He used this time to plan. He realized that when he dreamed about his time with the Bellefleurs, he would imagine Sookie at his side. He knew that Andy, Portia, and their spouses liked Sookie. Portia
and Halleigh, Andy’s wife, sent him photographs of Sookie when she was in Bon Temps. If the world was perfect, Sookie would live in his home and she would be ‘Mamaw’ to the Bellefleur grandchildren. She would embrace her own immortality and him.

There was only one problem and he stood between Bill and every dream he had.

Bill knew Sookie would never accept him if he directly attacked Eric Northman. He had tried and she ran from him both times. No, if he wanted her to come to her senses, he needed the Viking out of the way permanently, but he needed to be free and clear from it. Bill also knew Sookie always wanted a normal, human life. She wanted to be surrounded by family and happy events. He could offer her that through his association with the Bellefleurs, but so far, Sookie hadn’t been able to see it.

Bill thought about the book he wrote, the one that documented their relationship, revealing their love to the world. He thought about how he wrote Troy, the character that was really him, as a vampire. He wrote about feeding from Shanna, the character that was really Sookie. He described her need to be controlled by him. In short, he glorified his existence as a vampire. It made sense to Bill now, Sookie’s rejection. She really didn’t like the vampire part of him. But Bill also had a human side, if only she could see it!

Bill returned to Jackson from that second descent into hell to find a message waiting for him. The Kings were returning in two days. Bill spent every waking minute scurrying around, making sure that the house was perfect for their homecoming. He enjoyed the happiness he saw in their eyes when they found everything gracious and welcoming. It made him believe that he was still a Southern gentleman, that he was still worth redeeming.

Now, as Bill walked outside the main house and into the night, he was no longer so sure. The terrible treatment the Kings received in Indiana was not just the result of ignorance and hatred. There were real actions that fueled humans’ hatred of vampires. It had been a special televised report detailing what could only be a vampire attack on humans in southern Tennessee that prompted the Indiana monarch to leave the room. The announcer described the scene as ‘carnage’ and of a ‘savagery hard to believe.’ Bill felt ill as he recognized the killing ground he and Matthias had made. There were humans moving around, masks over their faces, as they lifted bodies from the ground. Bill thought it lucky there weren’t more vampires on local police forces. They might have picked up scents that would identify him. It was the mention that the local vampire authority had offered assistance but been turned away, and the self-satisfied look the announcer gave as he read that portion of the story, that was the final straw for Bartlett.

While Bill knew in his gut that the Kings would never approve of his darker urges, this evening truly ripped the covering from his eyes. Bill knew he had to confront this part of himself. It stood between him and all that he wished, and he had to banish it from his life.

The next evening, Bill entered the main house to find the Kings listening to music. Bartlett immediately apologized, “I am sorry I made such a scene! I thought I was over this, but I can see I am still struggling.”

“Don’t apologize,” Bill replied. “I can see how all this has affected you. It has affected me too. I know it isn’t much, but I want you to know I intend to join the Silent Witnesses. Perhaps if they can see that there are vampires who want to be part of the solution, it can help to build bridges between us.”

“You will face a lot of resistance,” Russell shook his head. “Those people are convinced we are nothing but the devil incarnate.”
Bill smiled gently, and glancing at Bartlett said, “And who has told me that once you get to know someone, it’s hard to hold onto your hatred?”

Bartlett laughed and walked over to Bill, hugging him, “You are the most dear man! I don’t know if they will ever accept you, but I am just grateful that you would try!”

Bill felt better. If he was able to join, his work with that group might help make up for the sins he had committed. Of course, he wouldn’t tell them his part in the sins. What was done was done. What was important was what happened from today forward.

“You know, I’m not surprised you and Northman don’t get along.” Russell was saying and it was hard for Bill not to drop fang and hiss.

Instead he gulped, forcibly retracted his fangs and asked, “Why would you say that?”

“The two of you think so much alike,” the Mississippi monarch replied with a shrug. “When we were in Indiana, he was advocating our finding a way to get more vampires in local law enforcement departments.”

“He thought if we could be seen as working with humans to police our mutual problems, it would be harder to simply hate us,” Bartlett added.

“Nice for Northman,” Bill ground out.

“Oh, Bill!” Russell scolded, “He does mean well!”

“He did look terrible,” Bartlett remarked, “Did you notice, Rusty?”

“Not surprising,” Russell nodded. “I overheard the guards chatting. Their friends in Shreveport are saying Sookie is in Bon Temps pretty much every month and when she’s not there, she’s traveling the country.”

“It is ambitious, the Weres trying to organize,” Bartlett agreed. “Remember how many times we tried? And we’re calm compared to Weres.”

“I think it’s an exercise in futility,” Russell nodded and sipped his blood.

“So, they aren’t spending time together?” Bill asked. He tried to make it sound merely curious, but Bartlett gave him a sour look that told him the Indiana monarch was not fooled.

“Pledged, Bill! You know how that works, and from what I hear it was Sookie that wanted the extra hundred years.” The King’s look was not unsympathetic.

“Still,” Russell mused, “For them to be so frequently apart. It could be trouble in Paradise. I don’t understand why the insistence on her being named Queen. It has to present a terrible strain on their relationship.”

“Why?” Bartlett asked, “What have you heard?”

“She tried to sit in Assizes with him. It didn’t work,” Russell supplied.

“Do tell,” Bill mimicked Crowe’s voice, but neither King seemed to notice.

“Of course, she was heckled. She didn’t push back and now she is nowhere near any vampire proceedings. They were together for their annual conjugal visit, but other than that, it looks like they are living separate lives.” Russell turned the goblet, observing the way the blood moved, “I would
never have believed it. They seemed so devoted to each other.”

“And they had so much stacked against them. You would have thought it would have lasted more than one year. What I can’t understand is how they are dealing with the bond. I can’t imagine being away from you for more than a week, much less weeks and weeks,” Bartlett sighed.

“Fae magic is the rumor,” Russell nodded. “We both know what Niall thinks of us. He must have found a way to allow his granddaughter to maintain her freedom.”

“So, she’s in Bon Temps?” Bill asked.

“Not all the time, but once a month at least, is what the Weres say,” Russell nodded.

“Stay out of it,” Bartlett said sharply, and then moderated his voice when he walked forward and placed his hand on Bill’s arm, “We are both fond of you, Bill. They may be having marital problems, but that doesn’t mean that Northman wouldn’t end you. It would be within his rights to kill you both, and we would be helpless to defend you. Don’t put us in that position!”

“We would miss you, Bill,” Russell agreed.

Bill smiled and laughed out loud, “Oh, I wouldn’t be so stupid!” he said merrily. “Although if Sookie isn’t happy, I would put my money on her finding a way out. She is amazingly resourceful.” Before the Kings could respond, Bill’s phone rang. The caller ID identified it as Twy, the woman who was organizing the events for Moshup Summit. Among those events were several showcasing A Viking’s Bond, the movie that would premiere later this year. “I’m sorry,” Bill apologized, “I have to take this,” and he walked toward the front door.

Behind him, the Kings exchanged looks. “You really shouldn’t encourage him,” Bartlett told Russell.

“How can you think I am?” his mate asked, “I didn’t say anything that would give him that idea.”

“You said enough!” and Bartlett swatted his mate’s arm. “I’ll talk with Bill again later. It was very sweet of him to offer to approach the Witnesses,” Indiana continued. “I hope that doesn’t cause more trouble than good.”

“He is a world-famous writer. There are women who now want to be a vampire’s concubine. In spite of the pockets of hatred, there is excitement about the fang/breather aspect of the movie. Our clubs in most cities remain hugely popular. I can’t see this hurting our cause,” and Russell drew his partner in. “I have to believe that all the anger is a tempest in a teapot; the darkness before the dawn. People will come to their senses and peace will resume.”

“I hope you’re right,” Bartlett sighed.

“You know I always am,” Russell teased, and kissed his mate.

XXxxx

“So, I have to dress up like a woman?” Bill was having a hard time understanding what Twy was talking about. He first became aware of this woman when Eric Northman hired her to coordinate a publicity campaign for him. He knew she was a friend of Pam Ravenscroft, and it was rumored they slept together. Twy was working for Pam now through Fangtasia Events Ltd, the new events planning organization. Bill tried to spend as little time as possible in the woman’s presence. Her stick-thin build and nails across the chalkboard voice set his fangs on edge. Still, it was commonly known she was talented at her job. She seemed able to make complicated multi-media events flow
effortlessly together, never a miscue. He had benefited from a couple of her events in the recent past and had every confidence that Moshup would be a success too. Even though he trusted her, this time her suggestion seemed foolish. “I don’t understand why this is important.”

“It’s Harvard,” Twy said again. “It is an honorary thing, this Hasty Pudding Club. All kinds of celebrities have been honored, former Presidents. You would be the first vampire ever inducted. It would be a sign to the money set that vampires have arrived.” When Bill still didn’t agree, Twy snapped, “Google it, Bill! I’ll wait!”

Grinding his teeth, Bill did as the woman demanded. He was surprised to see the list of other inductees and he only sounded a little disgruntled when he got back on the phone and said, “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“I knew you’d come around, Billy-boy,” she preened. “There is a parade, of course, but because you’re you, it will be held at night. Quite the concession. Then there is the gala. Boston Garden was pushing for the honors, but I held out for the Boston Symphony Hall. It’s intimate, we can show an extended trailer for the movie and the whole thing is snobby in the extreme. Then it’s around the corner to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and a reception in their Impressionist wing. Of course, all the stars will be there. You won’t believe who has been calling the office begging for tickets. I made a point of giving any celebrity with Boston ties first shot.”

“What about Northman?” Bill asked absently.

“Not sure,” Twy answered. Bill thought she would question him, but instead she asked, “and what about your roommates? They both declined. I thought the Clan Chiefs were pretty much a given at these kinds of events.”

“Not always” Bill told her. “So De Castro is coming?”

“And Stan Davis,” Twy confirmed. “Of course the folks from Moshup have most of the vampire-friendly hotel rooms tied up. The New York contingent took up more than two floors in the conference center and we had to scramble to find acceptable accommodations for the Florida contingent. What is with that guy, Misha, anyway? Pam said she’ll be in the City next week visiting with him and she’ll get me more details, but every time his name gets mentioned, Nabila gets into a snit.”

Nabila was the Clan Chief of Moshup, and Queen of the Carolinas. She was political, powerful, and well connected with the financial community. She wanted the Summit held in Charlotte. Instead, the Summit had been strong-armed into being held in Boston.

The rub was that Boston had been Tranh’s territory. Tranh was a powerful vampire, a force within their community. The former Queen had feuded publicly and not so publically with Mikhail, the King of New York for decades. Now, the feud was over. Tranh was finally dead and Mikhail, or Misha, was King of all New England. It was a development that made many of the Moshup vampires nervous.

Nabila had offered herself as Queen to Eric Northman, trading access to investment capital for the promise of his physical protection. She wanted the alliance enough that she offered to share him with Sookie Stackhouse. For a person in Nabila’s situation, it was understandable. Eric was a famed warrior. His progeny were likewise fighters. It would be a brave vampire to take on the Viking, but Eric had married Sookie. Now Nabila was forced to lead the Clan, but check decisions with the King in the North. It made for an uncomfortable existence, one where her neck hurt from having to look over her shoulder so often.
“Misha will probably end up as Clan Chief,” Bill stated. “What about Sookie? Is she coming?”

“Not that I know of,” Twy replied. “She doesn’t come to any of these vampire things anymore. Too busy with her Were thing,” and Twy moved on to laying out his agenda and timelines.

Bill listened with half an ear. He knew this woman would email him a confirmation of everything he needed to know. ‘So, she doesn’t go to vampire things,’ Bill thought. It confirmed the picture he was forming in his head and the plan he was putting together. He would join the Witnesses, a high profile and popular vampire adding his voice in support of the humans. He would make clear his low opinion of vampire aggression. He would bury himself in supporting good works. He would show how he had reconnected with his human family and how they loved him. Everyone said he gave every appearance of being the model vampire. His clothes were conservative; his tastes were middle of the road. He didn’t approve of loud music or act in outrageous ways, at least not when anyone could recognize him.

Bill hung up with Twy and saw that Portia had called him again. He hit the button that would dial her number.

She picked up on the second ring, “Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes” she replied, “I hope I didn’t worry you. I saw that you were going to be in Boston, so I was thinking of you.”

“I am always pleased to hear from you,” Bill said warmly, “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” she answered. “Past the worst of the morning sickness now, which is lucky. Michele Stackhouse is having a little party for Sookie and now I can go without worrying.”

“Oh?” Bill tried to keep the thrill he felt in hearing news of his darling from being too evident. “So, she is coming there?”

“Sounds like she’ll be here for a good long while, too,” Portia was enthusiastic. “Not sure what happened, but I’m just as happy she’s tired of New Orleans. It’ll be nice having her here. Michele is happy and I know Hoyt and Hayley could use her advice on Maxine’s.” Portia rattled on and on, giving Bill news about the town and people he knew. He kept up his end of the conversation, but in the back of his head, he wondered how he could get himself back into the house across the cemetery.

When they hung up, Bill turned the matter over and over. Finally, he just decided to call the Palace. It was a desperate move, but he thought if he appealed using his connection with the Bellefleurs and their need for him, he might get a twenty-four pass. It would be something.

His call was passed to Maxwell Lee. Bill wasn’t surprised. He had heard Lee was now Northman’s second. “Good evening, Maxwell,” Bill said in his most pleasant tone. “I was hoping I could ask for leave to return to your territory. My great-granddaughter is expecting again, and they have asked for a visit. I would never think to cross your borders without permission and…”

“I can’t imagine there would be a problem,” Max replied shortly. “I’ll update the database. Anything else?”

Bill gulped before saying, “No, and thank you.” He stared at the phone for a long time. It didn’t seem possible.
Sookie waited for Eric in the little office of the Palace, her laptop open, until she realized she’d been dozing. She woke with a start to find it was already two in the morning. Eric still wasn’t home. Not yet. When she stood up, she was stiff and it surprised her. She wasn’t used to aches or pains, headaches or bruises. She found herself counting backward to the last time they had exchanged blood. Sookie realized it had been over a month and she felt surprised again. Somehow with the running and planes, meetings and deadlines, time had slipped by. It wasn’t that they hadn’t seen each other or slept together, although Sookie had a suspicion if she counted the times in the past 30 days that they made love it wouldn’t even take two hands.

Feeling worse than she had before, Sookie stood up and made her way to the hallway. James stood next to the door, his face impassive. He was guarding her, willing to wait until she was ready to go upstairs, and Sookie nodded to him. As she walked down toward the elevator, tears started to roll down her cheeks. She couldn’t think why she was crying, but somehow she just couldn’t stop. When she stepped into the elevator with Saul, she told James, “It’s okay. I’m going to bed. Go home. Thank you.”

James bowed, “Good night, Majesty,” he said quietly, but Sookie knew he was really telling her, “It will be okay.”

As the elevator headed up, Saul hummed a tune. Sookie dashed the tears that wouldn’t stop from her cheek and said, “That’s pretty, Saul. Does it have a name?”

“No, Mistress” the Were said quietly, “Just a little something that makes me happy,” and he smiled at her in the mirrored door.

Titus was the guard on station outside the doors to their chambers. He opened the door for her and stepped aside as she walked past him. The door was closed before she could say ‘Thank you,’ and that action seemed to shout, ‘You are alone! Again!’

Their bed was large and empty. Sookie knew she could bury her nose in the pillow and sheets and not find him anywhere in it. The staff here was too efficient. Sookie bit her lip and headed toward the closet instead. Eric’s sweaters were stacked in a tall, thin set of shelves and Sookie pulled out the one she knew he wore often. She held it to her nose and he was there, the dry scent of sawgrass and sand and sea. “Eric!” she cried, and holding the sweater to her face, she sank down, leaning against the built-ins, surrounded by his clothes, her face buried in his softness, smelling the man she loved.

XXxx

Eric’s plane was delayed. He wondered if he would need to return to his coffin, but they pulled up in front of the Palace with barely an hour to spare. Charles walked behind him, signaling to the Weres
on the door to fetch luggage. The following car crew had the back of the van open and were unloading the travel coffin.

“Welcome, Majesty,” the door guards bowed. Eric glanced around, but didn’t see a face he trusted.

Saul’s face broke into a grin, “Well, look who raced the moon tonight.”

“It was a race I thought I’d lose,” Eric was about to ask, but Saul knew.

“She’s upstairs. She tried to wait up for you. She watched the doors and windows all night, your girl,” and the Were winked.

Eric’s mouth quirked, “I suppose you mean the Queen?”

“You know who I mean,” Saul replied with a wink.

Once inside their chambers, Eric saw the empty bed. He headed across the sitting room to their retreat, but that was dark and quiet, too. He felt a moment of panic and then shook his head, closed his eyes and felt for her. He followed her breathing to their closet. “Lover!” he whispered. He tried to take the sweater from her hands, but she held it tight.

Her eyes half-opened, “You were gone!” Her voice was soft and vulnerable, like a child caught in a nightmare, “You were gone and I couldn’t find you!”

“It is over now, Älskade, you found me. I am here.” He stooped and scooped her up in his arms, carrying her against him. Sookie pressed her lips to his chest and then snuggled her cheek against him. “Come, we will get in bed together, my wife. All will be well.”

As Eric unfastened her clothes, she woke a little and helped. He pulled the blankets from under her, getting her settled before taking off his own clothes and slipping in beside her. She curled into him, her fingers stroking and petting his chest. “I missed you, Eric. I missed you so much it hurt,” and then her eyes fluttered and she was gone.

Eric felt the ache in his own heart, the way his body felt raw with the need of her, but there was no time. Dawn was fast approaching and he could not hold it off, not in his current state. “I am here, Lover,” he whispered into her hair and fell into his death with the scent of her tears in his nose.

XXxxx

Sookie opened her eyes to see Eric’s still, white chest. There was something odd about his skin. It felt dry, drier than usual, and it was loose under her fingers. She leaned into him, burying her nose in that place where his neck met his shoulder. His scent always seemed strongest there. He would laugh at her, telling her since he didn’t sweat, he couldn’t have a scent. He was wrong.

“I missed you, Sweetheart,” Sookie propped herself up on her elbow so she could stroke his face. The minute she did her bladder started prompting her. She knew he couldn’t hear her, didn’t know she was here. It didn’t matter. It took a supreme act of strength to pull away from him long enough to go to the bathroom. Just leaning against him felt as if she was lying in the sun, the physical contact feeding some deep part of her.

Sookie took care of her human needs and then raced back across the floor, jumping into bed to press her body against his. She felt the thin headache that warned her she needed sun, but she didn’t think she could bring herself to leave the bed again. As she ran her hand over his chest, she felt something move and give way. Sookie rolled over and turned on the light. There was skin on her hand, fine as spider web. Eric’s chest was peeling in patches. If she didn’t know better, Sookie would have
thought he had been sunburned. She peeled the blankets back to find him covered with scaly patches that were lifting, separating from him.

She was startled by the knock at the door. “Go away,” Sookie called out. She wouldn’t leave him like this. She couldn’t leave him.

The knock came again, “Come out here, Sookie, or I’ll come in there and get you.” It was a familiar voice, but Sookie couldn’t place it. She hovered over Eric, pressing kisses to his cold cheek where the skin was peeling, revealing red skin underneath.

When the knock came again, this time louder and more persistent, Sookie whispered, “I’ll be right back.” The telepath grabbed a robe, stepping through the doors and then pulling them shut behind her as quick as she could. Almost unconsciously, she struck a defensive stance, her arms crossed, her legs planted.

“You look like shit!” Doctor Amy Ludwig was seated on the couch facing her. Sookie’s head swiveled as the hall door opened and Devrah walked in. The housekeeper glanced in her direction, but kept walking to lay a tea tray in front of the smaller woman.

Sookie shook her head. She ran her hand through her hair. She felt thin and stretched, as though she was tethered to the resting vampire in the other room, and that tether was pulling on her. She shook her head again, and the saner part of her scolded, asking where her manners had flown.

Then Devrah started to walk toward her. Sookie pressed her back against the door and a sound like a growl came from deep in her chest. Devrah pursed her lips and shook her head. “You see what I mean?” she said to the doctor and then walked back toward the hall saying, “I’ll leave you to it.”

Sookie found her voice as the door closed, “Why are you here?”

“Because I ran out of things to do and thought I’d pop on down to New Orleans to see how your suicide pact was going.” Amy’s voice was matter of fact. She could have been talking about the weather, for all the worry she was showing. She poured a cup of coffee and then another. “You going to stop standing there looking like the Bride of Frankenstein and get some caffeine into you?”

“Did Devrah call you?” Sookie could hear the petulant tone in her voice and she winced.

“No, she didn’t, Little Miss All-About-Me” and Ludwig gave her the stink-eye, and then leaned back a little, slurping her coffee, “I have to say, they make a mighty fine cup of Joe in this place, even if they are all wolves.”

“Why are you here?” Sookie challenged, but she knew she was being silly. There was something wrong and then the pieces fell into place. “Eric?” and she glanced behind her. “Is Eric sick, too?”

“Based on what Maude told me, I’m assuming that’s the case.” Amy watched Sookie like a hawk over the brim of her cup. “But I’m waiting until he rises to verify it. I have no interest in seeing him now, and I suspect if I tried to get too close, you would try to flay me with those claws of yours.”

Sookie swallowed then and lifted up her hands. Her fingers had become those hooked talons again. She glanced at the mirror that hung across the room. The face that stared back at her was longer and pointed. She saw cold eyes that slanted at the corners and a hard, thin mouth. She closed her eyes and shook her head again. From the couch, Amy laughed, “You should see yourself. It’s like watching cats in a bag the way you’re fighting yourself.”

“What’s wrong with me?” Sookie laid her hand against her chest. She felt as if her heart would leap from her chest and gallop around the room.
“Bonding sickness,” Doctor Ludwig chuckled from the couch. “It looks bad based on how you’re behaving. I’m surprised you made it out the door.” The Doctor bit into a muffin before saying, “Give it another minute. You’ll adjust. Take a couple deep breaths, and then walk over here before you miss out on your coffee.”

Sookie’s breathing was still erratic. She was afraid to look back at the mirror, afraid of what she would see. When her heart started to slow and her hands stopped shaking, Sookie stepped away from the bedroom door. The doctor patted the cushion next to her a couple times, “Come on, Sookie, come on! Right here! Good girl!”

“I’m not a dog, you know,” Sookie said sourly, but sat down all the same.

“I know you’re not a dog,” Ludwig snapped, “Dogs know enough to come out of the rain. Jury’s out on you.” The doctor held out her hand and was rewarded by Sookie’s blank stare. “Come on, Sparkles, give me your hand.” Sookie barely lifted it when quick as a snake, the doctor grabbed the telepath’s hand and pulled her so she could lick Sookie’s palm.

Sookie didn’t hide her disgust and she could see the doctor’s amusement. Sookie schooled her face into something polite and said, “What do you think?”

“Well, I’m right. Bonding sickness and you need sun,” the small doctor grimaced at Sookie, “So, what were you thinking, breather? Are you trying to end the bond again? Or maybe you’re just trying to kill the Viking.” The strangled noise that came out of Sookie surprised them both. It was a low keening; like an animal in a trap. Ludwig shook her head and her voice became a little warmer as she patted Sookie’s hand, “I said it before and I’ll say it again. Interspecies romance is a bad idea! You know you’re bonded. You know you have bouts of bonding sickness, and you still went gallivanting all over the country. How long have you been separated? Days? Weeks?” When Sookie shook her head, Ludwig’s look became even sharper, “How long?”

“Grandfather said it would be all right.” Sookie’s voice shook, “He… I was taught how to suppress the bond, make it disappear.”

“Did you do that recently?” and the Doctor’s head tilted to the side.

Sookie bit her lip, “No. Although I don’t know why…”

“Because your body is trying to tell you something,” the doctor interrupted, poking Sookie in the arm. “But, why don’t you show me how this bond fix works?”

Sookie closed her eyes and started to pull the internal blanket that would shroud the bond, but she stopped when the Doctor shouted, “What the hell? Are you trying to get us all killed?”

“What?” Sookie asked.

“You can’t smell that?” and Sookie knew.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me!” Sookie had forgotten to shield her scent first and in the act of doing magic, she was flooding the sitting room with a Fae scent. Were Sookie and Doctor Ludwig outside and far away from vampires it wouldn’t be an issue, but they were not. They were in a vampire palace surrounded by resting vampires. It was well known that vampires reacted to the smell of Fae magic the same way they reacted to the taste of Fae blood. It triggered an urge to feed that could quickly get out of hand. Eric once told Sookie that when he smelled her after she’d been practicing magic he wanted to rub himself all over her, and then fuck her and drink and drink until there was nothing left. He told her it was the same for any vampire. Sookie steadied herself. She put
her shield in place then went through the steps needed to suppress the bond. When she finished, she realized she felt a little better, although the ache in her heart didn’t go away as it had in the past.

Sookie reached forward for the coffee cup and gulped some down. She knew if she turned to look, she would see the doctor’s eyes looking at her as if she was a specimen under a microscope, so the telepath did the only thing she could think of, “Is this enough for you?” Sookie gestured at the tray. “Would you like some real breakfast? An omelet?”

The Doctor cackled, “You really are a piece of work! Figure now you’ll turn into Miss Manners and I’ll forget your little performance? That’s a nice trick, by the way. Wish I could teach that to all my patients with bonding issues, but it’s a Fae thing, and you’re the only Fae I know that’s foolish enough to bond yourself to a vampire.”

“I just don’t understand why it stopped working,” Sookie filled her cup again.

“What makes you think it stopped?” the Doctor scoffed.

“Well, you’re here, aren’t you?” and Sookie shook her head. “If I was getting it right, we wouldn’t be sick. I must be doing something wrong.”

“What did you think this magic was supposed to do?” Ludwig challenged her, “Eliminate the bond?” When Sookie didn’t say anything, the doctor rolled her eyes, “I don’t know what you thought this was going to do for you, but nothing is going to eliminate that bond of yours. Well, witch magic, maybe, but with the way you are tied together, you’d probably be pretty ripped up by the end. Might even drive you insane,” and Sookie had the uncomfortable feeling the doctor was filing that thought away for later.

“I’m not interested in breaking our bond!” Sookie replied. “If you think that’s what I want, just get that idea right out of your head! Grandfather told me I could suppress the bond and it would give Eric and me the freedom to travel. It was pretty bad before. Our bond was so tight we were thinking we wouldn’t be able to spend even a couple hours away from each other without feeling it.”

“That does sound like an extreme case,” the doctor nodded, “So, how long do you stay apart?”

Sookie bit her lip, “Days at first…” she said.

“And now? When’s the last time you were with your vampire?” The look Amy Ludwig gave her had Sookie squirming.

“Over a week,” Sookie answered.

“Okay,” the doctor said tentatively, “And just how much time did you spend together before your last trip?”

“A night,” and Sookie drank more coffee to cover her flush.

“When is the last time you had his blood?” Sookie couldn’t meet the doctor’s eyes. “The last time you were together? Or has it been longer?” the doctor drilled.

“Before that,” Sookie said quickly, and then pasted her Crazy Sookie smile in place and she forced herself to look at Amy. She wasn’t prepared for the disapproving look she saw on the doctor’s face.

“I don’t understand why you aren’t in worse shape,” Amy told her. “Your magic is nothing more than a smokescreen, by the way. It just numbs you. It doesn’t eliminate the bonding sickness.” The doctor’s eyes narrowed, “I heard your old place in Bon Temps is like Fae Central. Been spending
much time there?”

Sookie nodded, “At least a week, every month,” she confirmed.

Amy’s eyes flicked to the closed bedroom door, “And what about your vampire? You taking him with you?”

Sookie shook her head, “Not often. You know Eric. He’s so busy,” Sookie smiled, “In fact, I’m due to head up there today. What time is it?”

“Afternoon,” Amy said shortly. “And if you want to remain my patient, you aren’t going anywhere until tomorrow at the earliest.” Sookie almost protested, but then stopped. Sookie found her eyes drawn to the closed doors. She didn’t see Amy Ludwig’s satisfied smile.

“Good!” Doctor Ludwig nodded her approval, “You are going to take a muffin and get upstairs. There are at least a couple more hours of sunlight. Charge up! I will speak with your housekeeper and I am going to send you a meal. You are going to eat every bite. When it gets close, you are going to come back down here and greet your vampire, and I don’t want to see either of you until much later. You have my number. Call me when you have everything straightened out between you but before dawn. Do you understand?”

Sookie felt the blush start at the back of her neck and sweep forward. Doctor Ludwig gave her a leering look, “Oh good! I can see that you do!” As she stood up, Amy grabbed another muffin, “I should really double my fee,” she told the telepath, “Once for making me come here in person and double because you are both that much trouble!” Sookie blinked and the small woman was gone.

It took almost everything to walk back into the bedroom and continue through to the closet. Sookie could see Eric lying motionless on the bed and she yearned to wrap herself around him. “Soon!” she said out loud, making promises to herself. “Think of how much he likes the smell of sunshine on your skin,” and she pulled out one of her bikinis. She stepped into it and couldn’t help noticing the room left in the bra cups. She had to adjust the top twice, “Shit!” Sookie knew she’d been dropping flesh, but since she was avoiding the mirror, and no one saw her naked, she was ignoring it. Now she couldn’t. She knew Eric liked her rounder. ‘I’ll do better,’ she thought. There was a wrap and she tied it around her before heading out.

The next thing she knew, Sookie felt as if she was waking up. She was standing next to the bed, staring down at Eric. She figured she must have slipped into a trance. “Come on, Sookie!” she scolded and she gave a strong mental shove to get moving toward the door. She was almost through the sitting room when there was a knock on the outer door. “I’m here!” she called out and the door opened to Devrah.

The housekeeper’s face was concerned, “I’ve been on the roof waiting for you. I thought you’d be there already.”

“I’m coming!” Sookie forced her lips to lift, but when Devrah put her hand on Sookie’s elbow, the telepath didn’t shake it off.

When Sookie took off her wrap, Devrah made a sound. Sookie tried not to wince, “As bad as all that, huh?”

“Have you been eating at all?” Devrah sounded worried. It was Devrah’s voice more than anything else that got to Sookie. If the housekeeper had scolded, Sookie would have felt that things weren’t so dire, but hearing her housekeeper’s concern made Sookie want to go back inside and hide.
Instead she squared her shoulders and said, “I won’t be heading out on Were business again any time soon.” Sookie knew she was apologizing to Devrah, but she felt the one she really needed to explain herself to was her husband.

There was steak and steamed spinach on the tray. The salad on the side had spinach, too, and there was bread pudding made with molasses for dessert. Sookie found it difficult to get started, but once she did, she didn’t want to stop. The entire meal disappeared and she groaned as she stretched back on the chaise, feeling the sun’s rays play across her skin. It was delicious, lying here. She felt as if there were batteries within her recharging. She felt better than she had in weeks when she headed back downstairs. No one needed to tell her he would be rising soon. She could feel him coming back to her.

XXxxx

Sookie reached up to touch his face again. They were in their retreat. Eric was lying back on the large chaise, his head propped up by pillows. The fire threw shadows around the room that were further emphasized by the flicker of the candles Eric lit. Sookie wondered if he chose candlelight for mood or to hide the signs of illness they both wore. She was reading Wuthering Heights on her notepad, her head in his lap, a blanket draped over her. Eric was resting, his eyes closed. They knew the time would come for them to discuss the elephant in the room, but for now it was enough just to be touching each other.

If someone told Sookie that Eric could be awkward initiating sex she might have laughed, but now she knew it was no laughing matter. For the first time they had not found their rhythm. It had been long minutes before their hands found their way, longer minutes before their mouths were able to kindle fire between them. Sookie wondered if they had fallen out of love, but the moment she thought it, she knew it was a lie. The problem was she loved her Viking too well, and the sunken flesh around his eyes and the odd, crepe texture of his skin made her too anxious for him to feel sexy.

It took some coaxing to get him to feed from her, but that act finally got the ball rolling and everything turned out well from that point forward.

Eric opened his eyes, “What?” he asked, his lip lifting just a little higher on the right side. “Are you tired of your terrible book already?” Eric thought Heathcliff a fool. He believed the orphan should have taken Kathy, damn the consequences. He told Sookie that her hero lacked courage. Of course, Sookie disagreed. It was a favorite debate.

Sookie traced the line of his lip with her finger, “Don’t think you’re going to goad me into another argument about the merits of the Bronte sisters, Mr. Northman! They are geniuses and there is nothing you are going to say that will change my mind.” She waited for his eyes to crinkle further before asking, “Do you feel any better?”

“Yes, Lover,” he whispered and turned his head to kiss her fingertips. He drew her fingers down to the place on his chest where a patch of skin had sloughed away, revealing pink, new skin. Sookie tried not to think about it. On some level it made her cringe, but it seemed Eric was shedding.

It didn’t seem to bother him, but what ever really bothered Eric? “I am so sorry,” Sookie said again.

Eric just grimaced, “Stop apologizing! We are together, we both feel better. I am content to lie here with you.”

“I should have known something was wrong,” Sookie persisted. “I just figured I was missing you. I
didn’t think I was sick. Or you…”

“I was missing you, too, but you were happy, Lover. When you are determined, you are most attractive. Your eyes light up and you speak and walk with confidence.” The more he spoke, the worse Sookie felt. “I will enjoy the time we have,” he continued, “When do you have to leave next?”

“That’s the thing,” she said, and then, to her horror, her voice broke and her lip was quivering. She could tell by the way he moved that he saw it. “Don’t you peek into my head! Don’t!” Her angry words just flew from her mouth and Sookie sat up. She turned away so she could face the wall and to her great embarrassment, she started to cry in earnest.

Eric didn’t sit up with her and rub her back as he had in past. Instead his voice was cold, “I would not break my word to you, Lover. I have promised you I would not to read your thoughts without your permission. I would think my word should be enough.” He stood up and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Eric walked into the sitting room. He could feel Sookie’s misery. He had been feeling it for weeks. There would be brief bursts of elation followed by longer periods of frustration. It started shortly after San Antonio. She felt much worse now. He was surprised to find her eager in his arms upon his rising. Her unhappiness was like a third person in the room with them. It colored all they did, but when he agreed to feed from her, he found himself powerless to control his other instincts and he gave into his urges. It made him feel less, but she felt better. Once led to twice and by the end, he almost felt they were ‘them’ again. But now, she was back to her unhappiness, back to her old, accusing ways, so willing to believe the worst of him.

“She looked like shit,” Doctor Ludwig said from across the room, “but you look worse.”

Eric was startled. If he hadn’t felt so poorly, he would not have reacted as he did. He dropped into a crouch, fangs bared, and his eyes looked furtively around him. “You really are in a bad way, aren’t you?” The short woman laughed and then she pushed forward and off the couch to walk over to him. Eric straightened and retracted his fangs. He realized his cock fell just to the level of Amy Ludwig’s head. It was an odd thought and she must have been thinking the same thing because she snorted, “Bet that thing gets in your way,” and she batted it to the side, making him step back.

Amy stalked around him, her eyes moving over him. Eric heard a sound and turned to see Sookie standing in the doorway of their retreat. She had pulled her robe on and was scrubbing at her cheeks with the back of her hand. “You should think about feeding again soon,” Ludwig said, her voice even, “It will help your skin complete its cycle.”

“Of course,” Eric watched her continue her movements.

“From her,” and Amy jerked her chin toward Sookie.

Eric’s eyes followed and then he said to the doctor, “Sookie is not well. I can feed from a donor.”

Ludwig’s expression turned hard and in a heartbeat, she reached out and slapped his cock, making his fangs drop again. Sookie took a step forward as Amy snapped, “They don’t call it a dumb stick for nothing! Your mate is perfectly capable of feeding you, and that nasty way you feel is because you need to feed from her. I’m not making this shit up! If you haven’t looked in the mirror lately, let me be the first to tell you, you look like something the dog threw up and rolled in. Any vampire who sees you will see weakness. You want to be noble? How noble are you going to feel when you get staked and she follows?” and Ludwig waved at Sookie.

The little doctor turned on her heel and stalked back to the couch, leaving both Sookie and Eric
rooted where they stood. She jumped up a little and then worked her way back on the couch, “You decided you had to bond, and then you figured you could just ignore it? You wanted to play; now you have to pay. Figure it out, but you need to spend time together. You need physical proximity and you need physical connection. I’d say you should plan on spending at least three weeks together, and I mean close. I can check up on you in a week or two and see how you’re doing, but you have drained yourselves and this is going to take some time.”

“Niall said…” Eric growled.

“I don’t know why the Prince gave you the impression the bond could be ignored,” Amy shrugged, “but who knows why he does anything?”

“So,” and Sookie stepped forward until she was next to Eric. She slipped her hand into his, laying her other hand against his arm, “So, if we spend a few weeks together, we will be all right?”

“No reason to think otherwise.” The doctor looked around, “You have anything to eat around here? I have a Mah Jong group starting in an hour and I haven’t had dinner. Sparkles,” and she glanced at Sookie, “would you do me a favor and have something sent up? And you,” the doctor turned to Eric, “Go take a long, hot shower. That skin has to be itching. Hot water will help.”

Sookie walked toward her bags to retrieve her phone. Eric gave the doctor a cold stare, but then walked through to the bed chamber.

Sookie returned to see Doctor Ludwig make a motion with her hand. The door to their bed chamber swung shut all on its own. When she saw Sookie’s surprised expression, Amy shrugged, “What? Just because I don’t show off doesn’t mean I can’t!” She settled back on the couch and patted the seat next to her. When Sookie sat, the Doctor fixed her with a beady stare, “I need to say this fast because he won’t be busy long. He is going to come looking for you because he can’t help himself. Look, Fairy girl, your vampire in there is going to be stubborn, but he’s in bad shape. In all my years I have never seen a vampire lose skin like that and since he will keep ignoring his problem, it is going to have to be you.”

“Me, what?” Sookie squeaked.

Ludwig pinched Sookie’s arm, “You are going to have to fix this. He’ll let you do anything he thinks will make you happy. I don’t know how you did it, but you’ve turned the great Eric Northman into a pussycat, and you can see how that’s working out. He thinks your happiness is in being away from him? He’s ready to sacrifice.” When Sookie opened her mouth to respond, the doctor shook her head, leaned forward, and spoke in a hissing whisper, “He is noble to a fault. He will put you first. You need to find a way to do the same!”

“I do!” Sookie hissed back.

“By leaving your husband behind for weeks at a time? Look at what that has done to you both.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Everything I touch turns to crap.” Sookie sighed. “I’m a failure at being a vampire Queen. I work with Mr. Cataliades on my Grandfather’s businesses, but they mostly take care of themselves.” Sookie’s eyes dropped, “And now I’ve screwed up the Were thing. I don’t know if I can take just sitting around, Eric is going to know I’m not happy. It’s not that easy, pretending. He knows. He can feel it through our bond. He knows when I’m not busy, I’m not happy and I can’t bring myself to act around him. It feels like a lie and I won’t do that!”

“Well,” and the doctor brushed an imaginary piece of lint from the couch, “There’s always that other thing.”
“What thing?” Sookie asked.

“Jane was just reminding me that it’s been a year since your pledging. She has everything ready. You would have to stay in your house in Bon Temps for an extended period so you could be closer to the hospital. Of course, the Viking would want to be close to you. With technology, he could probably run his kingdom from there as easily as he could run it from here.” Amy gave Sookie a knowing look, “It’s likely all that Fae well-being the Prince soaked the place in will help you both heal faster. You could be taking day trips away from each other in no time.”

“Eric and I haven’t really talked about that lately,” Sookie could feel herself pulling back.

“Seems you haven’t been together long enough to talk about much of anything, but, not to worry,” and the doctor hopped off the couch, “you’ll have plenty of together time now. The more time you spend together, the sooner you’ll get to spend time apart. As for what you do to pass the time? Well, that’s up to you, but I agree, you’ll need a hobby. He’ll always have the worries of his world. If you can’t find an occupation that suits you in vampire affairs, you’ll need to find something else.” Doctor Ludwig smoothed her skirt, “But a word of advice as someone who has been around Weres a very long time? They are nowhere near ready to form a true government. This wasn’t your fault. They will need to try this a few more times before they’re really ready. The vampires failed for centuries before they succeeded. Don’t take this on yourself!”

“Aren’t you going to wait for the dinner I ordered you?” Sookie asked.

“Of course not!” the doctor snarked, and in a blink, she was gone.

XXXxx

They agreed they would drive up to Bon Temps separately. Sookie was already a day late. She texted the number Tamsin provided, informing her Fae trainer she would be ready to start lessons a couple days later than originally planned. Michele, Jason, and their children were scheduled to come over for a visit during the day. Sookie considered postponing, but then, she didn’t.

“I think it will be good for us to spend time there,” Sookie told Eric as dawn approached. “The last time we were there for any kind of time was our anniversary and we both enjoyed that.”

Eric nodded. He had fed from her again, and she had fed from him as well, but the Viking remained subdued. “I’m sorry I was so defensive about you reading me,” Sookie apologized again. “I know you wouldn’t break your promise. All I can say is that this bonding thing has me so worn out, I am just not myself.”

“I understand, Lover,” he said gently, and he squeezed his arms around her a little harder.

Sookie kissed his chest, “I mean it, Eric. Please, please forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” he replied, but Sookie knew there was. She was leaning over to tell him so when she realized he was gone from her, pulled into his day death. She wouldn’t see him again until he drove up the drive in Bon Temps tonight. “Rest well,” she whispered, and tucked her head against him until it was time for her to rise and pack.

XXxxx

All day the house on Hummingbird Lane was a hive of activity. Vans came and went, filled with clothing and food, trinkets and technology. Owen and James moved into the guest house that was located just beyond the edge of the trees. Michele and her three sons showed up before sundown to help Sookie get dinner started. “You should think about getting someone to come in and cook,”
Michele told her.

“I can’t see it,” Sookie replied. “It’s really just me and whichever of the guards are here. I figured I’d talk with Holly, Hoyt’s wife, about delivering meals for the guards. Figure some regular traffic couldn’t hurt.” Holly and Hoyt Fortenberry had taken over Merlotte’s. It was called Maxine’s now, in honor of Hoyt’s mother. From what Sookie had heard, it still wasn’t as busy as Merlotte’s had been, but since it had been open less than a year, she figured there was no cause to fret. A business needed time to take hold with folks.

“I think they’d appreciate that,” Michele confirmed. “And what about you? You going to remember to eat?”


“As bad as when you were starving for that bastard, Sam,” Michele wasn’t laughing. When Sookie had been married to Sam Merlotte, he told her the reason he cheated on her was because she wasn’t thin enough. He had regulated her food and almost starved her to death.

“Eric won’t let me forget,” Sookie smiled.

“So, he’s going to be staying here for a while?” Michele looked out the window. Bit and JC, her oldest, were in the barn tending to the horses. Michael Eric, the baby, was napping in the family room just beyond the kitchen.

“Yup,” Sookie said as brightly as she could, “We’ve decided we were spending way too much time apart. We’re going to be like peas and rice from here on. Where you see one, you’ll see the other.”

“I know there’s something you’re not saying,” Michele told her sister-in-law, “but I can tell you the boys will be thrilled. I just hope Bit doesn’t take it into his head to try and be a vampire again.”

“I can’t imagine what that would be like,” Sookie laughed.

“Believe me, you don’t want to know,” Michele shook her head. “Let’s just say it’s a good thing the folks at Church know us so well otherwise I would be hanging my head.”

Near six o’clock, Jason Stackhouse showed up, freshly showered, and bringing a six pack of beer. They sat down and ate, and Sookie played with the baby. JC and Bit told stories and Jason talked about his day. Once the dishes were finished, they moved outside.

The stars were twinkling above them and fireflies were making their own points of light along the edges of the woods. Sookie, Jason and Michele sat on the wide, front porch of the house, sipping ice tea. The boys played tag on the lawn and Michael Eric showed off how he could pull himself up against the table and stand on wobbly legs. Sookie found her eyes wandering back toward the driveway where it connected with the street and she swept her eyes left and right, waiting for Eric Northman.

The minute she saw the headlights she knew it was him. She felt a small thrill in her chest and she stopped what she was saying mid-sentence. Sookie stood and walked to the steps of her home, feeling herself on tiptoe as the Corvette swung into the long drive. Eric wasn’t out of the car before she was in his arms, her face against him. “I missed you!” she sighed.

“Good evening, Lover,” he chuckled. He really did look better. He had sloughed all his skin, but in that way vampires heal, the redness from the new skin had already faded. If she hadn’t seen it, Sookie never would have known.
“Uncle Eric!” Bit yelled, his legs wind milling in a blur as he launched his body at his favorite uncle. Eric stepped away from Sookie so he could catch the young boy, tossing him high in the air and then catching him. He flipped the boy over, hanging him by his feet, and while the child shrieked with laughter, Eric shook hands with both JC and Jason.

Michele hung back, the baby in her arms, “I’ll wait until you finish with that mess,” she jerked her chin at Bit, “But don’t think I’m not going to collect my sugar!”

As they walked up onto the porch, Jason shoulder bumped Eric, “Nice to see you again, bro. We’ve missed you.”

XXxxx

Sookie stepped back, then stepped forward to tilt the painting she just hung on the wall of their bedroom a little more to the right. As much as Sookie had been coming here, there were still things that had not found their rightful places. Of course, other than their first anniversary, they hadn’t been in the house together for more than a few days. Eric emerged from the closet, “I hope you didn’t mind having Jason and Michele over our first night.”

Eric stepped forward and tilted the painting back just a bit, “It was good to see them.” He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back against him, and then leaning down to kiss the top of her head.

“The boys were sure happy to see you,” Sookie said softly.

“I enjoy them,” her husband replied. “They have changed.”

Sookie took a deep breath, “I have something to ask you.” Sookie could feel Eric’s curiosity. She bit her lip a little before she continued, “We said we’d wait a year, and it’s been a year.” Eric became very still, and Sookie could feel the blush rushing over her face.

“Are you sure, Sookie?” Eric’s voice was very steady.

Sookie thought about tonight, Eric dangling Bit and the way their godson looked in her Viking’s large, capable hands. She thought of her vision, the laughing, golden-haired boy running toward her. “Yes, Eric. I’d like to try.”

“Then we shall, Lover,” he said simply, and turning her toward him, Eric Northman traced her cheek with his finger. He smiled in that way that was every promise he ever made and when he kissed her, she felt it all the way to her toes.
Sookie had been sleeping for a few hours. She was lying on her side, her hand tucked under her chin, which meant she was mostly silent. Sookie on her back was snoring Sookie. They had been here, in Bon Temps, for two weeks. If he was to be precise they had been here, within the confines of the property on Hummingbird Lane, for two weeks.

Sookie asking for the child had surprised him. She was so committed to her work with the Weres that she was able to ignore her body, her single-minded determination driving her forward. She was standing on her own, a force in her own right and claiming it, and then, in an instant, she was throwing it to the wind. With no warning, she now wanted to head in a very different direction, one that would force her to become a moon orbiting someone else’s world, a role she refused to play for him. He could still feel his shock as if it was that moment, but in the next moment she was in his arms and his own body and needs had asserted themselves.

For four nights, while he was awake, they were never out of bed longer than the minutes needed for Sookie to use the bathroom or prepare simple meals. The refrigerator was restocked every day and Eric could smell their guards on the first floor, but there were no disturbances. For four days they relearned the paths and trails of each other’s bodies. For four days they fed from each other, bodies intertwined, and joined in intimate ways.

On the fifth day, they talked, but not about this thing she wanted. Instead they talked of little things. She told him about the differences in landscapes and foods she had seen in her travels. He told her of trips he had taken to other countries and curious things people did there. She told him some of the silly jokes people went out of their way to share with her.

What do you call a fake noodle? An impasta. Why did the picture go to jail? Because it was framed. Why are frogs so happy? They eat whatever bugs them.

They moved to the first floor and Eric made a fire, even though it wasn’t cold. The shedding of his skin had stopped and Sookie was eating more. They felt stronger and talked about that. Sookie told him she was spending an hour or so in the sun every day, and that walking away from him the first few days was so hard it made her cry, but today it was almost manageable. “When we are ourselves again, Lover, you will find you are happy to go far from me again.” Eric stroked her face, already dreading that future his restless wife would desire.
“No, Eric. My wandering days are over,” Sookie’s eyes were bright, but he could feel a thread of regret flavoring the bond as she kissed him, so he didn’t believe her. She was sad now, but she would change her mind.

On the sixth night, he rose to the smell of sunshine. Her skin was more golden for all it stretched so tightly across her bones and she welcomed him with renewed energy. He felt purpose move within her again and she asked if he had changed his mind. “No, Sookie, I have promised. I will be ready when you are.” That night they rose from bed and started exploring the house. They didn’t get far, the family room, the kitchen. Sookie pulled open boxes that had been stacked in the front room, boxes that had come from his storage locker. Together they placed some of his personal items and hung paintings. Sookie found paper and they made lists of things they needed; brackets and nails, organizers and lighting fixtures to spotlight treasures. Much later, they found their way outside to the wide front porch and sat in the rocking chairs, holding hands and listening to the sounds of the night.

“We’ll have to install gates,” Sookie said. It was a curious thing to say.

“Are you thinking you want to fence the property? Gates without a fence don’t provide much protection.”

“No, silly!” she laughed. “Inside! For the baby!” He must have looked puzzled because she said, “All those stairs, Eric! Gates make sure he won’t get hurt.” She looked back into the night. It was on the tip of his tongue to remind her that a baby would need to be many months old before it would be ready to crawl, but her outsized happiness seemed too fragile to challenge, so instead Eric squeezed her hand and said nothing.

On the seventh night, Sookie handed him the phone and asked him to make the call to the clinic. “You know Jane better than me. Besides, I’m so nervous I’ll probably just burst into tears or get silly!” Eric thought it was a bad idea, moving so quickly, but he trusted Amy Ludwig to slow things down. The doctor hadn’t been out to see them yet and while Eric could feel they were Improving; he could also feel his lingering weakness. He wondered if Sookie’s enthusiastic, head-long rush to become pregnant was a symptom and if he should be worried. He was tempted to dip into her head and find out what it was she wasn’t telling him.

In past, he would have asked Pam to talk with his wife. Pam was a woman and had a way of finding things out and then explaining them to him in a way that made sense, but Pam was gone and they had no direct way to communicate. Eric knew Thalia and Karin were in town, but as quickly as he considered them, he dismissed the idea. Thalia would laugh at him and Karin? While his relationship with his other daughter had been restored, Sookie had been the reason he banished her. To ask Karin to interrogate Sookie about this desire for a biological child had disaster written all over it, so he decided to make the call and rely on Amy Ludwig to introduce moderation.

Jane answered almost immediately. She was surprised to hear from Eric and told him so. She told him she was delighted that they were ready to start and that the facility was anticipating the call, but she wouldn’t consider scheduling an initial appointment until they were cleared by Doctor Ludwig. It took everything Eric had not to sigh in relief. When he relayed the information to Sookie she looked angry, and then her face inexplicably dissolved into grief. Eric wrapped her in his arms, “All will be well, Lover!” he comforted her. “You are tired and we are still not ourselves. You would not wish to begin this and be too ill to continue, would you?”

“You’re right,” she sniffed. “You’re always right.” The way she said it didn’t exactly sound like a compliment. “I’m just ready to start our lives,” she whispered, and Eric wondered what she thought had been happening. He thought they had been living ‘their’ lives all along.

The next few nights passed more easily. They took walks in the moonlight and visited the horses in
the barn. “When we are stronger, I would like to ride with you again,” Eric told her one evening, stroking his wife’s long, blond hair.

Sookie teased him, telling him she was getting so good at riding he’d have a hard time catching her. He growled and she giggled. It was like it was, and then her phone chimed. “Cheese and rice!” she exclaimed. “I’m sorry! I texted Michele earlier and I forgot to turn it off.” She raised the screen, but then instead of muting it, she swiped her thumb and keyed in her password. He saw her eyes widen and he felt a quick stab of sadness.

“What is it?” He wondered if there was a problem with her family and the temptation to dip in and pull out her thoughts was strong.

“Nothing,” she smiled at him with too bright eyes. “The thing with the Weres? It’s over. Things got pretty ugly in Denver and they’ve decided to take a break before trying again.”

Eric laid his hand on her back. He knew she felt strongly about this cause, “It may only be a year,” he said quietly. “You will be stronger when they are ready.”

“They won’t be asking me back.” She said it with a steady voice, but even with their bond muted, Eric could feel her twist of emotions. “They’ve decided they’ll be better off keeping it to all Weres. No outsiders.”

“They are foolish, Sookie,” and Eric tried to wrap her in his arms, but she pushed away after only a moment.

“I’m fine!” she announced and then said “Let’s head back to the house,” too quickly. She turned and walked out of the barn without waiting for him, but when he joined her in the kitchen her smile was in place and she was humming while she prepared her dinner.

For days he waited for her to tell him what happened, but each time he tried to introduce the topic, she told him it was over and she was over it. “Like my Gran used to say, Eric, no use crying over spilled milk. Better to look forward than waste time regretting yesterday, right?” The determined way she said it and the energy she poured into those things they did together almost made him believe her. Almost.

Eric’s eyes flicked back to his laptop screen. The little wheel was still spinning, meaning his email was caught in cyberspace, and then the error message came up again, telling him his email had timed out. With a growl, Eric came off the bed, and carrying his laptop, headed downstairs.

Had Eric been involved in the construction of the house, he would have had it hardwired for Internet. It was a modern convenience the Fae had not considered. Eric supposed he could look into satellite, but for now there was a router positioned in an empty bedroom on the second floor. What the Fae had built were very solid walls and corners that baffled sound. That meant that connectivity on the third floor for all but their mobile phones was almost nonexistent.

There was a room at the far end of the master suite they had been calling their office, although lately Sookie had been eyeing it in a different way. Eric wanted an office on the top floor, one capable of video conferencing and remote access. He wanted the cable run up for a small television. He wanted things that required the cooperation of the local cable television/Internet provider and so far they had had no cooperation. The company would not send their contractors out at night and Eric didn’t want anyone in his chamber while he rested. Almost every other thing they needed to turn their house into their home could be accommodated. Everything that is, except utilities.

Eric sat down on a stool at the kitchen island, popped open his Drafts folder and hit send again. He
knew better than anyone that there were other vampires living in the Area so this wasn’t just his problem. He thought about texting Indira to ask if she had a contact, but just as quickly dismissed the idea. Indira was a good manager with a reputation for being fair in enforcing the rules, but she was not the type to get involved with simple day-to-day challenges. Vampires in Area 5 hired day men and mostly had their appliance and utility work done before they moved into a house. If technology changed, accommodations had to be made or you just did without. It was why most vampires slept in rooms that had little beyond electricity, and sometimes not even that.

Shifting to try and get more comfortable, Eric opened another email, but the spinning wheel appeared again. He growled, low and menacing. He thought about moving. He thought about heading back to New Orleans. Then he did the logical thing. He reached for his phone and called his former day man, Mustapha Khan.

Mustapha was now the Packmaster for the Long Tooth Pack, but when he had been working for Eric he had impressed the Viking. He was a day man who always delivered. He was not Eric’s first day man. Bobby Burnham was someone Eric remembered with some fondness. Bobby had been a whiner, but made that tolerable by being willing to do anything. Mustapha was better. What he couldn’t get reasonably he strong-armed to achieve and Eric admired that about him.

When Alcide Herveaux stepped down as Packmaster under a cloud of disgrace, the tall, brooding Were fought for the position and won. Eric wasn’t surprised. Mustapha Khan wasn’t the most popular Packmaster, or the most conventional. Most Weres, particularly in this part of the state, had strong opinions about the sanctity of marriage and racial parity. Mustapha Khan challenged those conventions on both fronts, but it would need to be a strong Were indeed to step forward and challenge him, now that he had the title.

The phone answered on the second ring, “I heard you were prowling this part of the state. How long have you been back?” Eric could hear music playing in the background.

“Two weeks,” Eric answered, “I have decided to become a more regular resident here and I find I am in need of help. Do you know of someone who can install cable? With Internet?”

The Were laughed, “I’m not your day man anymore, Northman, but I’m touched that you’re missing me. Those cable guys are the best, aren’t they? You get more channels that you don’t want for more money than you want to pay and they put you through the wringer to get it. They have it all figured out.” The Packmaster chuckled a little more before saying, “Yeah, I have a guy that can hook you up. I’ll text over your info and ask him to call you. Should I give him this number?”

“It will reach me directly,” Eric confirmed. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” the Packmaster said, “By the way, I think you should know there’s a rumor floating around that you’ve got some kind of wasting sickness. Folks are saying it’s Sino AIDS and that you’ve moved back here to prepare for your final death.”

Eric grimaced. Before he left the city, Eric had handed over the monthly Assizes to Maxwell Lee. As Eric’s second, it was expected Max would handle the usual cases while the King was traveling. Although they hadn’t discussed what would be said, Eric had counted on Max to present an acceptable story, explaining his absence. While Eric couldn’t be sure these rumors were coming from New Orleans, it seemed likely. Whatever Max had said was not convincing enough.

In truth, both he and Sookie were feeling much better. Doctor Ludwig had been out to see them earlier this evening, pronouncing them mostly cured. The short woman had been full of caustic remarks about sex, blood, and Fae magic. She told Sookie that they could count on another few weeks before either of them should consider returning to their regular lives, cutting his wife off from
asking about the clinic. Before she left, the doctor spent time walking around the house and then around the grounds, sniffing like a mother-in-law looking for a dirty sock, and exclaiming over the strength of the spells Niall, Prince of the Sky Fae, had put in place.

“You have a helluva protection ward here, Northman, a good one!” Amy informed him. “That Niall never does anything by halves!” Then the doctor had turned to Sookie, “And you, Fairy Girl! I can see you’re all hot to trot, and I’m sure your Great-Grandfather would thank me, but you need to cool your jets. Spend a little time starting small. Have your demon buddy out and have a couple meetings. Work up to it. I think you’ll find just doing normal things is more exhausting than you think. Give your body some time!” and with an eye roll, she was gone.

Sookie had slammed around the house for a bit after that, informing Eric that she used to think he was high-handed, but she could see she’d been wrong.

“You still there, Northman?” Eric focused on the Packmaster. The music on the other end of the phone didn’t cover the low rumble of conversation, which meant Mustapha was likely sitting in the middle of a crowded club. If the Packmaster was willing to repeat the rumor with so many around, then it was likely being bandied about as common knowledge and that was dangerous.

“Sorry,” Eric made sure he sounded slightly bored, “I don’t know how these stories get started. I am planning to spend more time here because this is Sookie’s home. She enjoys country living and I have warm feelings for this area.” This was the story they had agreed to use. It wasn’t the strongest explanation, but the Viking knew from long experience that the secret to a successful cover story was simplicity and consistency. “I have been considering moving the seat of the kingdoms here. I can spend a week every month in New Orleans. I’m sure you appreciate that the tension of walking through demonstrators every night makes city dwelling less enjoyable.”

“Uh huh,” the Packmaster replied, “Look, Eric, I buy it, but there are plenty of folks that don’t. I’m down here at Fangtasia. The place is packed, vampires, Weres, humans with cameras. Why don’t you come down and do an hour? Let yourself get photographed dancing with that Queen of yours and yucking it up with Thalia? It’ll hit social media in no time; rumor killed.”

Eric laughed, sounding more carefree than he felt, “I like the idea, but my Queen is sleeping. As you know, she’s been traveling quite a bit. There were some things we needed to get straight between us. I believe humans call it a second honeymoon.”

Mustapha laughed a little too, “Sure, I get it! So I guess that leaves you at loose ends, right?” Eric could still hear the note of doubt and Eric realized the first one who would need to be convinced was Mustapha.

“You’ll be there for a while?” Eric asked.

“I will,” Mustapha confirmed. “Karin is here and Thalia. Indira scooted out a while ago to check up on something. You’ll be among friends.”

“It is my kingdom,” Eric replied. “I am always among friends.” He glanced at his watch. It was almost two in the morning but Fangtasia wouldn’t close for another few hours. It was a reminder that they were still healing that he considered waking Sookie at all, but he just as quickly dismissed the idea. Sookie would start her normal routine tomorrow. In addition to rising long enough to sit in the sun, his wife would resume training with Tamsin, her Fae magic instructor. Mr. Cataliades, her attorney and business manager would be coming in the afternoon and she announced she would be signing up for some more online business classes as soon as they could get their Internet sorted.

“I can be there in thirty minutes,” he told Mustapha and rang off. He texted both Karin and Thalia. It
was better that they were waiting for him. He also texted Indira, giving his Sheriff the courtesy of knowing he would be in her gathering place.

Indira texted back. She informed him she had been called to Rubio’s Area. There was something in the way the text was worded that piqued Eric’s curiosity. He asked her specifically what got her in her car so late at night and she texted back that it might be nothing and she would let him know as soon as she did.

Eric’s next move was to call his guards. Charles and James were currently staying in the guest house just beyond the tree line of the yard. Part of what would need to be sorted if this was to become a more permanent base, was how the guard rotation would work. Eric didn’t think that having their New Orleans guards in Bon Temps would work long term. These were men with families and friends. Their lives were several hours to the South. Eric knew Mustapha would furnish day guards and things had improved enough that Indira could recommend vampires for night, but when he mentioned it, Sookie became emotional. “Everything is turned inside out and now you want to change this up, too? Mustapha doesn’t even like me! I just don’t want any more strangers around me, Eric! Unless our guards complain, I don’t want to go there!” and she’d stomped away.

Eric headed upstairs to dress. When he came back downstairs, James was seated at the island in the kitchen. “Charles has the Corvette outside,” the Were told him.

When he swung out the door and down the stairs, Charles climbed out of the driver’s seat and headed around the car to open the door. Eric slid into the driver’s seat himself. “Let’s go for a ride,” he growled, waiting for the flustered Were to get into the passenger seat.

The trip was quick, less than half an hour during which Eric opened the engine when they hit the highway. When they pulled into the parking lot at Fangtasia, they had to circle twice before Eric gave up and headed around to the back, pulling into Indira’s spot. Eric was wondering who he should text to open the back door when it swung open on its own and Karin’s face appeared. “Daughter!” he greeted her as he unfolded himself from the car, “I heard you were here.”

Karin embraced him, accepting his kiss, but then went stiff in his arms. “You smell off,” she said out loud. “You have been ill! The rumors are true.”

“I am fine, as you see,” Eric said quickly and in a voice pitched to be overheard. He leaned in again, appearing to embrace her more warmly, but this time hissed in her ear, “You forget yourself! We do not discuss personal things in public!”

“I apologize, my Maker,” Karin gasped and stepped back, bowing deeply and exposing her neck. This was not how Eric had seen their first meeting in almost a year moving forward. While he had accepted Karin back into his family, the feelings between them remained ragged. She was his oldest progeny, his first, and she had betrayed him. To be precise, she had betrayed Sookie, but it amounted to the same thing. Pam and Sookie had engineered their reconciliation, but Karin had left for Arkansas, staying with Thomas, Eric’s Sheriff in the North. While they texted, they had not truly regained their closeness with each other, and Eric was feeling it now.

The Viking glanced over to the open door to see Thalia. He kept his eyes on the fierce vampire as he said, “There is no need for apologies between us, Karin. A misunderstanding, nothing more.” He returned his eyes to Karin and touched her, drawing her closer and hooking his arm around her in a display of support. “Sookie sends her regards. She will be sorry to know she missed you. As you may have heard, we intend to be in Bon Temps more regularly. Sookie is fond of her ancestral home and it pleases me to indulge her. It would please us both If you were to visit with us.” Karin was less stiff in his embrace now. “Maxwell Lee tells me you are showing a rare talent for negotiation. He
reviewed the figures from the lumber sales and walked me through your role in securing the cutting rights. Most impressive.” Eric did not include his suspicion that the results were obtained more as a result of bullying than persuasion. His Karin was a blunt instrument. She rarely exerted herself to use charm if brute strength would work. It made her an outstanding warrior and an uneasy peace-time guest.

“I am pleased that I have pleased you, my Maker,” Karin’s tone and address remained formal. Eric sighed, knowing he would have to be the one to make the effort if they were to regain an easiness between them.

As they headed into the corridor, Thalia fell into step beside him, “I would ask a favor, North Man.” Eric stopped and then nodded once. “I would ask if you would meet with me privately.” Thalia’s eyes flicked toward the office doors they were passing.

“Yes of course!” Eric said smoothly. He smiled once for Karin and then acknowledged Charles, who slid into place beside the door.

As soon as the door closed, Thalia said, “You shouldn’t crush her that way. She was indiscreet, but she has been worried for you. The reports of your poor health have been on everyone’s lips.”

“She could have called,” Eric shrugged.

“She did,” Thalia hissed. “I did. You haven’t been responding to texts or messages.” Eric’s eyes flicked to his phone. He signed in, the first time in weeks, and looked at the list of missed calls and messages. “My guards are available,” it sounded like the excuse it was. “And Maxwell was available.”

“Maxwell is not showing well,” Thalia said shortly. “The rumors of your illness started in New Orleans. There is someone there who is not discreet, probably in the palace. Maxwell should address it.”

“Maxwell is not you, Thalia. He tries, but he lacks a certain….”

“Ruthlessness?” Thalia’s lip lifted just a bit.

“I was going to say ‘focus,’” Eric smiled grimly. “His figures are impeccable. He juggles Pam’s books, the Palace accounts, and personnel schedules and makes it all look easy. I have never met such an organized vampire. But I still find him…” Eric looked away. He didn’t want to criticize his employee, but then again, this was Thalia. She knew him better and longer than any other creature, “He lacks fire,” Eric finished.

“For all we are civilized now, we are still killers at heart,” Thalia nodded. “There will ever be a need for swords and discipline amongst us. Remembering that every hand, even those who appear friendly, can hide a stake keeps you vigilant. Especially those that appear friendly. Maxwell forgets that.” Thalia sat down on the couch while Eric sank down in the chair behind the desk. For a moment, it felt like old times. “Maxwell has become accustomed to talk and negotiation. He wants to believe that the violence that lies at our core has been tamed. It is a weakness. He is not a good second for times of war.”

“I don’t have an army and I am not aware of any war,” Eric reminded her.

“Every vampire that is within your realm should be ready to fight, Viking,” Thalia nodded. “I know you’re surrounding yourself with Weres. Sookie is pandering and prancing after them, but in the end, it’s fang that means something. You will need fang in the end.”
“Sookie does not seem to think that her days with the Weres will continue. She seems conflicted about it. What do you know?” Eric asked her.

“Not enough,” Thalia replied, then she lifted her chin, “You should also know that people are talking about a famous couple that is expected to visit Jane’s fertility clinic. There is a great deal of speculation.” Thalia sat back and stared at Eric.

“We have agreed to try,” he said levelly, his eyes not leaving his former second. “We will have our first appointment soon.”

“You should have your telepath screen that place and its personnel,” Thalia told him. “It was too easy for me to hear about an upcoming visit and it didn’t take much to put two and two together.”

“People should make up their minds,” Eric shrugged. “I’m finally dying or I’m reproducing.”

“They are not mutually exclusive,” Thalia observed dryly.

“You won’t forget the promise you made me?” Eric asked.

Thalia’s look turned dark, “No, Viking. I won’t forget, but I regret giving it.”

“I would trust no other.” Eric made an effort to shake off the foreboding he felt, “Not likely to come to anything anyway. Babies from bones? Foolish!”

“More foolish not to be prepared,” Thalia was not amused. “It is good you are showing yourself.” She walked around him, her eyes narrowed, openly assessing him. “You should go sit in the booth. Your friend, Mustapha, is there. Let the vermin see you. Tour your territories. End the rumors. You need everyone talking about your strength and the reach of your rule if you expect to keep the curious away from Bon Temps,” and Thalia nodded and started walking toward the door.

“I have often wondered, my friend,” and Eric dragged his finger over the desk. “What did Niall tell you, when we were in Nebraska?” Eric had asked Thalia that question several times since they returned from the Fae joining ceremony. He knew the Prince had pulled Thalia aside and he knew that as soon as they returned to New Orleans, Thalia announced she would be stepping down as his second. Eric had no proof, but he was convinced the events were connected.

Thalia gave him a long look, “Nothing, Viking. He wished to reminisce about the past.” It was the same answer she gave him every time he asked. Eric thought about what made good cover stories and he knew he was listening to hers.

They stared at each other for one long moment, but it was Eric who dropped his eyes first. “It will be as you wish, my old friend,” he conceded and stood up.

“There is something more,” Thalia told him. “I have finished my work here. I will be leaving tomorrow evening. I intend to travel to Lafayette. Your Sheriff seems open to hosting me while I train the vampires in his area.

Eric sat back down. He struggled to keep his face neutral, but in spite of himself, he asked, “Have I done something to offend you?”

Thalia stood still, poker straight, shoulders back. Her blade-like nose and thin lips didn’t change, but he was certain he saw her eyes waver. “No, Viking. You have not offended me. I would do what I must to best serve you, and that requires that I travel away from you for a while.”
“And you won’t explain it?” Eric was convinced this had something to do with Niall. The Prince had shown her something, said something, and now his oldest friend, his most trusted advisor was deserting him.

“All will be well,” Thalia nodded. “Tonight will be incredibly annoying. Once your presence is known, the vermin will flock.” She didn’t look entirely unhappy as she turned to leave. Before she opened the door, she said, “You could consider making Karin commander of your army. Not your second, but your war chief. It will give her standing and help heal was lies between you,” and then she was gone.

Eric rose to walk into the Club. The music was loud and the scent and sight of the bodies swaying on the dance floor was pleasing. “Do you miss it?” Karin joined him as he emerged from the back corridor.

Eric looked at the sleek surfaces, the colors and layout so changed from his time here as Sheriff. “Sometimes,” he told his daughter, “but not often.” There was a sound and heads turned. The vampires in the club stopped what they were doing, turned toward him and bowed. The hiss of words and whispers sounded like an electric current, running just under the music. Were looked. Some nodded at Charles, but there were hostile stares as well. Humans were turning toward him, their phones in hand. One girl pulled out a selfie stick and was walking well ahead of him, but he could see his image on the screen of her phone. Thumbs were clicking and people yelling to be heard over the music, telling others who weren’t there that Eric Northman had just shown up and to hurry over.

“You sure know how to make an entrance!” Mustapha Khan was seated in the corner booth that had been Eric’s once upon a time. The Packmaster was still shaving his head, but he had had a pattern tattooed on one side of his skull since the Viking had seen him last. Eric had heard Sookie calling Mustapha ‘Mr. Matrix’ once and he chuckled. The Packmaster did look like someone who would be more comfortable on a Hollywood movie set than sitting in a bar in Shreveport, Louisiana.

When Eric slid into the booth, the Packmaster nodded, then said, “I can see the reports were exaggerated. You’re lookin’ good, Eric.”

“You look like you need a fashion consultant,” Eric replied.

The tall Were laughed, “That’s jealousy speaking. You wish your ball and chain would let you dress this cool,” and he sipped his drink and slowly turned his head, tracking his eyes from one end of the club to the other. “Come on, Viking! Smile nice for your adoring fans!” Eric glanced at Mustapha before raising his face to look at the crowd that had gathered around the front of the booth. Charles was maintaining a line about five feet out, but they still seemed too close. Mustapha nodded and one of his Were’s joined Charles. Together they moved the by-standers back another few feet.

When the noise dropped a tick, the Packmaster turned back to Eric, “I heard about what happened in Denver. Good thing Sookie managed to get out of there in one piece. You know how Were’s feel about witches. When she summoned that blade? It looked like all kinds of witchcraft to those local yokels. I’m not sure they even believe the Fae exist. Not like they see them out there anyway.” Mustapha made a point of turning away before he said, “Guess Sookie won’t be attending any more conferences for a while.”

Eric frowned. Sookie hadn’t mentioned running into trouble in Denver, only that she was no longer going to be part of the movement. He felt his teeth grinding. Thalia was holding secrets. Sookie was holding secrets. Rather than explore it any further, Eric said, “I wasn’t aware that Were’s felt so
strongly about witches.”

“Goes way back,” Mustapha glanced at the vampire. “Y’all probably don’t notice because you like
to be in charge. You hire witches when you want something and you hire us. It’s the only time we
are willingly involved with those people, and preferably when you hire us to fight them,” and
Mustapha chuckled, “Which could be happening again pretty soon.”

There were more camera flashes, so Eric looked away when he asked, “What do you mean?”

“Sure you heard Indira flew out of here earlier,” Mustapha hid his mouth behind his drink. “There’s
a rumor the witches are figuring out a way to remove glamour. They are gathering secrets and fixing
to use the information to blackmail folks. Now, I’m not thinking that it will bring many crows home
to my roost, but I have a vested interest in keeping certain secrets a secret.”

“Where did this rumor start?” Eric hissed.

“Where all the best rumors start, New Orleans,” the Were answered. “Maybe you know the lead
bitch too. I hear it’s your wife’s former roommate.”

Eric knew without being told Mustapha was talking about Amelia Broadway.

The Viking had never liked her. Every time Sookie was teetering toward him, Amelia Broadway had
found a way to push her until she wasn’t any more. The witch had pushed Alcide Herveaux into his
wife’s bed. She had encouraged his wife with John Quinn. He knew the witch’s father had been
involved in shady deals and Amelia was no better. He pulled out his phone and texted Maxwell Lee
and Indira, asking them to collect information and then he felt it, the pull. Dawn was an hour away.
Sookie was a half hour of that hour away from him. He needed to get home.

“Thank you,” he told Mustapha, and slid out of the booth. He signaled Charles and the Were slipped
quickly toward the back hallway, clearing the way. As he moved through the crowd, Eric signaled
Karin and she joined him. “Please plan to visit with us,” he told her. “You are missed,” and he
embraced her, sending her comfort and affection.

Charles had the driver’s door open, but Eric walked to the passenger side. When Charles pulled out
onto the road, Eric laid his head back and said, “Drive like the wind.”

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Sookie slipped from the house and walked past the roses and through the trees. There was no fence
at this end of the cemetery and she walked confidently toward her Gran’s grave. It was comforting,
passing the monuments she knew so well. There was the one with the angel, it’s wings arched
forward as if it was protecting the person who rested there. There was another shaped like a tree
stump, and one that was shaped like a long, low bench.

Sookie found herself stopping in front of the one with the lamb perched on it. She knew it had been
placed for a child that had died. The girl’s name was carved in the stone along with the dates of her
birth and death. She had only been two years old when death had taken her from a family that had
loved her enough to commission such a special monument. There was something about this, the
immense mortality of it that had Sookie questioning her own desire to have children. What if
something happened to them? Would she have the strength to place them in the ground leaving
nothing but a stone for remembrance?

She gulped and then shook her head, pushing away the morbid thoughts. Gran was just a little way
ahead and Sookie smiled as she sank down on the bench she had set here many years ago.
“Been awhile,” she said out loud, admiring the way the daisies were swaying in the wind. Sookie supposed she should trim the flowers, make the site tidier, but there was something wonderful about the way nature had found to bring its glory to this place. The rose bushes were twining to either side, and iris bloomed in clumps.

Training this morning had been frustrating. Tamsin was trying to show her how to teleport. Sookie knew she could do it. She’d been startled and somehow she had done it naturally, but now, when she was trying, it seemed she couldn’t even find a clue of the elusive edge that would allow her to slip from one place to another. It had taken everything to drag herself upstairs, shower, and not just crawl back in bed.

Mr. Cataliades would return later this afternoon and they would review the quarterly statements. Once Eric rose, they agreed to go to Fangtasia and make an appearance. So much to do, but all Sookie wanted right now was a quiet moment with sunshine, a moment to sort out why she felt so confused.

For many days she had been convinced that the answer to her lack of direction was children. She had proven she couldn’t handle official supernatural business. The more she thought about her failure with the Were, the more convinced she became that she had no place trying to be involved in their business. She already knew that vampires wouldn’t accept having her be a Queen for all the title she held. She was a warm and giving person, everyone said so. Why not focus on something she could do?

But now Sookie found she was questioning whether she was doing this for the right reasons. Children were such a large commitment. What if she wasn’t meant to be a mother? She remembered saying that she didn’t want children. She didn’t want to condemn any child to have to grow up with her telepathy, unable to understand the terrible gift of hearing the thoughts of others. What had changed?

As if in answer to her prayer, Tara DuRone walked toward her, “I thought this is where I’d find you. Text your guard, by the way. He’s looking pretty frantic.” Sookie sighed and pulled out her phone. Owen was here today.

“What am I doing?” Sookie asked her best friend. “I’m not responsible when it comes to my guards. What makes me think I could be anywhere near responsible enough to be a parent?”

Tara leaned against her, “I’m not sure why you’re struggling with this. You’ll make a wonderful mother, and Eric? Well, he’s a natural. I’m surprised Jason’s boys haven’t moved in with you already.”

“What if I have them and then I figure out it’s a big mistake?” Sookie could hear how silly it sounded, but she was worried. “I thought being married to Eric would be enough, and the next thing I knew, I was running all over the country, trying to solve other people’s problems.”

“You worried you won’t have enough to keep you busy?” Tara laughed, “Well, I can tell you for a fact that having children keeps you busy and then some!”

“I guess,” the telepath shrugged. “I guess I wonder if it will be enough.”

“You thinking about being a stay-at-home mom?” Tara asked, and then said, “I could see you’d have that option, being rich and all. I decided to keep working. Mostly it’s because I have my own business and I couldn’t see letting it go. But look at Michele. She’s stay-at-home and she has so much going on. I don’t think the Church could run without her and she’s the person most young mothers go to for advice. There is no single right answer here, Sookie. But let me tell you what you
get in return if you’re brave enough to try.”

Tara looped her arm around her friend’s shoulder and pulled her close, “You get a lifetime of firsts. You get the first time you see that baby in the ultrasound photo. You get the first time you hear its little heartbeat and the first time you feel it roll over just under your fingers. I’ll never forget the look on J.B.’s face when he felt those twins. You know what he did? He leaned over and kissed my belly, and he laid his head against me so he could feel them through his cheek. We lay there all night and he tried to talk me into eating spicy food so they’d roll some more!” and Tara laughed.

“I’ll tell you for a fact, there is nothing to compare to the first time you hold that baby in your arms, or the first time it smiles up at you. When you hear it laugh and when it reaches for you, all chubby arms and messy mouth! Oh, Sookie, it’s a lifetime of firsts and the risk is worth every second.”

“Thank you,” Sookie sniffed.

“Well, you’re welcome!” Tara shoulder bumped her, “Now let’s get back to the house so you can feed me that lunch you promised.” As they walked up the path, arm in arm, Tara tossed her head a little and said, “Oh, and I can tell you for a fact, pregnancy sex beats regular sex hands down!” and when Sookie blushed, Tara laughed again.
A Freshening Breeze

Chapter Notes

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Nautical Note: When you are sailing in a direction, you may come to a lull in the wind. You continue to coast, but you almost start to drift backwards. All is calm. But then, you will see the ripple of wind on the water, and it approaches, filling sails and pushing you in an unexpected direction.

Pam’s eyes scanned the line-up of men with hats standing behind the partition. Only in New York could Anubis Airlines have sufficient traffic to justify scheduled flights. Pam sighed. In another life, she would live in this city full-time. It wasn’t Paris with its gracious light and amazing architecture, but it had a vibe and intensity that made her feel almost alive.

The sign with ‘Ravenscroft’ was second to the right and Pam nodded. The driver fell into step behind her. Pam noticed he signaled and another vampire turned, flanking them and keeping a little ahead. “Paranoid?” Pam said out loud, knowing the driver could hear her, “Or should I be worried?”

“His Majesty considers any guest his personal responsibility from the moment they arrive in his territory. There have been no threats, but your safety is a matter of personal honor.” For humans, talking about honor and nobility sounded pretentious, but these were concepts that still mattered to vampires.

The driver swiftly moved ahead of her as they neared the doors to the terminal. He stepped on the pressure plate first, causing the doors to open for her and then gestured to the left. There was a third vampire standing beside the open door of an impeccable black limo. Pam caught his eye and he bowed low. When Pam got closer, the door holder offered his arm, allowing her the opportunity to use him for leverage when lowering into the seat. Pam smirked, “No touching!” The door opener smirked back and Pam was surprised. She hadn’t expected the folks working for New York to appreciate humor, especially snarky humor.

The driver was putting the car into gear almost before she was settled and in no time they were driving smoothly along the roads that would take them into the city. “I’m curious. Where has the King decided to house me?” Pam asked, keeping her tone nonchalant and selling it by checking her face in a small mirror.

The driver’s eyes were waiting for her in the rearview, “You are staying at His Majesty’s personal residence, in the Upper West Side.”

Pam’s fingers stilled. She had assumed he would place her in an apartment he controlled or a secondary residence. “Does the King have other guests?” she asked.

“No, Miss Ravenscroft,” the driver’s eyes flicked toward her again. “The residence rarely hosts guests,” and his eyes flicked back to the road. Pam sat back, absorbing it. There had been nothing in the invitation that would suggest she was being singled out. Pam ran through the possibilities. He
could be curious. He could be curious about Eric. The King had history with both Thomas and Thierry, both of whom were Sheriffs in Eric and Sookie’s kingdom now. Perhaps he wished to hear more about their progress. Pam knew Maude, the Minnesota Queen, was not fond of Mikhail, Misha as he was called by friends and enemies, but when Pam asked whether she should change her plans, Maude scolded her, telling her not to be silly.

Rather than give the impression she was in any way nervous, Pam purposely stretched a little and reclined back on the seat cushion. She couldn’t tell for sure, but she was willing to bet she was sitting on custom-made, down cushioning. There was a mini-bar with an assortment of bottles in warmers and heavy Baccarat crystal goblets beside them. ‘Nothing cheap about this,’ Pam thought.

It wasn’t a long drive, but traffic slowed them. It gave Pam the opportunity to enjoy the changes in the buildings they passed and the skyline. One thing that set New York apart was its willingness to do away with the old in favor of the new. Unlike some cities that treated their architecture like sacred cows, New York was just as happy to build over, around, or encapsulate in such a way that they may have maintained the essence of the history while clearing the way for the city to grow. Pam felt this city dismissed the past. It was too busy making history to get stuck in it.

When the car pulled up to the curb, Pam couldn’t keep from purring. The front doors at the top of the stairs of the brownstone were open, light spilling down and over white masonry with black trim. There was a garden level entrance separated from the sidewalk by a wrought iron fence. The windows on each level were tall. Pam could tell from the slight shadowing they were all bullet-proof and light tight, but to the casual observer, there was nothing that differentiated this residence from the others on the street. Pam felt a tightening in her chest and for the first time in many years, she found herself reminded of her family’s London house.

“Welcome, Miss Ravenscroft,” an Asian vampire bowed. When he straightened, he said, “I am Andrew. I am Misha’s housekeeper.” He gestured toward the house, “If you would?”

Pam examined the servant. It was obvious he was carrying a sidearm. She was certain the slightly baggy pants concealed other weapons as well. The man moved like a cat and Pam drawled, “I’m sure housekeeping isn’t your only skill.”

“Perhaps,” Andrew smiled back. “You have a reputation as a fighter, so it would appear I am not the only one who wears many hats.”

“Touché,” Pam laughed. Pam recognized the vampires carrying her bags to the stairs as being the same from the airport. “Is the King in tonight?” she asked, unfastening her coat and then turning so Andrew could expertly lift it from her shoulders.

“Unfortunately, no,” Andrew sighed. “His Majesty will be returning tomorrow night. He has been in Boston and was unexpectedly delayed. He begs your forgiveness.” Andrew didn’t look the slightest bit concerned as he started up the staircase. “I will show you to your suite, and I can arrange some dinner for you.”

“That is very kind of you,” Pam said automatically, her attention drawn to the paintings that graced the walls of the staircase. There were landscapes she was sure were from the Hudson School, but the higher they climbed, the more modern the art became. Pam saw works by Oppenheimer and Schiele. As they turned to climb another flight, Pam stopped. “Those look like Klimt drawings.”

“The King has a fine eye,” Andrew’s tone gave nothing away as he continued climbing. By Pam’s count they were on the fourth floor when Andrew stopped on the landing to indicate an open door. Pam stepped through to find herself in a small hallway. “To the left you will find the bathroom suite,” Andrew opened the door to show her white marble with a large tub and separate shower stall.
Double sinks framed a dressing table and there were piles and piles of thick towels. A matching robe was suspended on a heated hanger.

“And this is the bedroom the King set aside for your use.” Andrew pushed the door open. Pam’s bags were opened and one of the attendants was hanging her clothing in large built-in armoires. The bed looked like something out of Versailles, but more comfortable and there was a bench seat that ran under the windows that Pam knew overlooked the street. “His Majesty made clear you are to have full access to the house except the resting chambers on the floor below your own. Those are the King’s own.”

“That is most generous,” Pam said sincerely. When Pam dropped her purse and scarf on the bed, Andrew gestured, offering to take her on a tour of the rest of the house. There was a large library on the same floor as her bedroom, complete with a baby grand piano. The stairs led up again and Andrew showed her the roof terrace. There was a glassed-in area surrounding the staircase with a table and chairs that could be used in cooler weather, and on both sides of the central entrance, there were pavers with potted trees and flowers set in containers. It was a fanciful bit of nature surrounded by the lights of the city.

Pam couldn’t help herself. She wandered from one end of the roof to another, admiring each thing. Andrew loosened a little, and Pam could tell he loved this place. He took her past the Master’s floor to the second level. This was where the living room and several meeting rooms were located. The first floor had a dining room that opened through French doors to an enclosed garden complete with a small oriental structure that looked back at the house. Water tinkled and brightly colored koi rose to the surface. “This is also the floor where my apartments are located,” Andrew confirmed. “There is a basement, of course, but it’s mainly storage.”

‘And torture chambers,’ Pam thought, though she kept that to herself.

As they came in from the terrace, Andrew said, “Perhaps you would care to feed?”

Pam arched an eyebrow. The rumor was that Misha did not use Registry, preferring to maintain his own donors. “That would be most appreciated,” Pam smiled tightly. Instead of showing her into an office, though, Andrew took her back to her bedroom. Almost before she had a chance to sit down, there was a discreet knock on the door and two beautiful, thin women walked in. It was everything Pam had not to gasp. They were exactly what she would have chosen. Most monarchs presented a choice of male or female. “Your King is most kind,” Pam sighed.

Andrew bowed, a slight smile playing across his face, “Misha is most anxious that his guests are comfortable. Feel free to keep one or both. They are skilled and I believe you will find their blood type to be your favorite.” As he left, he turned at the door, “If you would like entertainment later, I can be reached on the house phone. Just pick up and press the ‘one’ and I will answer. There are clubs nearby, movies. This is the city that never sleeps. I would be happy to arrange something that meets your tastes,” and with that, he closed the door.

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“Thank you,” Pam said simply, tucking bills into their hands. Andrew had not exaggerated. They were delightful, limber, and willing. Had Pam met them under different circumstances, she might have asked the brunette for another play date, but under these circumstances, she knew it would be a mistake. Pam hadn’t had time to sweep the room for bugs, but she assumed there were several in place. If her host wanted to spy on her techniques, he was welcome; it wasn’t as if she was shy. Pam was certain it wouldn’t take much trolling through cyberspace to find any number of videos in which she had a starring role. Pam’s attitude was if you had no modesty, then no one could hold it over you.
As the blonde smiled up at her before being lost to the winding of the staircase, Pam did have a momentary twinge, thinking of Twy. The affair with the publicist was mostly over, at least as far as Pam was concerned. It had been fun, but in the end, Twy was able to satisfy some needs, but not all. “Oh, the challenge of being a sophisticated female!” Pam said out loud, and with a sigh, turned around and headed back into the bathroom to turn off the water.

With another sigh she slid into the bathtub that was the perfect size for two regular sized people. With her small frame, Pam could almost swim in it. Vanilla with lemongrass oil was on the side of the tub, along with rose petal scrub. They weren’t exactly her favorites, but they were good guesses. Somehow it made Pam feel flattered and not stalked. When the water cooled, the vampire checked her watch. One in the morning. The evening was still young.

Flipping through her clothes, she chose a black leather skirt and a soft black leather top that plunged just short of her navel. Platform Louboutin and her near-white hair pulled into a tight ponytail completed her look. Pulling out her phone, Pam called a cab and headed downstairs.

Andrew met her in the front foyer. “Miss Ravenscroft? You look delightful. May I summon the car for you?”

“That’s okay, Andrew, I didn’t want to disturb you, so I made my own arrangements. I’m heading out to check on my downtown club. I’ll be home before dawn. Should I…”

“I will be waiting for you, Madame. If you would allow?” and the housekeeper held out his hand for her phone. His fingers flew, “If you call that number the car will swing by for you when you are ready. There is no need to have your transportation become a chore.”

“I appreciate it,” Pam waved her hand, “but I am a big girl. No one needs to stay up.”

Andrew’s smile dropped and he said in a serious voice, “What I said earlier, Miss Ravenscroft, about the King’s sense of obligation? If you don’t take the car, it will be up to me to explain what I did to anger you.” Pam wasn’t sure if the housekeeper was kidding her, but he didn’t look like he was joking.

“Fine,” Pam sniffed. “I’ll call!”

“Thank you, Miss!” Pam felt embarrassed that he was so obviously relieved.

There was a honk outside and Pam walked through the door Andrew opened. She made her way to the waiting taxi, climbing into the faint smell of cigarette smoke, cumin, and gasoline. As they headed uptown, she considered that having a private car with blended blood warmed in Baccarat crystal wouldn’t be such a bad thing.

Fangtasia on the Wall was doing well. It was a weeknight, but the line was healthy. The bouncers were well-dressed, handsome, and alert. One was a vampire and he recognized her the minute she unfolded from the taxi. “Mistress Pam!” he called out. “Welcome to your club!” That got the attention of the other bouncers and those standing outside. Cameras clicked and people called for her attention. The rope was lowered and the door held open. Pam saw a bouncer talking into his wrist and within five steps of the entrance, the manager was in front of her, bowing low.

Pam insisted on an exacting tour. She would come back in a few nights, but earlier before things got started, to confirm whether she missed anything, but she knew from experience, she rarely did.

By the time two hours had elapsed, Pam had catalogued over thirty changes or improvements she wanted to make. All in all, the club was aging well, but this was New York and New Yorkers were
demanding. She texted Maxwell asking for some changes that could be done without major
disruption. Her eyes flicked over the video screens. Removing them would be one of her
suggestions. Walls of screens were over. It was time for something new, perhaps something with
holograms. After a quick perusal of the books and turning down the manager’s offer for
refreshments, Pam called the number Andrew had provided.

“You are still at your club, Miss Ravenscroft?” the voice at the end asked.

“Yes, how long?” Pam glanced at her nails. Her manager was becoming tiresome. His pandering had
turned to toadying and Pam found she was anxious to be gone.

“The car is already out front and ready when you are,” the voice told her.

Pam thought about the street entrance. There was no parking lot and she didn’t recall seeing an open
spot on the street. “Great, I’m headed out now,” she could tell from her manager’s look that she had
not hidden her skepticism.

She summarized her findings, told her manager she’d be back, and then allowed him to escort her to
the door. The bouncers opened the exterior doors for her, and there, on the sidewalk was the black
limo. The driver touched his hat, opened her door, and bowed, treating her as if she was royalty.
When he slid behind the wheel, Pam laughed and shook her head, “A girl could get used to this!”

“My King will be pleased we have met your expectations,” the vampire answered smoothly. The car
moved over the curb and within fifteen minutes, they were back at the brownstone. A vampire was
on the sidewalk offering his hand to assist her from the car. Andrew opened the door, and then
moved behind her to assist her with coat and gloves, asking, “How was your evening, Miss
Ravenscroft?”

“Wonderful, Andrew,” Pam replied. As she approached the stairs, she saw a pair of soft slippers. She
 glanced at Andrew.

“If you wish,” he didn’t meet her eyes. “Your feet may appreciate a change in elevation.”

“These are pretty high,” Pam laughed and toed out of her heels to slip her feet into the slippers. She
could almost hear her feet sigh in relief. “That was most considerate, Andrew. Thank you.”

“You are the King’s special guest,” Andrew bowed again, “Let me know if I may be of further
assistance this evening. You will find warmed blood in the library. Rest well,” and he waited in the
hall until she was well up the stairs.

Once she was on her floor, Pam stripped down to her panties, laying her leather outfit across the
slipper chair. She put on the robe from the bathroom and walked across the tiled foyer to the library.

As Andrew had said, there was a decanter set on a warming plate, cut crystal glasses and a vase of
freshly cut orchids. “Wow,” Pam sniffed the orchids before draping herself across the chintz chair,
“It’s good to be King!”

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When she rose, Andrew informed her that although the King was in town, he had not returned to the
residence. “I am certain he will return at some point this evening. He mentioned his interest in
meeting you, but he asks that you not disrupt your plans on his account.”

Pam was surprised to realize she was disappointed. Even though she had confirmed there were bugs
in her room, she found she wanted to meet the vampire who lived this well.
The car was called and Pam headed over to the Village to inspect Fangtasia in Green. The crowd was a little smaller than the one she had seen at the Manhattan venue, but that was to be expected. The crowd was also a little younger, but they seemed to be spending as much if not more. The accounting books confirmed her suspicions. It was a different vibe, looser somehow. The dancing was more frenetic. Pam considered enlarging the dance floor here, maybe alternate dance platforms to give the action a more three-dimensional feel. One of the women she had met at the brownstone her first night in the city walked up and asked if she would care to dance. One thing led to another and Pam found it was near dawn when she left.

When she exited the club, the car was waiting for her. Like the night before, Andrew was at the door and slippers waited on the stairs. Pam drew a bath before retiring. She knew the sheets on her bed had been changed, as they had last night while she was out. The towels were fresh. The flowers were fresh. Everything was meticulously clean. She reached for her phone, starting a favorite piece of piano music and then closed her eyes, allowing the smells and music to transport her.

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On the third night when Andrew informed her the King had returned late last night, but had already left, Pam said, “I’m going to start thinking he’s avoiding me.” Andrew smiled and asked where she would like to go this evening.

“I should probably work this evening but I think I’m going to take a night off. Suppose the car can drop me off downtown? I thought I’d do some shopping, maybe poke around a little.”

“Of course, Miss Ravenscroft,” and the car was there.

It was Thursday night and Pam knew that Neue Gallerie New York stayed open until nine on Thursdays. These extended hours were recent, a nod to vampire guests. She took her time, browsing the standing exhibits and then sampling the visiting art. When Pam couldn’t wait any more, she walked into the central gallery. She took a seat on the neat white bench positioned directly in front of the Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer and sighed. It was like visiting an old friend. Pam found it mesmerizing. The color and composition, the slight smile, it called to her in a way she couldn’t describe.

There weren’t many people here tonight, but after a time another vampire came into the room. He seated himself on the bench, the one that was positioned farther away from Adele. He was dressed casually, black pants and a white, button down shirt that looked custom made. When Pam glanced back, she saw his gaze was also captured by the painting and, feeling a little self-conscious, Pam turned around and said, “There’s plenty of bench here if you’d like to be closer to her. I’m willing to share.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind?” His accent was difficult to place, New York, but something else too. “I don’t intend to leave her any time soon so the least I can do is share the view with a fellow admirer.”

He stood and Pam could see he was short, but not as short as she was in stocking feet. His chest seemed a little over-sized for his body, but he was well muscled. He sat down at the far end of the bench, careful not to crowd her, and turned his face back towards the painting. After a bit he asked, “Have you seen the special exhibit?”

“Austrian decorative glass?” When he nodded, his eyes remaining on Adele, Pam replied, “I browsed it before I came in here. Lovely.”
“You like Klimt?” and this time he turned her face toward her. Pam catalogued his face. It was strong, but not handsome. His nose was off center and his teeth were a little large for his mouth, but his eyes were attractive.

“I do,” Pam answered and arched an eyebrow. “I am drawn to the work of the post-Impressionists and Modernists. There is something honest about the German and Austrian artists of that period. Hard to believe their work would be repressed by their own people.”

The man nodded, “Repression is always hard to understand. When there is a meeting of the minds, why should the material,” and he pinched his arm, “the packaging make such a difference?”

“Pam Ravenscroft,” Pam said by way of introduction.

“I know,” he replied, and Pam realized that she had just met Mikhail, the King of New York.

“Did you know I was here?” Pam asked him.

He chuckled. The way his eyes crinkled and his cheeks lifted almost made his face handsome. “No,” he shook his head. “No, in fact I came here thinking I would avoid you. I thought a woman such as you would be busy going to clubs on a Thursday night, not wasting her precious time looking at old things.”

“I go to clubs for a living,” Pam said quietly. “It’s business. Loud music and people willing to spend money. I won’t deny there’s a rush in scoring big. I like to win.”

“Me, too,” the King laughed, and then he nodded his head, “Mikhail.”

“I know,” Pam smirked.

“But you didn’t,” he said knowingly.

“No,” she confirmed, “I didn’t. You surprised me.”

The King’s eyes crinkled again, “You are honest with me! You are an unusual woman, Pam Ravenscroft. You make me wish to surprise you again,” and he held out his hand. Pam placed her hand in his and he lifted it and lightly kissed its back. With a brief smile, he placed her hand back on the bench and then, wordlessly, they both turned to look upon the magnificent painting and stayed there until the guards asked them to leave.

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They rode together in a town car Pam assumed was the King’s own. They entered the brownstone and spent a good part of the evening admiring the art that adorned his staircases. The library on Pam’s floor had books cataloging more. As the evening stretched, Misha (‘You must call me Misha. My friends do’) asked if Pam had enjoyed the donors he provided.

“I’m sure you know already,” Pam teased from her perch on his bookcase ladder. “You have the room wired, don’t you? Listening? Watching?”

“I have the option of both,” he agreed with a shrug. While she didn’t like it, she appreciated that he was immediately honest. “I will tell you I haven’t been recording.” When she looked skeptical he chuckled, “From the way you are acting, I can see that was a mistake. You enjoyed yourself, then?”

“They were as skilled as advertised,” Pam replied.
“I can invite them back,” he offered with a lift of his goblet.

“I don’t do seconds on paid help,” Pam shrugged, earning her another chuckle from the monarch.

“No, Zolotse, neither do I,” and he leaned back.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Pam purred, pouring herself a tumbler of the blood. “Zolotse?”

“It means, my golden one. I will see you forever in my mind, sitting in the Galerie, your back so straight, gazing at Adele. Adele was all gold, but you? You shone brighter,” and Misha drank, then rose. “It has been a delightful evening, Pamela Ravenscroft. Perhaps you would do me the honor of accepting an invitation to spend another evening with me during your stay?”

It was on the tip of Pam’s tongue to decline. She had follow-ups and scouting for possible future sites. She promised Maude she would be returning in four days and she had five days’ worth of work since she’d ended up taking tonight off. He stood up and his face fell just a little as he anticipated her negative answer, but just as he was turning to go she heard herself say, “I’d like that.”

Misha’s face lifted, his smile beamed, and Pam felt unreasonably happy to have pleased him. As he leaned forward to lift her hand, she said, “You understand, I’m not attracted to men.”

He gave her a knowing look from beneath his brows, “Now, Pamela, we both know that’s not the truth. You are attracted to me, and I am attracted to you. You may be confusing attraction with sexual desire. They can mean very different things for sophisticated people, and we, Zolotse, and his kissed her hand, “We are sophisticated people.”

The next days were a whirl of activity. Pam worked and then would meet Misha in different places. He took her on a guided tour of the old Garment District, regaling her with stories of hunting down the alleys and by-ways. Pam shared her thoughts on the direction fashion was taking. She wasn’t surprised to hear Misha was invited to all the major shows, “But I rarely go. Who would I laugh with? But now? Now I will have a companion who understands the nuance!” They visited museums that had late hours, and on their last evening together Misha arranged a special viewing at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art. They walked the galleries lit just for them.

Later, at the brownstone, a stunning brunette appeared and they shared her in the King’s large bed. It was passionate and foolish and Pam promised herself she would never stay in the New York King’s residence again.

“Who did you meet?” Maude asked her on her return to Minnesota.

“What makes you say that?” Pam had reared back.

“I know you Pammie, and you are glowing.” Pam shook her head and joked it off, but later, when the large basket of yellow roses arrived, Maude gave her a knowing stare.

The Minnesota Queen plucked the card before Pam could retrieve it. “Zolotse?” she smirked. “Oh Pam, you sure know how to pick them!”

“You can’t believe the stories, Misha. She and Northman have remained very close over the years. To think they would sever relations over his Fae Queen is too thin! My spies tell me she saved the Fae’s life. That doesn’t sound like the kind of relationship that would lead to a falling out with her
Sire. It’s more likely the opposite and she’s working for him in some way.”

“What does it matter, Carlo? Pam is a businesswoman. Northman is no problem for us. He is busy in Louisiana. He doesn’t have the money or the ambition to create trouble.” The King stretched a little, then settled back so the Were could resume massaging his upper back. “Did I tell you I met the Fae? Sookie Stackhouse. She was at Sanctum when I went there for the Lady’s funeral. She has a pretty kind of face. Her chest is large, which is what I assume attracted Northman. These country vampires are all the same.”

“She is related to Niall,” Carlo added.

“Again, so what?” and Misha swatted the Were as a way of venting his annoyance with his second. He rolled over so he could face Carlo before saying, “What does it matter? What power do the Fae have in this world anymore? It’s like marrying a Russian princess. The title is there, but it has no meaning. She is an interesting ornament with a curious pedigree, no more.” He turned to his masseuse and said “I’m sorry, Jack. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“No problem, Majesty,” the well-muscled man bowed. “Would you like me to resume?”

“No, no,” and Misha hopped off the table, “Carlo has ruined it for me.”

When the Were left, the New York King flicked a towel around his shoulders and said “So, what was so important that you had to disturb my massage? We both know my sexual appetites are fleeting, so Pamela is not truly the problem.”

“No, Majesty,” and Carlo bowed low, “The Ravenscroft woman is not a problem.” Misha’s eyes narrowed and his lips lifted. It was one of the things he liked about Carlo, he could read a situation, so he knew Carlo would not say her name again unless invited. When he was sure his second was suitably cowed, he walked over to the low chair and sat. Only then did Carlo straighten up, and then he said, “There are reports that the witches in the South are threatening vampires. They have found a way to remove glamour.”

“How was this verified?” Misha frowned. “It could be the witches are simply introducing their ideas. Even we can’t remove glamour completely. There are gaps, loss.”

“It is said they used vampires to test it. There are still gaps, but many of the main memories remain.”

Misha drew air through his nostrils. It wasn’t that he needed to breathe. He hadn’t needed that in centuries, but it satisfied some instinctual need to test the environment around him. ‘My security blanket,’ he thought. Once he was certain his surroundings were safe, his mind could turn to the problem at hand. “I am assuming they are threatening vampires in general? This isn’t aimed at any one vampire?”

“Our spies tell me that covens here have been communicating with the ones in the south. Local chapters are debating whether they should take advantage of the opportunity this new magic presents.”

“I hope you have arranged a demonstration of how foolish that might be,” Misha’s voice was soft, almost gentle. For those who knew him best, they knew it was when he spoke this way that he was at his most dangerous.

“They have been informed,” Carlo confirmed, “Still, it will be hard for all of them to resist the money. They are looking for blackmail, selling back our stories for enormous wealth. Most believe that all vampires possess untold riches, fountains of wealth.”
“The Christians should have finished those bitches off when they had the chance. Who started this?” Misha pushed out of his chair and headed to the shower.

Carlo followed, “We are not certain, Majesty. It could be those in the South would know better. It is a dangerous skill.”

“One we can either exterminate or glamour away, eh?” the King asked.

“I have heard from our Clan Chief,” he paused when the King growled, “this matter is to be discussed in Boston next month at the Summit. In the meantime, we are to handle any incidents as local affairs. We are reminded that there are Witnesses and too many humans who are willing to release video of us doing bad things on the Internet.”

Misha’s mouth worked a little before he said, “If Nabila had the subtlety required to be a true Clan Chief she would have pulled us together in an emergency session. She may be able to speak in the language of money, and I, for one admire that, but she lacks finesse.”

“Perhaps you will need to correct that, Majesty,” Carlo bowed again.

“Perhaps,” and Misha smiled, “And why are you calling me ‘Majesty?’ We are friends, Carlo!” His second smiled and nodded, but they both knew that staying on Misha’s good side required dancing the fine line between familiarity and obedience. Carlo was dancing well, and if he managed to survive a few more years, he could expect to step into any other kingdom with high marks, perhaps even aspire to be named Regent. If he failed, he would find himself running bridges in the dark of night with wooden stakes affixed to make the game livelier, like his predecessor. “Well, we don’t have to worry about those Silent Witnesses, do we, Carlo?”

“No, Misha,” and Carlo laughed, “They go where we say. They are most appreciative of their anonymous benefactors and most happy to have the organization and support their local chapter provides.”

“Good, good. So simple. Give them plenty of money, offer to help them organize, and soon, they are doing your bidding. Too bad my fellow monarchs haven’t figured it out!” and the King chuckled. He finished his shower and walked out, grabbing a towel. “And, how are things in the good kingdom of Indiana?”

“He fled his own kingdom, his tail between his legs!” Carlo shook his head, “He is in Mississippi, licking his wounds. He had left his second. We could take the kingdom…”

“No,” Misha shook his head. “There is no need. He is humiliated. Keep sending our little presents. They won’t be able to keep up and the humans will be outraged.”

“I don’t wish to question you, Lord, but doesn’t this reflect badly on all of us? My purpose in asking is only to understand the subtlety of your plan,” and Carlo waited.

“You don’t think this is just about revenge?” Misha asked him.

“No, Misha!” and Carlo laughed in a way that acknowledged his belief that the King was teasing, “You would never allow an opportunity like this to be about one thing. You will have other goals.”

“You have learned well! You are right, of course.” Misha moved back into his private sitting area. The massage table was gone along with the towel warmers and oils. He walked to the antique serving cart and poured himself warmed blood.

There was an arrangement of yellow roses in a low, cut crystal bowl and he thought of her, the
sounds she made as she locked eyes with him. His Pam had tasted delicious, as delicate as rose petals, and then he drew in more air, surprised at the direction his thoughts had taken. Since when was Pamela Ravenscroft ‘his’? He shook his head and filed it away, a problem for another day. “It is an easy thing to point out that no other vampire territory has these problems, only Indiana. We will offer to help police our own, clean up this terrible mess, and put measures in place to make sure it never happens again.”

“There are those who worry that this will push the humans into making laws that will work against us.”

Misha smiled, “With the money we provide to certain politicians, the access to our blood? I doubt it. There will be chest beating and fist shaking. These humans are dramatic beings, but in the end, they will accept our offer. Poor Bartlett Crowe! To be revealed to all vampires as too weak to rule!”

“It will be open season on him,” Carlo nodded.

“Yes, too bad!” Misha chuckled.

“Have you heard from Thierry lately?” Carlo asked.

“We have a lively correspondence,” Misha smiled. “He does well. He is too far removed to have much useful information, but he lets me know how my gifts are doing in that part of the world. He is most successful, and getting richer, but then again, it is expected. All know that any vampire who trains with me develops into a successful vampire, a money maker. I make them better and then I set them free into the world, and since each of you succeeds, each of my graduates is sought after.”

“An opportunity for which I am most grateful,” Carlo bowed. “My King!”
Stormy Weather

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Thank you Breathesgirl but your quick turnaround and thank you Ms Buffy, for taking the time to teach me more.

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“You lied to me!” Eric’s fangs descended and he leaned over her.

“I did not lie!” and Sookie smacked the vampire in the chest to make him take a step back, “I just didn’t tell you about that! What’s the big deal? It’s over!”

Sookie turned to walk away, but Eric grabbed her arm, “Don’t you walk away from me! We are not finished!”

“We are now!” she raged, jerking her arm from his grasp, “You don’t manhandle me! No one will ever manhandle me again!” and her eyes were blazing.

“You think to distract me? I would never hurt you! You dishonor me by even saying it!” but her words caused him to drop his hand and rock back a little on his heels. He stood taller instead and crossed his arms. He retracted his fangs and looked down on her using his ‘I’m so superior’ look, the one she really hated. “Perhaps you feel I am not worthy of your trust? After all, I am a vampire, not a human. Perhaps you feel my uses are limited.” He was so angry he could hear his slight accent.

Sookie exhaled and looked away, “That’s not it, Eric. I was sick. You were sick…”

“You did not know that! Neither of us realized what was happening. You chose to withhold information from me!” and just like that, his anger dissipated. The arch to his eyebrow lowered and his swagger melted as his eyes turned thoughtful, “Why, Sookie? Why would you not wish to share your life with me?”

“I didn’t want you to worry,” and she bit her lip. “It was scary, but then it was over. There was no reason to go over it again,” and then she shrugged, “Besides, what could you do about it? It can’t be fixed.”

Eric’s eyebrows came together, “Why? Why would it need to be fixed?” He could see her struggling, the confusion and conflict humming through their bond. Her emotions made him uneasy, “Please, Lover, please let me see what you are thinking. You are in turmoil. Perhaps I can help.”

“No!” It sprang from her. “No,” she said again, her voice more modulated. She could see she had hurt him, so she stepped in and wrapped her arms around his waist. When he left his arms at his sides, she sighed, “It’s not that I don’t trust you, Eric. It’s that I don’t trust myself.”

Now his arms did rise to wrap around her, pulling her to him. He made her feel safe through his embrace and through their bond. “What did you think you could have done that would have changed
things?” he asked. “This was not your doing. Were are emotional creatures. They fight and snarl with each other. It is their nature. They envy what vampires have achieved, but they don’t have our discipline, our desire for order.”

Sookie let out a quick huff, “You mean your need to control everything!”

“You call us high-handed? Yes, we prefer to understand our surroundings. Most of my kind do not appreciate surprises.” Eric made no move to shift or turn her. He could feel the comfort she was taking from standing within his embrace, her ear against his silent chest. It puzzled him. “Do you believe you were at fault for the conference, Sookie?” He waited. She didn’t say anything, but she made a small sound. “How, Lover? How was any of it your fault?” He did turn her now. There was something here, something she wasn’t saying, but he could feel it ran deep. Moving slowly, he lowered himself onto their bed and drew her to him. He wrapped his arms around her, “Tell me, Sookie.”

She wrapped her arms around his head, so that she held him against her. She spoke over his head, looking out into the room, “It’s not any one thing. I can’t put my finger on it and I keep trying. I turn it over and over and I still can’t figure out how I messed up this time, but I know I did.”

“You are taking on things that are not yours. You blame yourself too much, I think.”

“You’re saying that because you love me,” Sookie sighed.

“Perhaps you feel I am foolish?” and Eric chuckled.

He stopped when Sookie said, “I keep waiting for you to figure that out.” Eric pushed back from her, tilting his head to look into her face. She shrugged, “I keep waiting for you to figure out I’m a fraud. I remember a time when I was sassy and fiery and I stepped into each day like I owned it. But so many things have happened. Sometimes I think about that woman who didn’t take shit from anyone and I wonder where she went.”

“She is here,” Eric told her, “She is standing in my arms.” When she looked skeptical, Eric smiled at her, “You don’t see it, but I do. You have had a disappointment. You wished this thing to succeed. You wished to be the one to help it come to pass. You believed in it and gave it everything.” When she twisted in his arms, an animal trying to escape, he held her tightly until she looked back at him. “Only those who are brave take those chances, Sookie. It took courage. Now, you will need time to recover. You will learn from the experience.”

“And what did I learn, Eric? That I should stick to my own? And who would that be? Vampires? Humans? I don’t really fit in anywhere.”

Eric was no longer smiling. “I am your own, as you put it, and you are mine. What I have learned is that sometimes the lessons to be gained take time to be found. Until you stop wallowing in your own self-pity, you will not find them.”

She nodded, and leaned over to kiss him, then pushed him back on the bed to find comfort in other ways, but later as she lay sleeping in his arms, Eric thought about her words. “I see you,” he said out loud and then smiled. Sookie had made him watch the movie, “Avatar,” several times. He wondered how he could help her see who he saw, his warrior, his Queen.

The appointment was set. Sookie had gone into Shreveport for initial testing. So far it was blood work and an ultrasound. Tomorrow night they would both meet with Jane and her team. They would
discuss the protocol for the fertility drugs Sookie would be self-injecting and reviewing side effects and timelines. Eric could feel her before he rose, her tension intruding on his twilight. It was as if he was in bed with a live wire. He barely opened his eyes before she pounced on him. The excitement of starting this new thing seemed to overshadow her earlier doubts, and she was expressing it through rather aggressive lovemaking. Not that he was complaining. She was inventive and vocal, all of which added to the experience.

She must have started without him, because he slipped into her easily, and she was riding him, her tits bouncing in that wonderful way that had him growling. He lifted his hands to hold them, twisting and pulling her nipples, causing her to moan and her pussy to twitch around him. Her hand went between her legs and she rubbed her clit. When her head fell back, he flipped her over, dragging her until her legs and ass hung over the edge of the bed. He rolled her knees up and entered her swiftly, using the leverage of the floor to go deep, rotating enough to drag past that place within her that pushed her hardest. Her hands grabbed his upper arms and her nails pressed into him as she sought to pull herself closer. He watched how she stretched to fit him, her moans and cries sweet music to his ears. When he felt his balls pull close and his muscles tighten, he pulled her up so he could sink his fangs into her as he released. “My wife!” he sighed, “Jag älskar dig, Sookie!”

"I love you too,” she sighed.

He fell forward, rolling to bring her over him again. He slipped from her and she laughed, “I don’t know how we’re going to not do that for a whole month.”

Sookie had told Eric that after the embryo transfer, she wouldn’t be able to have sex. "No orgasms until they can confirm I’m pregnant,” she’d said with a contrite face, "But once it’s all confirmed, Jane said we’d be good to go.” When Eric grimaced, she’d laughed, saying, "Doesn’t mean that I can’t take care of you! Just means I need to keep things all calm down there,“ and she’d pointed at her pussy.

Eric had followed her gaze with his hand, his fingers stroking lightly, "It will be a hardship for you, I am thinking. How will you go without?"

"No pain, no gain, right?” she’d laughed, and then pushed his hand harder against her. "So I guess we’ll need to have extra now. That way I can have plenty in my orgasm jar for later.”

She was making good on her promise.

For all her bravado though, Eric still worried. Most days she seemed better, more confident, but he could feel the thread of uncertainty from her at odd moments.

Once they dressed, Sookie announced she was going over to see Tara. She spent time with Michele, but Tara DuRone seemed to be the larger part of their lives. Eric pulled Sookie to him and kissed her forehead. His eyes flicked to Owen, who was waiting by the door. He nodded and the Were nodded back. They understood each other. Eric knew he was going to have to have the talk about the guards with Sookie again. Once they started this process, Sookie would not be able to leave Bon Temps for a period of time, perhaps months. She needed to be close to the clinic for monitoring. There would be blood tests and ultrasounds. Eric would need to return to New Orleans periodically. It would place an even greater burden on their guards.

As he watched his wife sail out the door, all bright energy and enthusiasm, he knew the talk must be sooner as opposed to later.

Eric was expected at Fangtasia tonight. Indira had returned from Rubio Hermosa’s Area and there
were things they needed to discuss. The Viking checked his watch again. It was early. He found his eyes returning to the door that Sookie had exited. With a growl, he picked up the phone and hit his speed dial and the number ‘6.’ The phone rang twice before it was picked up. "How is my Granddaughter?” Niall asked.

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"It explains much,” the Prince sighed. "She does well in advising, but I had expected her to grow my assets at a faster rate. If she doubts herself, she will not take the risks she should. What are you doing about this?"

"I am calling you,” Eric grumbled.

The Prince laughed, and Eric found the sound of it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. "So, the Viking sex god must come to the Fae for advice about women!” and he laughed again.

"Surely you are not holding yourself out as a marriage counselor, Niall,” Eric snarled.

"I am not,” Niall’s voice was cold and then turned silky as he asked, "Is it a favor you seek?” Eric felt his fangs descend. He had wanted help from the Prince. Instead Niall was talking of trading favors, always a tricky proposition with the Fae.

"I am asking you to consider the well-being of your Granddaughter. I would help her if I had the opportunity, but those things she does that would benefit her most come through your agents and occur during my rest."

"Her training and her business meetings,” Niall still sounded as if he had a stick up his ass, and it was everything Eric could do to not tell him to go fuck himself.

Eric grit his teeth, put a smile on his face, and said, "If some part of those activities could be arranged while I am available, I could assist. Perhaps I could continue exercises that would help build her skills.”

"You aren’t Fae. No amount of wishing will allow you to take one step closer to our state,” the Fairy sneered.

"No, I can’t practice magic with her, but some part of her day is weapons training. That is something where I could assist. And were Mr. Cataliades available to consult on my business as well as your own, we might both benefit."

"You have not earned your way to any of the wealth I have settled on Sookie,” the Fae snapped.

"I don’t wish any part of it,” Eric snapped back, "but were we in the same conversations, Sookie could observe how I approach risk propositions, and I could ask the right questions to help her do the same.”

"I understand you will be headed to the clinic tomorrow,” the Prince abruptly changed the subject.

"You are well informed,” Eric replied. "Will you consider my request?”

"It would be best if my Granddaughter were to become pregnant soon,” the Fae persisted.

"There is no reason that should be delayed beyond what we can’t control,” Eric replied and then added, "Do we have an accord?"
"I will call the demon," Niall huffed. "He will time his meetings for after sunset. As for Tamsin? She is a free creature. I can ask, but I don’t speak for her."

"Thank you, Papa-in-law," Eric said in his most charming voice. There was a feral sound on the other end of the phone and the connection was terminated. Eric grinned. This was a good outcome. This would force Sookie to interact with him in a way that was not just social or sex. If he could show her he viewed her on an equal footing with him, encourage her to make suggestions, and watch his joy in maneuvering his businesses, her competitive nature should kick in to do the rest. Eric checked his watch and then headed outside. His car was running in the driveway, ready for his trip to the club.

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"How many have received demands?" Eric asked. He was seated behind the desk in his old office at Fangtasia. Indira wasn’t required to give up her desk chair, but she had insisted. Sitting here, looking around the room with its filing cabinets and long, low couch brought happy memories to mind. There had been harsh things that had happened here too. He had divorced Sookie in the exact place Karin’s chair now sat, but that was past, and Eric had no time for looking back. 'Absorb what you need to move forward, discard the rest’ was a motto he embraced.

"Twenty that we know of so far. Max and I spoke earlier, and he asked me to let you know he is sending out word to all the Areas. He says those in the City seem especially hard hit. He’s sending you a report."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask, 'Why didn’t he call me himself?’ but Eric wouldn’t ask that question in front of his Sheriff. Besides, he already knew the answer. Maxwell would have his head down, working hard, and expecting Eric to trust that when his job was complete, he would communicate. For a strategist, like Eric, this was not a good solution. To be effective at planning, Eric needed everything. He needed rumors and whispers, preliminary numbers and hunches. If he waited for a boiled down, wrapped up report, he would never get ahead of this thing. It was something Max just didn’t understand. Eric found himself glancing at Karin, considering Thalia’s suggestion that she be made his war chief.

With a sinking feeling, Eric knew what he must do. "I will be leaving for New Orleans in the next forty-eight hours. I suspect this threat started there. I intend to investigate for myself."

"It may have started there, Majesty, but it is spreading," Indira’s expression didn’t change. Her ability to deliver the worst news while maintaining the calm of a summer night was something Eric appreciated about her.

"You do not believe that finding the serpent’s head and destroying it will end the threat?" he asked.

Indira picked at the sari that lay across her knee, “No, Majesty. Not now. Whoever is behind this is able to translate the skill to others. Whether it is something that can be taught or is attached to a charm is unknown.”

This was disturbing. Eric had assumed this threat was controlled by one coven who was coordinating attacks, but if these witches could teach this ability to others, it was far more dangerous. He thought about calling Bartlett Crowe and then dismissed the idea. He realized in that moment that he had lost confidence in his Clan Chief. 'How fleeting is the trust that comes with power,’ he thought, then tucked that thought away for another day. Instead, he picked up his phone and called Stan Davis. Their states lay side by side. If this problem was spreading beyond his kingdom, Stan would know.

"Northman!” the King’s voice sounded pleased.
"King Davis!" Eric returned, "I assume this is a secure line?" and he signaled those in the office with him to leave. When the door shut, he asked, "How is Bubba? Is he tiring of pinball and Dance Revolution?"

"If you are ready to entertain him, I believe he would be ready to leave. He has started traveling again." Both vampires knew that when their once-famous guest began taking unsanctioned trips out and about his host city it meant he was becoming bored and needed a change.

"He is always welcome here. In fact, I have a place that could be his home base, should he wish it." Of all the vampires, Bubba was one of Sookie’s favorites.

Recently, Sookie had begun the process of mastering her ability to alter appearances. She had demonstrated her new-found skill in a rather delightful way for Eric and then in a not so delightful way by altering the appearance of Owen. If Bubba were to come to them, she would have a worthy subject for practice. If she were able to place a glamour on his face, hiding it from humans, it would grant Bubba greater freedom to roam. In return, there would be a guard at the Bon Temps house that Eric could trust at night when he wasn’t there, a guard Sookie would welcome.

"I'll inform him. You can expect him tomorrow," Stan sounded so pleased, Eric figured Bubba must have been making a nuisance of himself.

"I will inform my Queen." Eric glanced again at the door, "I was calling on another matter. We are receiving reports of blackmail involving witches..."

"You too?" Stan growled. "I just found out about it this week. It took awhile because the vampires they are targeting are small businesspeople, functionaries. The news worked its way to one of my Sheriffs when the vampire was unable to pay his tithes. Once we found one, we found more. We’ve tried torturing the information out of one of them..." Eric knew Stan meant a local witch, "but she’d been spelled not to tell."

"My reports tell me that there are many vampires in my kingdoms who have been targeted." Eric confirmed. "I am heading to New Orleans to conduct my own investigations."

"You do know we aren’t alone..." Stan said, and Eric could hear the question behind his statement. Deciding to bite, Eric asked, "What do you mean?"

"It’s turning up all over the Eastern coast, and trailing into western cities like Dallas and Las Vegas. There is a special meeting of Clan Chiefs called for Moshup Summit in two weeks. I figured since you and Bartlett were so close, you would know," and then he added, "Have you heard from Bartlett lately?"

"Bartlett is doing well," Eric said automatically. In reality, Eric hadn’t heard from him in several weeks. During settled times, that wasn’t unusual, but this was not settled times. There were problems with rogue vampires, Amun Summit was scheduled in four months, and now this. Were things well with Bartlett, there would have been regular conference calls with all the monarchs, maybe even a meeting or two, but instead there was only silence. Eric decided that Bartlett and Russell should be his next call.

"Well, then I’m surprised you didn’t know about the meeting in Boston. Sandy Seacrest told me you would be the one representing Amun," and Stan paused, waiting for Eric to respond.

"You know how these rumors start," Eric tried to sound nonchalant. "Doesn’t mean I won’t get the call. Bartlett knows he can count on me, so in the list of things he has to arrange, I’m probably far
down the list.” Eric hoped he had given Stan the impression that things were well. As he disconnected, there was a knock on the door. “Enter,” Eric called.

Charles’ head appeared, ”Your Queen is here.” Eric glanced at his phone, then tucked it back in his pocket. The call to Jackson could wait a few hours.

Eric passed out into the hallway. Neither Indira nor Karin were waiting for him, but he hadn’t expected them to be. As he passed into the main part of the club, he could see heads swivel and phones come up at the ready. He knew he was being filmed, every step, every gesture caught and uploaded to be posted to site after site. There were groups dedicated to him, Thalia, Karin, Sookie, and combinations of each.

Eric thought that once he and Sookie showed their faces a couple of times, things would calm down, but he had to admit, that didn’t seem to be the case. If anything, the crowds were increasing. A few times, Eric had to slow for Charles to move ahead and clear a path. Sookie was in the corner booth, her face turned toward the phone in her hand. Tara and Karin were seated beside her. Sookie looked calm, but Eric could feel her tension vibrating through him. He sent her his calm and strength, knowing it helped her to mute the mental voices. She looked up at him right away and her smile made him feel warmed. Tara looked between them and he could hear her whisper, ”I don’t think I’d like being hard wired the way you are. Too much sharing.”

Sookie turned to Tara, arched an eyebrow, and said, ”Don’t knock it until you try it.” It was a loyal thing to say, especially knowing how his Sookie struggled with the depth of their bond, and Eric was warmed more.

”"Turn this way!” a man shouted. Faces turned toward the interloper, vampire and Were faces. Eric schooled his face so he appeared not to notice. This human was carrying an oversized camera. Bouncers moved in on him. He struggled a little but gave up quickly enough.

”Dance with me,” Eric purred, as he approached their booth. He held out his hand to Sookie and his Queen smiled. They started to unwind on the dance floor, but soon found themselves in an open circle, their amateur paparazzi pushing back the other dancers so they could film the couple.

It was too much for Sookie, ”Let’s go,” she sighed. He could feel her disappointment as they walked back to the table.

Tara had her coat on and made her farewells. ”Good luck tomorrow,” she said earnestly. She drew Sookie into a hug and started toward Eric. To be hugged by another female around family was one thing. To have any other but his Queen touch him in public was a blood offense. Eric pulled himself up to his full height and stared at her as coldly as he could, but it was Sookie’s hand on her friend’s arm that stopped Tara.

”Don’t touch him!” Sookie even sounded a little angry. When Tara’s eyebrows pulled together, Sookie added, ”He’s mine!”

Eric could see the minute Mrs. DuRone put the pieces together. She smiled easily and kissed Sookie’s cheek, ”Pass that along for me later,” she said with a sassy smile. Eric noticed the humans photographed Tara, too.

Karin stood a little to the side, ”Yes, good luck,” she echoed.

”You have not come to us,” Eric chided. ”It would please me, daughter, to see you tomorrow night.”
"Please, Karin," Sookie added, and Karin quickly nodded. Eric and Karin spoke when he came here, but his daughter steered the conversation away from personal things, talking of business and observations. He knew she communicated with Thalia and she mentioned Thierry. It was the vampire she didn’t mention that made Eric wonder if all was truly well with her.

"Come," Eric wrapped his hand around Sookie’s upper arm and together they headed toward the back door. Charles and Owen fell into step, one in front and one behind and soon they were on the highway, the Corvette eating the miles between the club and home.

"I will need to return to New Orleans for a bit," Eric said, his eyes forward.

"Are you up to it?" his wife asked. He knew she was referring to the lingering effects of their bonding sickness.

"I will not stay long." In fact, Eric wasn’t sure how long he would last away from Sookie. Proximity and the magic captured in the earth of Bon Temps had healed them faster than Doctor Ludwig had anticipated, but who was to say what part these same factors played in preventing relapses? Eric could easily travel alone to Fangtasia. This would be the first time they would be separated by so many miles and so many hours.

Sookie sighed. "Be careful, Eric. You know what it feels like now when we start to have problems. Don’t make me come after you!"

"And you would, Lover. I know this!" Eric retrieved her hand so he could hold it. Even this small contact gave him comfort, although there was a part of him that thought it was probably his emotions and not his biological needs that were in play.

As they turned on to Hummingbird Lane, Eric slowed. There were humans here, standing on the road in the middle of the night. "That’s them!" someone shouted and there were suddenly several humans standing up and running toward the road. There were professional photographers with large cameras standing across their driveway. They did not move and Eric was tempted to accelerate.

"Don’t!" Sookie punched his upper arm. "Think, Eric! Stop the car and wait for Charles and Owen to handle them."

"Who are they?" but Eric knew. These were people who were looking for a story. These were the stalkers Twy, their former publicist, had warned them would come, looking for the snippets and gossip that Eric and Sookie had stopped feeding them. The gravel crunched in back of them as the chase car caught up. Their Were guards quickly cleared the space in front of them, but to their horror, they found more photographers closer to the house.

"I don’t understand," Sookie gasped. "How did they get past the wards?"

"The wards will protect us from those who mean us harm," Eric told her. "These are curiosity seekers. There is no malice in them, so the wards don’t bar them." Eric pulled past them and down the long driveway. Thankfully these people did not appear to have come further toward the house. Eric opened the garage door and they drove right in. He waited for the door to close almost completely before turning off the car. When his wife exhaled in the seat next to him, he turned to her, "We are done with talking, Sookie. I am calling Mustapha. James, Charles, and Owen deserve lives with their families. They will come with us for travel, but we will start using local Weres for daytime. I will contact Indira and there will be vampires here at night."

"This is my home..." Sookie started to wind up.
"And mine," Eric replied hotly. "Think! We will need patrols for our borders at all times. Would you stretch your guards so thin? Of course there are more at the Palace you know, Titus and others, but where would we house them? Would you have me build until this place is a city surrounding its castle? Where would your woods go? Or your birds or flowers? Local guards go to their own homes. At most, we would be expected to house and feed a supervisor, but our guest house would be preserved for guests."

"But it’s strangers, Eric!” He knew Sookie’s concern. She would feel vulnerable if she were to become pregnant and be here in the home without him. There would be new thoughts to filter and unknown challenges.

Eric took her hand and pulled her toward the stairs, "You are the friendliest human I know! You will be caught up in making friends with each of them. You will feed them cookies and sweet tea, or my private stock of Royalty, and you will learn all about their families and lineage. You will bore me for hours with stories of their lives and you will open your heart to each of them, although you should not. It will not be different people every day. Mustapha and Indira will pick their best. In time you will know them as well as you know Owen.”

"You’re just trying to butter me up!” she huffed.

Eric waggled his eyebrows and leered, "Is it working?"

Sookie giggled, "Well, I don’t know, Buster. This may take some world class convincing.”

Eric laughed and easily lifted Sookie, throwing her over his shoulder, "Well, then I should get started!” and he headed up the stairs at a more rapid pace.

"From where I’m sitting, you’ve made a good start,” his wife laughed and using her position, she slipped her hands into the back of his pants, "World class ass!” she giggled, and Eric knew he had won.

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"So, do you have any questions?” Jane, Eric, and Sookie were seated in an area that didn’t resemble a doctor’s office.

They had been in the center for hours. Most of that time was spent talking. First there had been the earnest-looking doctors and researchers who paraded through Jane’s office, describing each stage of the process and the science that allowed this ‘miracle’ to happen. They were followed by introductions to the care team that would be most closely involved in monitoring Sookie and the progress. There were two humans and a Were. All were female and had either nurse or nurse practitioner titles. They all seemed pleasant. They gave Eric and Sookie paperwork that included their phone numbers, email addresses and hours, allowing twenty-four hour, seven-day a week access to at least one of them. "This is the most important thing that has ever happened!” one woman gushed.

"Oh, I don’t know,” Sookie teased, "Curing cancer and saving babies might be ahead of this!” The nurse blushed a little and Sookie smiled in that way she had that made everyone feel more comfortable.

Jane was disappointed when Eric point blank refused to allow any filming of the pregnancy and its progress. "Find another couple,” he snarled when she persisted, "I am not some test subject to be traded about, and neither is my wife!”
Doctor Ludwig had chosen that moment to stroll in, "Put away the fangs, Dead Man!" she chuckled, "Won’t matter whether it’s recorded for posterity or not. Everyone is going to know you’re creating human mastodons, so you better start getting used to the idea."

"How will they know?" Sookie challenged. She glanced at Eric before saying, "We could always say that we chose traditional in vitro and screened for a donor that looked like Eric. We could say that Eric decided to give me this experience."

"Like anyone would believe that!" the Doctor chuckled, but Eric took Sookie’s hand.

"We could make it work," he said directly to Sookie. "The child might resemble me, but it would be my human self," and then he turned back to Jane, "right? Isn’t that what you said? That the DNA you harvested was preserved from my human days? There is no reason to assume any part of this is directly tied to me. It is not as if the pregnancy will carry any hint of vampire." Eric felt a thread of unease from Sookie, so he concluded, "It would reduce the attention this will garner, make it appear less special..." and Eric’s voice trailed off.

"It won’t be less special to me!" Sookie burst out. She glanced at him, swallowed, and he could feel something within her settle. She said the next words with that quiet voice that told him she had made up her mind, "Truth is, even if this wasn’t part you, and we did choose to become parents using a donor, or even if we had chosen to adopt, it would still be ours and that’s plenty special. It’s the choosing that’s important, Eric. I believe that!"

Eric nodded. He could feel his fangs threatening to descend at the thought of her bearing another’s child, but then he thought of Aude. Their first child had been his brother’s and it had made no difference to him. She was his child as were all the others that followed. 'She meant no less to me," and then he realized, 'and she meant no more.' Eric remembered in that moment that he had not been a particularly involved parent. Aude had cared for the children. He had done what was expected.

He thought about Jason and the Stackhouse boys. They were entertaining, testing their muscles and challenging their world. Eric looked forward to spending time with Jason’s progeny. They acted in a way that let him know they looked forward to spending time with him. It made him feel better about the son that was coming and he was able to smile at his wife’s cool stare and say, "What I meant was that this story will allow us to reduce the attention this would attract. If we provide a conventional explanation, our son will have that normal life you like to talk about."

"Son?" Ludwig chuckled. "Sound pretty sure of yourself, Viking." She turned to Jane, "Did they ask for gender screening?"

"No, we did not!" Sookie scolded, "Nor would I want to!" She turned to Eric, "Right?"

"Of course, Lover," Eric chuckled, but they both knew what Sookie’s vision told them. Their first child would be male.

Dr. Ludwig walked closer to Sookie. She leaned over and peered into the telepath’s eyes, then grabbed her hand. Sookie half-heartedly pulled against the smaller woman, but she could swear the doctor turned on the jets to pull her whole body closer. As before, the doctor licked Sookie’s palm, then rocked back on her heels. "Not more than a trace of the bonding thing now," she said to Jane and then turned back to Sookie, "You could start injections tomorrow if you like."

Sookie stared at the box in her lap. She knew it contained many small hypodermic needles. It had been explained to her that she would need to inject herself, in either her stomach or her thigh, three times a day. In two weeks, she would need help to inject a different solution into her backside. "Now when we get to the three-week mark, one of the care team will call you and that’s when you’ll use
the larger, purple hypo,” Jane was all smiles. ”That is going to get things moving. You should be prepared. Once we reach that point, you need to be close to the clinic,” Jane explained. ”We will be drawing blood and doing ultrasounds every day. We are pretty good at figuring out when your eggs will be ready to be released. When it’s time, we’ll put you under and harvest as many eggs as possible, so you will need someone to drive you on those days.”

”My friend Tara will come with me,” Sookie was all smiles.

”Will this procedure hurt her?” Eric asked. He was not easy with the idea that she would be doing these things during the day. He would not know if this had happened until after he rose.

”She won’t feel it,” Jane shrugged.

”She will need to take it easy for a couple days after, though,” Amy Ludwig added. ”It may be a good idea to get a hotel room in town, because once we harvest, she’ll need to come back in three days to have the embryo implanted.”

Sookie bit her lips, ”So, in about a month, I could be pregnant?” No one said anything, but they didn’t have to. Sookie’s eyes were shining, and she reached out to Eric who took her hand in his.

”You’ll need daily injections for a couple weeks after that, until we can confirm you’re pregnant,” Jane continued. ”Those need to be in your behind, so it’s easier if you have someone give them to you.”

Eric started to say something teasing when Sookie said, ”Don’t worry! I’ve already asked Tara.”

In that moment, the uneasiness Eric felt became something else.

Sookie would be coming here. She would be given tests. She would be prodded, poked, and violated. He had given four teeth over a year ago, and now his part was done. Sookie had arranged things so that she had no further need for him to contribute. Even the injections she needed would be given by another. Eric realized he had far less to do with this offspring than with any other child he had produced, either biologically or as a vampire. He could be in another country and be of the same use in this thing.

Not for the first time, he noticed the sterile look of the room. He smelled the faint whiff of something unpleasant from the box his wife clutched. He realized Sookie was staring at him, ”I am happy to start,” he said, figuring that was a good, all-purpose answer.

”Good!” Dr. Ludwig replied, but the way she was looking at him suggested she wasn’t fooled. ”Go home, relax, and have fun. Then, when you get up in the morning, Missy,” and she gave Sookie the stare, ”You can get started. Try to move the injection sites around. You don’t want to get too sore.”

”Should I heal her injection sites?” Eric asked, working hard to keep the hopeful tone from his voice.

”No!” Jane shook her head. ”You don’t want to be exposed to the hormones.”

”That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t continue to exchange blood regularly. In fact, that will probably help move everything along. Sex is good, too.”

”But I’ll have to see if you should continue after that second one!” Jane exclaimed, ”The purple one. Best not to get too excited. We want to make sure you are at peak while you’re here so we don’t lose the opportunity. Once the eggs travel from your ovaries into the fallopian tubes, game over for another month! And, of course, once we implant, there’s no sex until we’re sure the egg has
implanted in your womb and you’re officially pregnant.”

”You going to be okay with that?” the Doctor chuckled, staring at Eric.

”Ask my wife,” he said evenly, managing to smile, ”She’s been saving extra orgasms in her jar.”

Sookie blushed bright red, ”It’s a private joke!” she explained quickly, swatting Eric, and then hissing, ”Not funny!” at him.

On the ride home, Eric found his eyes wandering to the box of needles Sookie insisted on holding. Every so often she would run her hand over it, and once, she rested her hand over her abdomen, as if feeling for a pregnancy. ”We’re really doing this” her voice was dreamy and she seemed unable to stop smiling.

”Yes, Lover, this adventure begins,” Eric answered, but what he was really thinking was that he doubted he would ever feel more for this child than he had for Aude’s children. He thought of Jason and Michele Stackhouse, the proprietary look Jason gave his mate when she was large with his child. She had smelled of herself, but Jason as well. And then, there were the boys. They walked like Stackhouse, smiled like him. The baby smelled of him.

This thing they would make would have less of him than Aude’s children, or even Pam and Karin who were made of his blood. He remembered Sookie’s description of her vision. In it, she was standing alone with this child. It was a sobering thought.
Chapter 9 - The Unseen Rip

Author’s Note: Once more, we see that vampires are not cuddly creatures with sharp teeth. Thank you to both Breathesgirl and to Ms Buffy for reviewing and commenting. I promise, I'll get the one word/two word thing right someday!

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Nautical Note: There are places where the water looks quiet. It beckons you to come swim and play. What you can’t see is the current that travels just below the surface. Invisible, it waits for you to approach so it can whisk you far out to sea.

“So, Thomas doesn’t mind you traveling so much? You don’t get that pull?” Sookie had worked every conversation over the past hour back to quizzing Karin about her relationship with Thomas. Eric watched his daughter’s eyes narrow.

“They are not bonded, Lover,” Eric interceded.

“Vampires rarely bond,” Karin said in a tone that implied Sookie should have known that and was just being tiresome.

Eric decided this had gone on long enough. He sent a sharp stab of disapproval at Karin through their bond while turning to Sookie, “As you know, a bond is permanent. Since vampires are immortal, true bonding is unusual. I doubt even Bartlett Crowe and Russell Edgington have bonded.”

“But they love each other,” Sookie observed.

“They do, but they also appreciate the practicalities of our world. They have a contract that pledges them for a hundred years. They can renew the contract, making the association they have mimic the longevity of a bond.”

“But our bond is so much more!” his wife exclaimed.

“I also feel that way about it,” Eric felt warmed by her affection, the unwavering acceptance of their tied fate that he felt from her in this moment, “But you understand why other vampires rarely bond with our own kind. We bond with humans…”

“Because it’s not permanent,” Sookie completed his thought.

“So, there you go,” Karin interrupted, “The 411 on vampire relationships. Thomas loves me. I love Thomas. Doesn’t mean we have to sit in each other’s back pocket the way you two do.” Karin’s eyes narrowed again, “Can you even have separate lives now, or are you really stuck with each other?”
“I consider myself pretty lucky to have your Maker in my life!” Sookie snapped.

“Well, then that’s a good thing!” Karin snapped back, “Because the only way you’re ever getting rid of him is through final death, right?”

Sookie plastered her Crazy Sookie smile on her face, and Karin looked triumphant. This was one of those moments his wife had described to him, the awkward moment when family was fighting and there was the need for a safe phrase. Eric looked at his wife and said, “Will someone pass the potatoes?” and Sookie glanced his way and burst into laughter, ending the feeling of tension.

“Will someone explain that?” Karin looked less amused.

“I will,” Eric nodded, gesturing toward the front door. He glanced at his wife who was wiping tears from her face. She had started her hormone injections today. He didn’t see much difference, but she had the faintest whiff of something astringent about her. “I need to discuss things with Karin. I’ll be back before I leave.”

Eric was headed to New Orleans tonight to personally review the findings of the investigation into reports of a local coven blackmailing vampires by removing glamour from those humans around them. While it was now a misdemeanor to use glamour, most vampires still did it. Glamour eased the small issues that inevitably arose between species. There would be consensual feeding that was viewed differently when the romance ended. There would be small injuries or things broken when vampire strength met human frailty. Of course, there were other, larger things that had been hidden as well. Eric would be gone a couple days, but he and Sookie agreed he would commute if he had to, using his travel coffin. Sookie was in her training week with Tamsin and they decided between injections and Fae magic lessons, it was better for Sookie to stay in Bon Temps. They would both carefully monitor their reactions and do what was needed if they detected a relapse in their bonding sickness.

When Karin and Eric were outside and the front door shut behind them, he asked, “How long do you intend to stay here in Area 5?”

“I like it here,” Karin shrugged. She had spent over a year here in the past. Eric had summoned her to watch over Sookie when he left for Oklahoma to be married to Freyda. “Indira and I have been getting along. Why? Do you have a job for me?” She looked bored, but Eric wasn’t fooled. His daughter longed for his acceptance, and that included being made a larger part of his life, not just the consort of one of his Sheriffs. Eric remembered Thalia’s words, recommending Karin be made his war chief.

Eric looked out into the darkness. Beyond the line of trees, his New Orleans Weres prowled the grounds, discouraging interlopers. Mustapha Khan, the Shreveport Packmaster, was interviewing those who would take the place of these guards. Indira was forwarding him a similar list of vampires who would take over night time duties. “I was wondering if you would watch over my wife for the nights I am not here,” Eric asked. It was a test.

“You would condemn me to that again?” she cried, her mental filter slipping, but unlike those times in the past when she would have followed such a statement with harsher words, Karin said, “I’m sorry. I should not have questioned such a small request. I will watch her with my life, if that is your wish.”

Eric turned to her, “Thank you,” he said simply. “I know she can be inappropriate. She means well. She wishes all creatures around her to be happy. She believes Thomas is your happiness. She also believes she threw away her own happiness through pride and she cares enough about you to not want you to make the same mistake.”
“How do you know?” Karin snipped, “Do you spend your evenings gossiping about me?”

“No,” Eric chuckled, “But believe me when I tell you this thing.” He looked back at the woods “It would not be for long. Soon, there will be a more formal guard protocol in place.”

“I spoke with Pam,” Karin said. Eric glanced at her, wondering where the comment had come from. Karin returned his gaze, “She says you need to hire someone to get control of this feeding frenzy the public has for news of you and your Queen. She says you will continue to be plagued by stalkers until you do.”

Eric nodded. He had come to the same conclusion himself. “How is your sister?” he asked.

“She’s met someone,” Karin smirked. “She won’t tell me who but I can tell she really likes this person. She simpers. You know how she hates it in others, but she’s worse than your wife.”

“I am pleased for her,” Eric nodded. It had been many years since Miriam, the woman Pam had loved, had died of cancer. Since Miriam’s death, Pam hadn’t been celibate. There had been many lovers, some of longer duration than others, but Karin was never fooled. If she said this relationship was ‘someone,’ it meant that Pam was more than interested.

“Please pass my greetings to her when you speak with her next,” Eric smiled. Karin knew the break between her Maker and Pam was manufactured. Pam was spying for Eric, gathering information about the unrest that was sweeping their world. The information came back through a circuitous route: Pam to Maude, Maude to Isaiah, Isaiah to Sandy Seacrest, Sandy to Eric. So far, the information had not suggested any conclusions, but Eric was convinced that some part of the unrest he saw had a common cause. “There is someone coming you have not seen in some time. He will be a guard during the evening hours. I expect he’ll be in the house often,” and Eric told Karin about Bubba.

“So, your Queen can shift appearances?” and Karin looked impressed. “I figured that was how the Fae managed to move among us as easily as they did. To see them in their natural state, no one would think they were just more attractive humans.”

“She alters her own appearance easily. She is less certain when she places her magic over others. It is easy to see that this could be a valuable skill. Practice will strengthen it. She knows what’s involved in keeping Bubba’s existence secret. She will be motivated.”

“I can’t believe you are training her the same way you trained me,” Karin was amused. “Are you going to stake her to a cliff using silver and leave her to figure out how to save herself from the sunrise?” Karin referred to a test Eric had set for her, a harsh test, and one Eric had given Karin many centuries before.

“Sookie is stubborn, but not as stubborn as you,” and he looked at his daughter, “and you were my first. I had only Appius to guide me in my role as your Maker. It was a lesson that might have been taught in a different way.”

“You taught me to be a superior vampire, like yourself,” Karin sniffed. “How many of us, the old ones, still exist? A handful in this country?” Karin’s eyes were proud, “I am what I am because of you. I do not regret one moment.”

“You make me proud in all things,” Eric answered her, using the accepted phrase for high praise. It was on the tip of his tongue to offer her the role as his chief, but he held back. He needed to explain his decision with Maxwell Lee first. He did not wish to alienate the vampire, although he hoped Lee would be relieved to have this part of his duties removed. Lee could fight, but it was not his first
love, not like Karin.

Charles, his Were guard, pulled up the Corvette. It was time to go, and Eric still needed to take leave of his wife. “Take care, Karin,” Eric told her and pulled her close to kiss her forehead. Charles passed him, walking into the house to gather the bags that held the laptop and other small personal items and Eric followed him. Sookie awaited him in the kitchen.

“You will be well, Älskade,” he sighed as he brushed his lips against hers. “These days will fly by and I will return to disturb your sleep and whisper bad things into your dreams.”

“You better!” she playfully pushed against his chest, but then fisted his shirt and pulled. “Take care of yourself, and hurry back. Text me when you get there,” and she looked teary, her emotions bouncing.

Eric was surprised. Jane and Ludwig had said the hormone shots might make her more emotional, but this was only the end of the first day, “What is it?” he asked. “Have you seen something?” He didn’t think Sookie had been scrying for visions of their future, but if she was getting premonitions, it was something to consider.

“Oh, good grief, no! Nothing like that,” and his wife plastered a smile on her face, “I just didn’t think how seeing you leave would make me feel. Guess this is just some bonding sickness hangover.”

“Good!” and Eric tipped her chin, growling as he kissed her, “I would have you miss me, Lover! It will make my return more sweet,” and Eric Northman, King of Louisiana and Arkansas, turned and headed out the front door.

Lafayette

Thierry had not counted on Thalia showing up on his doorstep, announcing she was now his houseguest. She held a special place in this kingdom, and all others, a place that meant he couldn’t refuse her. It wasn’t that he didn’t want her in his home, it was that he had another guest scheduled to arrive.

Nabila and he had found ways to come together over the past year. When she had a conference, he would find an excuse to schedule a meeting nearby. When he had field inspections, she would find a contact she needed to speak with who was coincidentally located in the same place. They would meet for sex, sometimes for one night, sometimes for more, the time together all the more interesting for its expiration date. To date, he had never set foot in her palace in Charlotte, North Carolina, and this would have been the second time she joined him here, in his own home. Thierry found he had anticipated this visit with more enthusiasm than he would have thought possible.

She was beautiful, his sloe-eyed beauty, but more importantly, she was brilliant. He knew that it was her intelligence that drew him. He was based in a college town. He saw beautiful women every day, some more beautiful than Nabila, but Thierry knew the attraction of beauty faded. It was the lure of argument and debate that kept his senses whetted for more. He had yet to introduce a topic she couldn’t discuss with some authority. She would turn her eyes his way and tilt her head, her mouth would open and the thoughts would flow. They would talk politics and history, philosophy and musical theory. She disagreed with him quite often, but the way she framed her arguments would have him seriously re-examining his own. She challenged him, forcing him to improve his analysis and more fully form his opinion.

Thierry had long considered Thomas his intellectual equal. They were both widely read and spent probably too much time scanning other media to feed their interests. Nabila was the first female he found who seemed to share and perhaps even exceed his insatiable hunger for knowledge.
With a sigh, he signed into his phone, texting the Carolinas Queen his regrets. There was no response, but he hadn’t expected any.

Thalia had gone out earlier, bent on her own pursuits. Who knew why she did anything? Thierry glanced at the clock. He had cleared his calendar, canceled meetings. He was at loose ends, which was a dangerous place for him. Thierry knew enough about his own nature to know that boredom often led to bad decision-making on his part. He could head to the university, charm his way into a conversation at the student center. In appearance, he was little older than those attending. Then he grimaced.

The last time he had done that had been satisfying aside from the whining and moaning afterwards over whether the experience ‘made them gay.’ He saw several of the group on campus later, but he avoided them. There was nothing more boring than shame. If he were to hunt at the college again looking for relief from his disappointment, it would inevitably end in the same way. He would find he had a bedroom full of lovely men and women whose sweetness would be soured by their misplaced morality. He moved to the window, looking out at the night. There was nothing to see. His nearest neighbor was some distance away. This was no city like New Orleans. This was no city like New York. He checked his phone again. With a growl, he punched the number that called Thomas.

“Brother!” his friend answered.

“Asshole!” Thierry growled.

“I thought you’d be balls deep in royalty by now,” Thomas’ voice was light.

“I had to cancel. Thalia showed up.”

“Why don’t you fuck her instead?” Thomas laughed.

“Thalia?!” Thierry snorted, “She probably keeps swords up her twat. I’ll bet she could rip my junk off with that thing!”

“What an interesting idea.” Thomas laughed some more before adding, “I’d be willing to put money on that.”

“What? Bet on whether Thalia could rip my dick off with her cunt? Why don’t you come down here and find out for yourself!” Still, it had worked and Thierry laughed too, his bad mood lifted, “Thank you, Brother.”

“What are friends for?” Thomas asked agreeably.

“So what about your own equipment? Handed it to Karin for safe-keeping?” Thierry knew Karin was currently in Area 5, a whole state away from Thomas.

“My equipment is right here and fully functioning,” Thomas drawled. “Why not arrange a trip north? You can take a tour of your wind turbines and then head north to examine my lumber.”

“You hog the top when she’s not around,” Thierry sniffed and then said more seriously, “She has been in Area 5 for some time.”

“I had it in my head that she was there because of you,” Thomas replied, “But I figured out she was there because she wished it.” Thierry could hear the edge in his friend’s voice. He was missing his woman, but then again, he was crazy to have committed himself to her. Karin would never be able to return his devotion. She was a wild thing. It was not in her nature.
“When I ask her to do me a favor, I will tell you,” the French vampire said solemnly. “I may not understand your obsession with the talented Karin of Slaughter, but I respect our friendship.”

“Thank you.” It stood between them, this bond that was almost blood. “I don’t think she’s coming back.” Thomas’ words hung in silence and Thierry could feel his heart twist. He lifted his lips and found the words that were the only answer. “You are a fool! You have been looking at trees for too long! Of course she wanders. It is her nature, but Karin’s path is your path. She will let her temper rule her. She will say the wrong thing to the wrong person and become damaged again, and it will be your number she will call. She belongs to you, and she resents it. You should have found a nice human, or even a Were. You could have glamoured them and had them telling you every day how handsome you are, how virile. Instead, you had to become involved with a complicated woman.”

“I wouldn’t need to glamour them to hear those things,” Thomas sniffed.

“Keep telling yourself that!” Thierry shrugged in response. “Of course, if you become tired of waiting for your prickly one to find danger, I could suggest a visit might be in order to Thalia. I could paint a most interesting picture, and then we could see if your wooing might help us resolve our question?”

“I have no interest in becoming a eunuch, even if it is temporary,” Thomas chuckled, “But I am touched by your concern.”

Thierry wished his brother was in Lafayette. Together, they would find something interesting to do, but Thomas was many miles away and building his own interests and capital. Maxwell Lee shared the Area spreadsheets and reports among all the Sheriffs on a regular basis. Thierry had watched Thomas’ success in lumber and land development with pride. His brother was stationed in a state that had never shown a great deal of promise, but Thomas was demonstrating that a vampire with imagination could find a way to make money. They spoke often about wind farm opportunities. Neither thought much of fracking, although the quick cash was a powerful lure. Lately, Thomas had started exploring the use of the state’s rivers for generating power. There were many that flowed swiftly through the kingdom. Were there lines to carry what would be produced, the potential was there to add to the power grid in a small, but noticeable way.

“I hear there will be presentations on energy production at Moshup,” Thomas offered. Thierry’s lip lifted. It was a rather ham-handed reference, and he called Thomas on it. “If you are asking whether I intend to find a way to get to Boston to see my playmate, the answer is yes. I have no idea why Nabila added that topic to the agenda,” and then he stopped talking because Thomas was making rude noises over the phone. When his brother quieted, Thierry said, “What was that, Thomas? An attack of some sort? Perhaps you should call the local witch doctor.” He didn’t wait for Thomas’ reply before adding, “Since I am the energy czar in our kingdom, it stands to reason that our King would ask me to attend.”

“It’s possible Eric will simply ask you to prep him, and he’ll go himself.”

Thierry snorted, “Not possible! Our King enjoys my company. The rumor is that his Queen will be indisposed. He enjoys traveling with me and he has a reason to take me. Yes, I look forward to seeing Boston again.”

“You heard Misha will be there?” and Thomas’ tone turned serious.

“It’s his territory. Why wouldn’t he be there?” Thierry kept it light.
“You are still corresponding with him?” Thierry knew Thomas would never betray him, but he also knew his brother disapproved of the game he was playing.

“I do,” Thierry confirmed. “I tell him just enough to keep him coming back. I talk of business and those concerns we all have. I tell him I am too far from the King now to have information on Northman’s actions.”

“He believes that?” Thomas challenged.

“So far,” Thierry shrugged, “And if he doesn’t, he doesn’t say. He tells me how things are in his territory; how much I’m missed. He said something about the Adirondack territory again, something about sending newcomers that way and how lucky we were to have come into this territory when we did.”

“You think it means anything?”

“I’m not sure,” Thierry shook his head. “It was given in an offhand way, and then he changed the subject, so I’m filing it away. Oh, and there was something else.” When Thomas acknowledged he was listening, Thierry said, “He asked about Pam Ravenscroft, whether the break with Northman was real.”

“What did you tell him?” Thierry could hear Thomas’ concern.

“I recounted the scene they played out for us. I gave him the entire exchange and my initial skepticism, but how as time continues to stretch, I am becoming more convinced.”

“And he bought it?” Thierry turned it over again, the chat he had with Misha, every inflection, every word, and how it fell in the framework of what was said before and what was said afterward.

“I don’t know,” he answered truthfully, “But his request was more than curiosity. He has taken an interest in her.”

“For what purpose?” Thomas asked.

“I don’t know, but I will see them both in Boston. I’ll know better then.”

“Be careful, brother,” Thomas said. “You’ll get yourself killed. Misha is no fool.”

“Misha deserves to die!” Thierry hissed, “You know it! I will do anything necessary to make that happen. I have sworn this.”

Thomas sighed, “The world will be a colder place without you.”

“Stop slobbering, Doubting Thomas,” Thierry said with a laugh, “You know what a cautious fellow I am!”

Thierry terminated the call and headed back toward his closet. He looked at his computer. There was always work. With a growl, he headed to the door and from there to the university. Sure, they might whine, but for several glorious moments, he could lose himself in their willing flesh and young blood.

What he didn’t see was Thalia standing on the other side of his window, assessing the side of the conversation she had heard perfectly well.

New Orleans
“And you decided it was not a good time to stop by the shop?” It was the second time Eric had re-phrased his question, but Maxwell still appeared oblivious to his King’s growing frustration.

“Of course! There were only the complaints of those two vampires, and when you take their character into consideration, committing our resources would have been premature. Those two have been one step away from Assizes from the moment they arrived. I would be foolish to take anything they said at more than face value. They were just as likely making more excuses for not being able to pay their tithes.”

‘The type that would have plenty to hide,’ Eric thought, ‘what better targets?’ Eric took careful assessment of his expression and body positioning. It was good practice.

Eric had developed a grudging respect for Maxwell Lee. This vampire who was now Eric’s second was brilliant with a balance sheet and what’s more, he had formed a solid relationship with Emil Touissant, the New Orleans Packmaster. Both of these talents were assets to his kingdom. Pamela, his daughter, thought the world of Max and they were business partners in the Fangtasia franchise.

These were the only reasons Eric Northman hadn’t killed Maxwell Lee already. As his second in command, Max was failing miserably, and didn’t have the judgment to realize it.

Eric had arrived to find Max waiting for him. The vampire had a report assembled, complete with PowerPoint slides, detailing the number of reported blackmail incidents, the number of reported sources, which seemed to be tied to witches, and the probable lost revenue to the kingdom. He then went on to give an update on the slowing numbers of rogue vampires and declared success as a result of the actions taken in placing nesting areas under surveillance. He couldn’t see what Eric did; the blackmail was probably more widespread than they knew and the rogue vampires were still coming.

“The rumors you are collecting from other Areas, are they still suggesting New Orleans as the source of the problem?”

“Yes, Eric,” Max nodded. His eyes shone and he looked eager to relay his information, “It is our best lead. Of course, it is just a rumor for now. I wouldn’t move until I confirmed it,” and he rocked back on his heels, looking pleased with himself.

“And is there any particular name or coven associated with those rumors?” and Eric leaned forward.

“Oh, no,” Max puffed out his lips and shook his head, “No one place any more than any other.”

“What about your gut, Max?” Eric persisted. “If you were pushed to the wall, where would you start your interrogation?”

To Eric’s frustration, Max simply looked bewildered. “I wouldn’t want to steer you wrong,” he said quietly. “I wouldn’t want to send you on a wild goose chase.”

The Viking forced his lips to stretch up at the corners, “Good thinking,” he nodded. “A conservative approach has its place.” What he didn’t say was that this was not the place.

“Max,” Eric introduced just a hint that this was a favor being asked, “When I was in Area 5 I saw Karin. She’s at loose ends at the moment. I would like to bring her here and offer her something meaningful to do. We both know she can barely handle a computer, and I can’t very well ask her to head up any trade deals. I thought offering her the honorary title of War chief might appeal to her. Of course, I didn’t wish to go any further until I spoke with you…” and Eric left it.

“I think that is a marvelous idea!” Max smiled. “Talk about a deterrent. Things haven’t been the same since Thalia left,” and so it was settled.
As he swung out the door and down the corridor, Eric started cataloging who he knew in the city and who he could call upon to help him locate and shake down some witches.

He was almost to the elevator when Devrah, the housekeeper, approached him. Her daughter, Angel, was behind her.

Devrah and Angel were some of the only humans left in the palace. With protests growing outside and the pressures that could be brought to bear against them, Sookie had decided to replace the humans working inside the Palace with either Weres or vampires. Supernaturals were subject to supernatural laws. Supes understood the penalty for treason was death and because they accepted it, they inspired more trust. Any misgivings his wife had about making that decision had been eliminated when Meg, a human who had been a servant in the Palace, had turned up as a leader for the Silent Witness movement. This young woman was seen on television and at local rallies, stirring up hatred toward vampires. There were many who listened, but there were plenty who didn’t. This was New Orleans, the city of voodoo and all things mysterious. There were many who championed having vampires in the city, including most of the local business owners. People flocked here. The presence of so many vampires, including the most famous and handsome of them all, Eric Northman, made the Crescent City a tourist destination. Merchants made brisk business on the fang, and no amount of sour grapes on the part of a disgruntled employee was going to change that.

Eric wondered if he would keep their support were the story of the donors to come to light.

When Eric had taken over the Palace, there had been a donor pool in place. Like so many of these holdover institutions, the pool was populated by men and women who had been taken over the years. They were attractive, but had no skills. In the days of Queen Sophie-Ann, the pool would have been regularly culled and repopulated. Victor Madden had wiped out that earlier pool and replaced it with his own. Eric knew humans in the palace, including Meg, had witnessed all of it. Glamour had been used to make the humans forget.

Victor’s pool had created friction between himself and Sookie. Eric had recognized the liability the pool represented. He knew these individuals couldn’t be released into the city. Once found, they would have led others to the Palace and questions would have arisen. In fact, it was inevitable. Some of the donors were harmless, but many had developed into devious and dangerously manipulative beings, anxious to take whatever actions they thought would create best advantage.

Thinking he had Sookie’s support, Eric had eliminated the pool in one evening, ending that practice in his palace once and for all. It was a savage act, but no more savage than others he had performed over his long life. He had offered the Weres the peace of glamour. He had insisted on it for the humans, including Meg.

The threat that was posed by the witches in removing glamour was a real one. Eric felt it only a matter of time before his phone rang, the blackmail aimed at him. Now, seeing the distressed faces of his housekeeper and the one who would replace her, he wondered if that time had come. “How can I help you?” he kept his voice pleasantly neutral.

“If we could talk privately,” Devrah said, and she glanced at the little office off the hallway. Eric gestured and the two women preceded him. For the first time he felt fear radiating from the older woman as he closed the door behind them. It was unexpected. Eric sat down, hoping it could put the women more at ease.

“Please,” he gestured toward the other chairs. His housekeeper exchanged a look with her daughter, but neither moved.

“We received phone calls,” Devrah told him. “Well, I got a phone call, but someone walked up to
Angel outside, on the sidewalk.”

“I was shopping for myself,” the younger woman said. “She stepped right in front of me. She knew who I was.”

Eric waited. He was careful to make no movements. He considered pouring himself a blood, but reconsidered, worried they might interpret that as his knowing too much. After a few more glances exchanged between them, Devrah said, “We trust you, and you’ve trusted us. I consider us part of this place, for all we’re human.”

Eric frowned at that. He hadn’t considered how the substitution of help would appear to the housekeeper. She was a part of this place, as had her mother been before her. The family association with vampires went back to the beginning of the Palace here in New Orleans, as long as Eric could remember and that was a long time, before there were even Kings and Queens and Clans. “I apologize if any of my actions have caused you to doubt your importance to me,” he told her. “I consider your service here to honor me. In many ways, this place is more yours than mine.”

He could tell his words had the desired effect, because Devrah sat down. “I think the world of you, Majesty,” she sighed, “You and Miss Sookie. You coming here after that Mr. Madden was like the answer to my prayers. Made me want to have my daughter here,” and she glanced up at Angel again. “That’s why I knew I had to tell you about this. The woman who called me was a witch. She told me she could help me retrieve my memories. She told me she knew I’d been glamoured over the years and that it was a terrible thing. She said she could help me, and that she’d pay me if I wanted.”

“Do you think you’ve been glamoured?” Eric asked, careful to keep his voice mild.

“Of course I do!” Devrah exclaimed, and then she laughed. “I live in a vampire household. I figure there’s things that have happened here that folks would pay good money in a movie theater to see, not that I hold much with that! I don’t need to get those memories back. You all treat me fine, and you respect my need to sleep nights. I have never awoken with pains or injuries I can’t explain. I have no reason not to trust you,” and then she gave Eric a knowing look, “And every reason to trust you! I see how you treat Miss Sookie. I see how she adores you. Bad people don’t treat each other that way, and I’ve seen my share of those types, too.”

Angel nodded, “What worried me was how knowing the woman was, as if she already knew things. We wanted to warn you.”

“Why didn’t you take this to Max?” Eric asked. His suspicions were quickly confirmed.

“We did,” Devrah nodded. “He told us he’d take it under advisement. I like Mr. Max. There’s no one that can make me laugh the way he can, but he’s in over his head and don’t know it.”

Eric nodded, “I agree with you. I will speak with Mr. Max. It is my intention that he remain my business manager and the primary contact here, but I will be bringing my daughter, Karin, to live here. She can take Miss Pam’s rooms on the top floor.”

“The Slaughterer?” Angel’s eyes were wide.

“She does have the reputation,” Devrah nodded, “Should send the right message.”

Eric glanced from one to the other before asking Angel, “Can you describe the woman who stopped you? Did you recognize her?”
“I think I did,” Angel nodded, “although I’m not really sure from where, maybe a long time ago. She was my height, white woman.” She glanced away, looking inward before she continued, “Brown eyes, brown curly hair. She had a way of talking, like you knew she’d come from the rich side of town.”

“And you think she was a witch?” Eric asked carefully.

“I’m sure she was,” Angel nodded. “It wasn’t just that she was dressing the part. When she touched me, there was a jolt, like energy. I’ve met witches here at the Palace. Sophie-Ann used them every once in awhile. You get to recognize their feel, if you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Eric nodded. His jaw clenched. If he was right, the woman who approached Angel was someone he knew, someone who should have known better. When the women left, Eric started a google search and in no time had the address of the magic emporium run by Amelia Broadway. “As good a place to start as any,” he growled. He checked his watch one more time. The night was still young, so he texted Charles and James to join him. Knowing how Weres felt about witches, he felt more confident bringing these two. What’s more, if she spelled them, he would have an easier time subduing Weres than another vampire.

“Where to, boss?” James asked as they headed to the door.

“Witch hunt,” Eric growled.

The Tri-Moon Emporium was located in the heart of the Quarter, but for all its location, it did not seem to draw traffic. Eric stood in the alleyway and watched tourists almost unconsciously cross the street before walking past it on the sidewalk. It could mean the place was warded with magic, and Eric was willing to bet that was the case, but what kind? It was strong enough to repel humans. “Can’t be good for business,” Eric chuckled darkly.

“What, Majesty?” Charles asked from his position beside and a little behind the vampire.

“The magic the witch uses seems to push her customers away rather than draw them in,” Eric jerked his chin in the direction of the shop in time for another couple to inexplicably decide to explore the dry cleaner across the street rather than the dusty display in the Moon’s window.

“She must be a terrible witch!” James said from his place on the sidewalk.

“She is,” Eric agreed. He remembered when this person had turned her boyfriend into a cat, then been unable to reverse the spell. He recalled other times the witch’s work had not been worthy, small things Sookie had shared with him, but it wasn’t those things that made him hate her.

Eric Northman hated Amelia Broadway because this woman had worked against him. She had actively discouraged Sookie from accepting their first marriage. She had fed every question and doubt Sookie had, encouraging her to put him aside and find another. When the opportunity presented itself, this woman had reappeared in Bon Temps like the bad penny she was and without a moment’s hesitation, broken the bond that existed between him and his wife. She had placed Sookie in terrible danger and then scoffed when he confronted her. In short, Eric Northman hated Amelia Broadway because her actions spoke so clearly of her hatred for him.

At his signal, the three of them crossed the street. Eric was prepared for the spell to hold him on the sidewalk, but it didn’t. He could feel the unpleasant sensation the humans must have felt, as if insects were crawling on his arms and legs, but he was able to push through that. James opened the door and
the three of them entered the shop. Charles flipped the sign on the door to ‘Closed’ and James lowered the privacy curtains on the shop windows. Amelia was sitting behind the counter. She was older than Eric recalled, but it had been many years. Her brown hair was less curly and duller than before. Eric had heard that her father’s death had revealed him to be a pauper, the victim of bad investments and some subsequent scheme that had drained his accounts.

“Eric Fucking Northman!” she spat. Amelia got off her stool. She stared at him all defiance and bravado, but he had seen the fear when she saw James close the blinds. “To what do I owe this pleasure? And where’s your lovely bride? Keeping my friend shackled to the bed or is she too anemic to move?”

“Shut your pie-hole, bitch!” James snapped.

“It’s fine, James,” Eric smiled and he moved closer to the woman. She really was a terrible witch. A good witch would have silenced him by now, frozen him in place, or attempted to turn him into a mindless zombie. Instead, this stupid woman with her silly velvet dress and dangling earrings thought to control him through force of personality. It was a mistake.

“It has been many years, Miss Broadway,” he purred. “When was the last time we spoke? Before you severed my bond from my wife, wasn’t it?” Eric knew his eyes were flinty, but this stupid woman seemed unable to comprehend her danger.

“I don’t remember,” she snarled, “I don’t bother keeping track of those kinds of things. It’s not like it did any good anyway,” and she glanced again at the front door before bringing her hateful eyes back to his. “I gave Sookie her best chance and she just threw it out the window. How’d you convince her anyway? She always was a glutton for good sex and she told me you were the best,” and she lifted her eyebrows and curled her lip. It was all Eric could do to not lunge.

“Of course, she had plenty to compare you with, didn’t she?” Amelia must have seen the change in him and interpreted it as weakness, because she leaned forward. “You have to know that she shared everything with me, every attribute,” and the witch’s eyes flicked to his crotch, “every favored position. You think she’s such an angel, but you don’t know the half of it.”

“She was your friend,” Eric said in a voice which was little more than a growl.

“Before you really got your hooks in her? I guess. But she’s too good for me now. Can’t answer my phone calls. Can’t invite an old friend to drop by now that she’s living in a palace.”

“Is that what this is about? Revenge? Jealousy?” Eric asked. He could see that Charles had stationed himself in front of the street entrance and James had worked his way to the doorway that led to a back room.

“Of course, I’m not surprised, not really. For all her sweet smile and Boy Howdy attitude, she’s really nothing more than trailer trash, is she?” When Eric leaned forward, Amelia’s smile turned predatory. “You really think she has any more morals than an alley cat? Maybe she’s not the only one who’s deluded.”

Amelia leaned back against the counter, “How many times do you think she opened her legs when you weren’t around, Northman? You know she thought you were pathetic with your claims that she was your wife. Like you were ever around to make that happen!”

Eric could feel it, the cool flow through his body, the calm that came on the eve of battle. He felt himself relax, and she must have seen it and thought she had created doubt, because she smiled in a cruel way. “You knew about Compton. You know he came around pretty much all the time? A girl
like Sookie never really forgets her first, you know? Hard not to go back for old time’s sake. And then there was John Quinn. I had a front row seat to that one. You know he used to howl like a cat when he came? Had me wishing the walls were thicker.”

Eric’s hands became loose, his eyes narrowed. ‘Words,’ he told himself, ‘nothing but words. If you kill her it will be messy and it will be difficult to find out who else is involved.’

“So, you are blackmailing us? My people?”

“A girl’s gotta eat,” she preened, then her eyes narrowed again, “Did she ever tell you the real story about Jackson and Alcide Herveaux? What did you think they did, staying together in that apartment? I can’t believe you didn’t smell him in her.”

Eric swallowed as a way to return his calm. He knew it was a lie, believed it was a lie. “Who else is involved in this? I know someone like you has help. No witch as pitiful as you could have figured this out on your own.”

“How dare you!” she lashed out. “Do you know that Octavia Fant declared me the most talented witch she ever met? Do you?!” Amelia’s eyes flashed and there was spit flying from her mouth. “I didn’t need help to figure this out! It came to me, and now, there’s no turning back.” Amelia gestured toward the door. There was a stack of brown padded envelopes stacked there. “That’s my latest mailing. I’ve been sending these all over the world. I can’t believe the number of requests. The money’s been sailing in,” and she smiled in a triumphant way, “Seems like I’m not the only one who hates vampires enough to make them eat dirt. And let me tell you, Northman, you are going to be squirming.”

“You think too much of yourself, Amelia,” Eric smiled. He had the information he needed. She was the serpent. If she was gone the danger would be contained.

“Big man!” she smirked. “So tell me, big man, how often does she make you bring a partner to bed? Those nights we spent with her Fairy kin were wild. What side does she make you take? The top or the…”

Eric was so angry he was quivering. His fangs descended and his nostrils flared, but Amelia didn’t seem to perceive her danger until his hand closed around her throat and he pulled her close. “You bitch!” he hissed. “She was always better than you! If there was any mistake my wife made it was in trying to be your friend.”

“Go ahead, Northman!” Amelia gasped. “It’s not going to stop what’s coming for you!”

With a twist of his wrist, her neck snapped. It was a distinct sound, like a branch. Her eyes which were so full of venom went wider as she realized what had happened. There was that look of panic when she realized she could no longer breathe, that her body would no longer obey her commands. The air escaped her in one, long exhale, and Eric held her before him, watching her eyes until death finally took her, closing the windows and leaving only flesh.

There was the chime of a bell and then the sound of struggle. James appeared from the back of the store with Meg in his hands. The girl took one look at Eric, Amelia’s lifeless body hanging from his grip, and she opened her mouth to scream. James put a hand over her mouth and held her still.

Eric dropped the witch and came close to Meg. He looked into her panicked eyes and said, “What do you know about this?”

James dropped his hand, but instead of responding as she had in past, Meg stammered, “You’re a
killer! I’ve always known it. She helped me to figure it all out and now you’ve killed her for it!”

Eric pushed his will harder toward her. “You aren’t frightened of me,” he said steadily. “You were a member of my household.”

“Like that made any difference to Denny or Desiree or Pauline?” They were the names of people who had been donors in the Palace, people Eric had ordered killed. “I know where to find the proof, and once I take this to the authorities, people are going to believe what I have to say about vampires.”

Eric shook his head, “You can’t be glamoured.”

Meg’s eyes were full of tears. She glanced at Amelia’s body, “She fixed me so I will never lose my mind again,” she said and then half-sobbed, “She was my friend.”

“You were Sookie’s friend,” Eric said sadly, and stepped forward, delivering death for the second time.
Chapter 10 - Cross Currents

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: And so the game’s afoot. For those who wondered whether Eric will come clean, the answer is here.

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Bon Temps

Sookie blinked, rubbed her eyes, and then blinked again. For a moment she panicked. There was a soft light spilling across her bed, and then she remembered. Eric was in New Orleans. He left last night and wouldn’t be back for a few days. She’d left the doors to their sleeping chamber open and the light wouldn’t have hurt him anyway. It was filtered through special window glass. ‘I could see him in daylight, if I wanted to,’ Sookie thought and she didn’t know if that was a good thing.

During the day, Eric was dead. Sookie turned it over in her head again, forcing her brain to accept it. When the sun rose, Eric was not in deep sleep or a coma. That was their life. “Or unlife,” Sookie sat up, pulling the sheets up with her and wrapped her arms around her knees. The alarm sounded softly. Time for her first injection of the day.

It wasn’t difficult, but Sookie found she winced just before inserting the needle. “Get your head out of your ass, Stackhouse!” she chided herself. “This is what you wanted, remember?” She depressed the plunger and watched the liquid disappear. Day Two. Only forty or more days to go. As long as it all worked out. As long as her eggs were good and the procedure worked and her body didn’t reject the embryo and… “Cut it out!” Sookie shouted out loud.

“You all right up there?” The voice of Tamsin, her Fae trainer, came from the stairway.

“I’m fine!” Sookie grabbed a robe and opened the door. “I slept late. I’m on my way!”

This was another thing that was accepted. Tamsin provided lessons. Sookie paid for those lessons by preparing and serving the trainer food. When she mentioned it to Desmond Cataliades, grousing that the Fae might at least start the coffee, the demon laughed. “Preparing and leaving food for the fairy folk is an old and honored tradition, Sookie. It is a way of repaying the favor being done. Frankly, in view of how quickly you are learning skills, I think it’s little enough!” After a cup of coffee, Sookie tended to agree with him.

As she walked into the large, airy kitchen, she smiled at Tamsin, who was perched on the stool at the far end of the island. The dark-haired woman looked up with a gleeful anticipation, as if she expected Sookie to pull hot food out of thin air. Sookie had actually tried that once, which earned her the Fairy’s tinkling laughter. “Silly woman!” Tamsin had chided her, “You can’t feed imaginary food to a Fae! You have to make it the old-fashioned way, so it has your grace woven into it. That is what makes it real!”
Sookie had no idea what she meant, but Tamsin was full of those pithy, New Age, mumbo jumbo kinds of sayings. The telepath found as long as she didn’t think about it too hard and just went along, things went well between them. The coffee maker was next to the stove and Sookie grabbed the glass canister and the grounds holder. As she shuffled to the sink, Tamsin inhaled sharply and her mouth turned down. “What have you done to yourself?” she asked.

Sookie stared at her. The woman’s nose was crinkled up and Sookie pulled out her robe and took a quick sniff. Granted she hadn’t showered last night, but she didn’t think she smelled that bad!

“There is something wrong with you,” Tamsin said again, and even leaned away when Sookie came close.

“There is nothing wrong with me,” Sookie rolled her eyes. “I don’t know what makes you think I smell that bad, but I’ll tell you what. I’ll run upstairs and take a shower as soon as I have the coffee started.”

“It won’t help,” Tamsin announced. “The smell comes from inside you.” The woman crossed her arms, shook back her hair, and announced, “I will just have to suffer through it, I suppose.”

Although they got along, the trainer wasn’t what Sookie would consider a friend. The telepath was clear that this person was here to complete a job, and she was determined to get it done. There was very little joking or playing once work started. Still, Sookie had to admit, she had mastered many more skills under Tamsin’s supervision than when she had Bellenos as her trainer.

Sookie could cause seeds to sprout now and mature into full blown plants. She couldn’t get trees to grow from seeds, but she could cause saplings to get larger. That took a great deal of energy though, and Sookie really couldn’t see any good purpose except to say that she could do it.

Shape shifting was the thing she was working hardest on right now. Not shape-shifting like the Were did where they turned into animal form, although Tamsin told her there was no reason Sookie couldn’t learn that, too. No, the lessons being taught at present were about changing how people saw her when she was in public. What’s more, she was learning how to change the appearance of other people, too. Mostly she practiced on the guards or in front of the mirror. Tamsin was very critical, making sure she walked all the way around to ‘fact check’ the illusion.

That was the hardest part. It was one thing to pull a mask of sorts over her face, or someone else’s face, but that wasn’t enough. Sookie had to make sure the illusion held so that someone could closely examine her or the other person and not see anything out of place. She remembered the photos she had found of her Gran and the man she thought was her Grandpa Mitchell. Dermot told her that the man in the photo was really Fintan, and he’d shown her the feet. She remembered Dermot telling her that Fintan was lazy that way, always leaving out some small detail. Now she knew what her uncle meant.

Sookie finished setting up coffee, then pulled eggs from the refrigerator. “Waffles?” Tamsin asked.

“Sure, I guess,” Sookie agreed. The Fae leaned forward, her face as excited as any child as she watched Sookie assemble the ingredients. “When Dermot used to live with me he loved pancakes,” Sookie sighed, mixing batter.

“Did Claude ever ask for breakfast?” Tamsin asked.

“Huh,” Sookie thought, “No. Sometimes he’d make breakfast for me.”

“That’s because he was not working for you,” Tamsin nodded. “That should have told you he was
your enemy.”

Sookie looked over her shoulder, “So let me get this right, if a Fae makes you cook for them, then they’re your ally, but if they cook for you, then things are bad?”

“Of course!” Tamsin smiled.

“So, you are learning our traditions as well. That is wonderful!” and Niall stepped into the kitchen. He was impeccably dressed in a grey suit. His hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail and he was wearing a Jerry Garcia tie.

“Oh, good grief!” Sookie grabbed at her robe. “Good morning Grandfather! I am so sorry I’m not dressed!” and she blushed bright red. “I wasn’t expecting you!” In fact, this was the first time Sookie had seen her Grandfather in close to a year. In fact, she could count the total number of conversations she’d had with the Prince over this past year on one hand. Most of her news of the Prince came through either Tamsin or Mr. Cataliades.

“Not at all, Granddaughter. You can get dressed after you feed us breakfast. You look charming!” and then his nose crinkled.

“She smells!” Tamsin proclaimed.

The Prince nodded, “It’s a side effect of the hormones,” he replied. “Temporary,” he said directly to Sookie. “Once the shots are finished, your natural scent will reassert itself.”

“Great!” Sookie said through clenched teeth, “Moody, acne, I get to stick myself with needles, and now I smell. Boy, do I feel like a prize winner now!”

Her Grandfather took off his suit jacket, draped it across a chair, and then climbed onto a stool. Seeing him sitting up so straight at her kitchen island struck Sookie as odd and she giggle-snorted. When he raised his eyebrow in that disapproving way, she covered by pouring two mugs of coffee and then fetching the pitcher of cream and matching sugar bowl. She noticed her Grandfather added five teaspoons of sugar to his cup.

When the waffles were done, Sookie invited them both to move into the dining room. It was the first time she’d actually used it and she realized this new house was beginning to feel like home. She poured the real maple syrup in a little pitcher and set it in front of the Fae, and then excused herself to shower.

When Sookie returned downstairs, her Grandfather and Tamsin had moved into the family room. The dishes were stacked neatly in the sink and Sookie wondered if that meant something, too. She heard her Grandfather say, “In this case I agree with the vampire.”

“Well, let me get out the red pen and circle the date on the calendar!” Sookie said brightly. “Were you saying you agree with something Eric said?”

“I did, yes,” and the Prince was smiling. “Your mate has suggested that some part of the lessons and meetings that I arrange be timed to allow him to be included.” Sookie’s smile dropped a little. “He had suggested that if he is able to participate he can extend your practice time, allowing you to perfect your skills more quickly.” The Prince watched her carefully before saying, “Of course, I’m sure he told you of this.”

Sookie swallowed. What she wanted to say was the truth, which was that Eric hadn’t said one word about this to her. She wanted to call her husband out as high-handed and tell her Grandfather there was no need to change anything about her current schedule, but something held her back. She knew
the Prince’s expression hadn’t changed. She knew he was reading her expressions and she knew that most of what she was thinking could be plainly seen on her face. Instead she looked down at the coffee table and said, “Would you like a little more coffee?” and without waiting for a response, headed back toward the kitchen to give herself a minute.

She picked up the coffee carafe and turned around to find her Grandfather standing right behind her. She hadn’t heard him move and she jumped, and then cried out, “Cheese and rice!” Niall reached out to catch the bottom of the coffee pot before she dropped it and deftly set it on the counter.

“You are learning,” he told her. “You are standing with him, and it is a lesson you need to embrace. Now come and sit down with us. We will discuss what part of your lessons will continue in the morning,” and he laughed a bit, “if you can consider this morning, and which will wait until sunset.”

Once they were settled, Sookie glanced from one to the other, “I think I should tell you that I plan my day so that I’m with Eric when he rises.”

“Very sensible,” her Grandfather nodded. “A simple tradition that replenishes your bond. We can plan around that.”

“Magic lessons should only be done during daylight hours,” Tamsin declared and Sookie could tell the trainer wasn’t exactly thrilled with the change being proposed. When the Prince fixed the trainer with that narrow stare of his, she explained, “It is not possible to contain all aspects of magic. We may inadvertently release pheromones or some other evidence of our essence.”

“Good point,” the Prince conceded. “The weapons training, however. That should wait until the Viking is up. He is a worthy warrior and will make an excellent sparring partner.”

Sookie snorted, which had both Fae looking at her, but then she shrugged. It wasn’t that she didn’t think Eric was a great fighter. She’d seen him with a sword, the heat of battle bringing that crazy happy look to his eye. It was that she figured he was so much better than her that she’d hardly prove any real challenge to him. She had a vision of her flailing away with her practice sword while Eric fended her off while reading a book, but in the next minute, she remembered when she’d trained with Thalia. She’d actually stabbed the small vampire. Thalia had told Sookie had natural ability. Feeling no little pride, Sookie considered that training with Eric might not be so pathetic after all.

Her Grandfather nodded and she suspected he’d followed her mental discussion as easily as if she’d spoken the words out loud. “Good, then that’s settled,” he said out loud, pretty much confirming it. “Since my Granddaughter is short in stature, most of her adversaries are likely to be taller. This will be most useful. Focus on those positions and moves that will best use those differences to her advantage. Almost all training is between those of equal height.” He looked at Sookie, “It’s too bad you are right-handed. Handling weapons with the left hand can also be an advantage.”

“We have been using practice swords. Will that do?” Tamsin seemed to have gotten over her snit. “She does well.”

“Spend more time on knives,” her Grandfather replied. “Soon she will be off balance. Knives will be more effective and practical. She should be comfortable using them.”

“So,” Sookie bit her lip, but her blood seemed to flow a little faster, “You’re saying that this,” and she waved toward her stomach, “This is going to happen?”

“Of course, child,” Niall smiled. He used his best Grandfather face, the one where his eyes crinkled and his cheeks rounded. He looked so kindly and wise and Sookie felt a tear slip from her eye.
Tamsin leaned over and scooped up the telepath’s tear on her finger, then put her finger in her mouth. It reminded Sookie that she was not exactly among friends, and her smile froze a little. “That’s great!” she said weakly.

Her Grandfather laughed again, “You are here, Granddaughter. Surely you can feel life all around you! Every night you sleep on this blessed earth, and the healing properties of this place build and enhance all that is here. You and your mate were ill. Do you feel any effects of that illness now?”

“No,” Sookie confirmed, “I feel great!”

“Exactly! And now, you are launching your own personal journey of creating. No, Granddaughter, conceiving children will never be your worry,” and he looked away. “It would be appropriate for the weapons training to begin immediately after you rise with your mate. That way Mr. Cataliades can come and have dinner with you. Your North Man has asked that the demon consult for both of your business concerns and I have consented. This will allow you to consolidate the time you must spend on these matters and free up your hours to spend in other pursuits.”

“That’s real nice of you,” Sookie nodded.

“If you think so,” Niall chuckled.

Tamsin rose and Sookie followed her. They walked to the back yard where the grass had been trimmed. Instead of Tamsin barking orders, though, it was her Grandfather.

“Show me a full Were,” he ordered, and Sookie closed her eyes. She visualized Shari Decker, a Were who had been her bodyguard at one point. She knew when she opened her eyes, her Grandfather was seeing the face Sookie saw in her own mind. He walked around her, looking so closely that she felt a thin sheen of sweat break out across her forehead. “It’s adequate,” he announced. “Good enough for someone who doesn’t get too close. Now, Sookie, show me a human woman.”

For the next hour, the Prince had her create the illusion of a human woman, a human man, another Were, a vampire, and then another vampire. He was sharply critical, pointing out features that were inconsistent or places where the illusion was thin. When Sookie thought she wouldn’t be able to imagine any more faces to pull over her own, her Grandfather said, “That’s fine. Now call over a guard.”

Sookie asked Owen to join them and, under her Grandfather’s watchful eye, she started all over again, this time changing Owen’s appearance instead of her own. Frankly, making someone else look different was trickier. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but then her Grandfather asked Owen to walk.

“There, that’s the problem!” he exclaimed, and Sookie could see it. Owen was looking like a human male, but when he moved, he still walked with the fluid gait of a Were. Niall had her try again and again, but she just couldn’t hold the idea in her head firmly enough to become more than just an appearance. When she was trembling with exhaustion, Niall said, “Let go, Sookie. Let me show you,” and with a flick of his wrist, she was looking at Finn, the vampire king of Nebraska, and then, in just another breath, she was looking at Tamsin’s twin. When Owen spoke, it was Tamsin she heard.

“It is not enough to have the appearance,” the Prince lectured, “the illusion must be total. The walk, the way they act and speak, even their smell must be exact.” He smiled indulgently at Sookie, “You have made a good start, better than I would have expected for the short time you have been practicing, but you must work harder. This is a skill you must master. It is one that is always most
useful.” He released Owen, who became himself with the faintest shimmer in the air around him.

As Sookie, Tamsin, and the Prince walked back into the house, Sookie said, “Well, making folks smell the right way will be a neat trick. When it comes to my sniffer, I’m afraid it’s human all the way. I can figure out a steak on a grill without a guidebook, but beyond that, I’m pretty smell-blind.”

“It is a deficit that is easily fixed,” the Prince replied. He held out his hand and within it there was a flat, brown stone. It had striations, like a tiger’s stripes. He fisted it, then held it out, and dropped it in Sookie’s upturned palm. “Hold it in your fist and take a deep breath,” he instructed.

When Sookie did as her Grandfather asked, she noticed a sour smell. It wasn’t as off-putting as sour milk. It was more the flavor of laundry that had been left in the washing machine too long. “Jeez!” she exclaimed, scrunching her nose up, “What is that?”

“You!” Tamsin explained and rolled her eyes.

Sookie held her arm up to her nose, and sure enough the faint, sour smell seemed to be coming from every part of her skin. “That’s disgusting!” She looked at her Grandfather, “And taking a shower won’t help?”

“It is a little more pungent at the moment,” Niall conceded. “You were working very hard.”

“Well, if you don’t mind, I’m going to run upstairs and rinse off. I am so sorry!”

“Think nothing of it,” Niall said calmly. Sookie ran into the kitchen and set up a tray with a pitcher of sweet tea and glasses with ice. She added a plate of butterscotch cookies, and once her guests were settled, she galloped up the steps, taking them two at a time.

She scrubbed until her skin was red, and then, when the alarm sounded, retrieved the box from the little refrigerator and, with a deep breath, injected her second shot of the day. “Only one more…” she sighed.

Towel drying her hair, she pulled on blue jeans and a sweater and headed back down the stairs. As she came around the corner, she heard the third voice that meant Mr. Cataliades had arrived. As she passed, her cell phone buzzed on the kitchen counter. She saw it was Tara and was about to pick up when her Grandfather was right beside her again. He took the phone from her hand.

“Granddaughter, there is no reason for you to be rude. I am sure those who are not of this house can do without news from you for one evening.”

It was an odd thing to do, but Sookie didn’t think too much about it. After all, she was a northern Louisiana girl hanging out in a house with fairy tale creatures. What wasn’t odd? So, instead she shrugged, plugged the phone into the charger, and walked through the family room. Desmond Cataliades was standing near the fireplace. Eric’s sword hung above the mantle, so long it almost stretched the full width of the mantle shelf. “Princess,” he greeted, and bowed in his formal way. When he straightened, his eyes returned to the sword, “I had expected to see your family’s sword in a place of equal honor.”

Sookie lifted her chin, “My sword is in a place of greater honor. It sits above the fireplace in our chambers, not as a decoration but as a treasure.”

Tamsin smiled, “I would believe you to be Fae now, your words flow so gracefully.” Sookie knew she was ladling it on a little thick, and she could feel her cheeks flush, but she held her pose and toughed it out until her Grandfather nodded. As soon as she saw it, Sookie let her shoulders drop a little.
Fae could be prickly about honor and hospitality, particularly when it came to giving proper appreciation of their gifts. Sookie wasn’t about to stumble into an insult over something as important as the Brigant sword. She had asked Mr. Cataliades, the demon attorney, one time why her Grandfather was willing to part with it. She assumed the sword hanging upstairs belonged to the Prince. The attorney told her that the sword was, in fact, Fintan’s, the Prince’s son and her real Grandfather.

It had taken a bit for Sookie to become comfortable with the realities of her Fae family, and there were times she still wondered. If she was being technical, the Prince was her Great-Grandfather, but saying all that seemed a mouthful. On the other hand, with his erect posture and patronizing way, calling him by his first name seemed too familiar, so Sookie called him Grandfather, and Niall, Prince of the Sky Fae, seemed pleased with the title.

Sookie walked back into the kitchen to retrieve a glass with ice for the demon attorney, and a plate of the ginger cookies he preferred before getting a glass for herself. When all the niceties of manners had been satisfied, and Sookie had taken a sip of tea, the Prince turned to Mr. Cataliades, “As I was saying, I am amenable to a change in the arrangement. I require you to be here after Northman rises. He will bring his own reports and records. I will subsidize your fee to include some portion of your work in supporting him.”

“And if there is a conflict between the Viking’s interests and those of the Princess?” and the attorney sat back.

“Why, you will inform both parties and favor Sookie, of course,” Niall said smoothly.

Sookie had been living with the impression that her Grandfather was fond of Eric Northman. She certainly had no reason to think he didn’t like him, but when he said things like this, she wondered. “I sure don’t see that happening much!” Sookie shrugged. “I mean; how could we have a conflict? We’re working in different industries…”

“Mr. Northman might be competing with you for the purchase of a particular piece of property, or he may wish to develop a parcel in a way that would not benefit assets you have in the area,” Mr. Cataliades rattled off. “He may compete with you for talent or he could find himself with legal complications that would…”

And Sookie’s Grandfather hissed. It was so unexpected that Sookie jumped, sloshing a little ice tea on the floor. “Oh I am sorry!” she apologized. “Are you all right, Grandfather? Did something happen?”

“No,” Niall smiled tightly, his eyes drilling into the attorney, “I was startled by something I saw outside. It was nothing.” He jerked his head at Tamsin and Sookie’s trainer rose.

“Come on, Sookie, let me help you with that. Tea can stain, and that’s a lovely sweater,” and Sookie found herself herded into the kitchen and answering a series of questions that prevented the telepath hearing what was being said in the other room. Sookie didn’t need telepathy to tell her something was going on.

She marched back to find the Prince smiling benignly and Mr. Cataliades sitting back, his hands crossed over his round belly. “Okay, fellas, I think you better tell me what’s going on!” she demanded.

“There is nothing that you need to know, Granddaughter,” Niall said, rising from his chair. “I would only ask one thing of you this evening. Have a quiet night at home tonight. Don’t talk on the phone or reach out to your friends. Watch television. Read a book. Conserve your energy, Sookie. All will
be well.” He turned to Tamsin, “Are you coming?”

Sookie almost rose, but Tamsin shook her head and glided out the door, following the Prince. Sookie didn’t even feel the shift in the air, but she knew they were gone.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Sookie rounded on Mr. Cataliades.

“I plead the Fifth,” her attorney replied, “And if you press me on it, I will have to leave. I will tell you that the Prince’s advice is never lightly given. Now, if you would still like to work?” and he gave her a long look that told her the subject was closed.

‘Why do I have the feeling I won’t be so happy when I find out what’s coming?’ Sookie thought. With a deep breath, she nodded to the attorney, and together they sat at the dining room table, reviewing the reports and invoices the attorney brought.

New Orleans

James was on the phone with the Palace, asking that a cleaning crew be sent to the shop. He was speaking swiftly, his voice low.

“Let me talk to them,” When James handed Eric the phone, the Viking said, “Get Max.”

Charles moved around the premises, searching for surveillance cameras. He found two; one was suspended from the ceiling near the front door, the other was hiding on a shelf behind the cash register. Turning it over, Charles realized the one from the shelf wasn’t turned on. It was old, too old to be Bluetooth or Internet enabled. The Were popped it open and removed the film cassette for later, then set it on the counter. The camera on the ceiling turned out to be a toy that had been put in place to fool customers. “She probably figured she didn’t need real cameras since her magic would protect her,” Charles mumbled.

“She was a terrible witch,” Eric replied as he walked toward the back. His eyes passed over the bodies as he tossed James back his phone.

The King’s movements were coldly efficient. ‘I wonder how many times he’s done this,’ Charles wondered. He knew the Viking was called that because Eric Northman literally was a Viking. He had been made a vampire over a thousand years ago. For some reason, that gave Charles an odd sense of comfort.

“Look around,” the King told James, “See if there are any large garbage bags. Plastic sheets would do, too. Something we can wrap them in that will keep them from dripping.” While James started looking, the King walked out of the small bathroom with a bottle of cleaning fluid in his hand. He opened the top and sniffed. “Good!” he nodded, “Bleach.” He handed the bottle to Charles along with a rag. “Be careful about touching too much,” The King was looking around them. The back room was cluttered with overflowing shelves and boxes that were opened and stacked, one on the other. There was no obvious system. To Charles’ eye, the place looked more like a hoarder’s den than a storekeeper’s inventory. There were piles that looked in danger of falling and there was a pervasive smell of mildew and dust. “What a shit hole!” the King hissed.

“She was a terrible witch,” Eric replied as he walked toward the back. His eyes passed over the bodies as he tossed James back his phone.

“Wonder if this is how she lives, too,” Charles shook his head.

“She was my wife’s roommate a long time ago,” Eric said, and then a look came over the King’s face and Charles had the impression he wanted to kick the witch’s corpse. It was the first time Charles had seen Eric look with such pure loathing at any creature.

“Will bubble wrap do?” James asked, pulling several rolls from a back corner.
Eric nodded, “See if you can find some tape.” James stooped and then straightened with a roll of strapping tape in hand and he and Eric used the wrap and tape to cocoon first the witch and then Meg. As they reached the former servant’s face, Eric said, “Sookie will not be happy about this.”

“So, why tell her?” James suggested.

“You’re not married,” the King’s voice was bleak. “When you are you’ll learn that keeping secrets is a dangerous pastime.”

“That’s for sure!” Charles said quickly and their eyes met.

“Let’s head back to the front,” Eric said, and they started making another sweep. Charles showed Eric the fake camera and the old one and the Viking nodded. He then looked toward the door. “The envelopes she was going to mail,” Eric said and jerked his chin toward the pile of mail. “Find a bag and collect those.”

Charles reached under the counter and pulled out a couple of used bags from a local grocery store. “Guess she recycled,” he said, half to himself. Eric nodded, and then pulled out his phone and made another call. He started speaking in that vampire hiss again, but before he did, Charles heard him say, “Karin.” Eric ducked his head and then walked back into the storage area.

James caught Charles’s eye, “You know this is going to be big trouble.” Charles knew he was right. Even if she wasn’t a witch with a famous dead father, Amelia Broadway was a person with enough money to have a shop in the middle of the Quarter. Most likely with the state of things around here, she was renting. If they were really lucky, Daddy had left her enough to own the building outright. If she was renting, a landlord would eventually start wondering.

An ‘On Vacation’ or ‘Gave it to Katrina’ sign would be enough explanation of the shuttered shop for most around here, but from what the witch said before she died, she had a going business in selling her charms. Each one of the envelopes now sitting in the Publix shopping bags on the counter represented some witch somewhere in the world who would start wondering what her payment had bought. Even if the locals were satisfied, her Internet customers would eventually file complaints.

“Can’t imagine she had many friends,” James grumbled, clearly thinking along the same lines.

“With a mouth like that?” Charles shook his head, “I’m surprised the King held his temper as long as he did. But you know how these witches are. She’ll have some coven sister or witchy matriarch or some such crap. Someone will come looking for her.”

James flicked his eyes to the back of the store where they could hear Eric still talking on the phone, “Would have been better if this had been part of the plan from the beginning.” Charles knew he was talking about the killing.

Charles shook his head, “We couldn’t have planned for Meg. Her being here made this a cluster fuck. No way we could have seen that coming.”

James’ gaze fell, “I still can’t believe Meg.” Charles looked at his partner and he knew they were both feeling it.

“Yeah,” Charles said carefully. “Tough luck.” They had both known Meg when she was a servant at the Palace. They ate meals together and joked together the way you do with people you see every day.

Charles and James had been as shocked as anyone to see Meg turn up in front of the palace, leading
the Silent Witnesses. When Meg started making accusations on the television, they told anyone who asked that there was no basis in truth for what the woman was saying about Eric Northman, but they both knew that wasn’t exactly true. There were plenty of times they had seen the King angry or making threats. Eric Northman was a vampire king. Snarling and intimidating were part of the tool kit. Hell, there’d been times his snarling had been directed at the Queen, but she would just give it right back. Meg may have called Eric Northman a beast, but as far as Charles was concerned, it was Sookie who could be stone cold terrifying, especially when that creature face of hers crept out to play.

Regardless of how wrong Meg had been, or how many accusations she threw around, the Weres couldn’t help feeling badly about how things had ended for their former co-worker. Charles gave James a long look, “You heard her the same as me. She threatened all of us. It’s really the witch who killed her. If the King could have glamoured Meg, he would have let her go.”

“You believe that?” James asked.

“Don’t you?” Charles asked in return. He gave the younger Were a long look and he could see James understood how important this was.

When James answered, his eyes were clear, “Yes,” he said. “Yes, I do.” James’ eyes flicked back to the door that led to the back, “She lived with vampires all those years. She knew the deal. Stupid!” Charles nodded. They worked quietly then, examining shelves and looking through piles of paper, wiping surfaces as they went. “Cops are going to know someone was here just because the place won’t be dirty,” James grumbled.

Eric rejoined them, “The cleaners will be here shortly. They will handle the rest. I will need you to check the alleyway and the street at both ends for cameras. If you find any, you know what to do.” Charles and James nodded, but before Charles headed out, he turned to the Viking and said, “It would be best if you had a solid alibi, Majesty. There will be too many people willing to believe the worst. It’s known you were no fan of that one,” and he nodded toward Amelia Broadway. “With all the publicity, everyone knows Meg worked in the Palace. She did a pretty good job of accusing you of being violent. When both of them turn up missing, our local police will see the connection. It will be too much of a coincidence for them to ignore and if they can confirm you were in town when it happened, they’ll be convinced of your guilt without having to wait for evidence.”

Eric had found himself on the wrong side of a murder investigation before. He remembered how the circumstances had resulted in his being arrested. In that instance, he hadn’t done it. “You’re right,” he told Charles. “It would be easier if we managed this to look as if I had never left Bon Temps. Get moving before the vans arrive,” and he gestured toward the door, “I’ll get things started to erase our presence. When you finish out there, I’ll need you to call your Packmaster. This means glamouring the Weres in the palace. I don’t want to enforce it without Emil’s permission.” Eric gave Charles a look, “And tell him I’ll explain it myself. No details for now.”

The inspection didn’t take long. They didn’t find any cameras on the street, but they weren’t surprised. Cameras around here had a tendency of disappearing. Some were taken as souvenirs or to sell for quick money, but mostly the shop keepers removed them, making sure that those who came and went through their backdoors maintained their anonymity.

It was as Charles was dialing Emil Touissant’s number that the lights of the cleaning crew’s vehicles turned into the alley. Charles recognized the driver of the first vehicle. This service was the one called when there were embarrassing problems that needed to be handled. “This problem may be a little bigger than you think,” he mumbled as Eric walked forward to greet the driver and explain the situation.
The King appeared at his elbow. “Tell your Packmaster everyone gets glamoured this time around.” Eric gave Charles a long look and then said, “Even you. It’s for your own protection. I won’t have you implicated. You have a family.”

Charles nodded. He didn’t like the idea of glamour, although he knew that when done properly, there were no long term effects, but in this case, he had to agree. The issue wasn’t really the human police, although if he found he was forced to take a polygraph test, the glamour would help. The issue was the witches who would come with their own questions and methods. “If they can remove glamour…” Charles didn’t have to finish the thought. They had always lived in dangerous times, but this latest trickery on the part of the Broadway bitch had made it worse.

The King didn’t answer. He didn’t need to, instead he asked, “Would you take me home, Charles?” The Viking didn’t say it as an order. He said it in the way a friend asks another for help, and Charles realized he did consider this vampire his friend as much as his employer.

“Guess you’re happy you didn’t drive the ‘Vette down here after all,” Charles shook his head, and was rewarded by the Viking’s broad smile.

“It’s the only good decision I made tonight,” Eric chuckled. They walked back inside. The crew was already starting their work. Strong arms hoisted the cocoons and quickly walked them toward the van. No one would be told the identities, but all were vampire and it was their final death to reveal any detail of any job.

Eric turned to the driver, “There is a computer, files. I want those delivered to the Palace. My second knows what should be done with them. And there’s something else. You will need to contact a specialist. There can be no ectoplasmic reconstruction. I believe you have someone.”

The driver nodded, “We do, Majesty,” and the phone was in his hand before he finished speaking.

“There are a lot of details,” Charles said.

The King nodded, “Cameras that saw us drive here. People at the Palace who saw us. At least we had the foresight to use the back entrance to the Palace when we came in tonight. We control that watchful eye. That will help.” The King briefly shut his eyes and then said, “and there was no one on the sidewalks that could have seen us.”

James came in from outside, car keys in his hand, “There is a vehicle here for your use,” he said.

“I want you to stay here, James,” Eric told him. “You will be the explanation for the car that arrived from Bon Temps. Do you have any concerns?”

“No, Majesty,” James bowed. “What happened here was the only outcome,” and he glanced at Charles. “I’ll head back to the Palace. Guess it’s glamour time for me.”

Charles laughed, “I’ll make sure they add a suggestion to help you remember who’s top dog on our team!”

“Shut the fuck up!” James tossed back and they smiled briefly in the way of brothers in arms, then with a nod, Eric and Charles walked out to the car.

There was a wavy look to the windshield. “It fools the traffic cameras,” the vampire standing next to the open door explained. There was a similar scrim over the license plates.

As they headed onto the highway, Charles turned to Eric. He knew the King was troubled because he chose to be a passenger instead of driving himself. “Is there anything I can do for you?” he asked.
Eric turned to him. He shook his head, “Not unless you want to be the one to tell Sookie,” he 
laughed.

“There are many things I am happy to do in your service, Majesty,” Charles said, turning his eyes 
back to the road, “But facing down your wife is not one of them.”

“Smart man,” Eric replied, and then he tilted his head back and his eyes took on the distant look.
‘Downtime,’ Charles thought. “Yeah, I’d start figuring it out, too, because you’re going to be doing 
some fast talking and dirt eating when we get to Bon Temps, and it won’t be to the police.’
Chapter 11 - Submerged Hazards

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Thank you for your enthusiastic reception to the story. As I’ve mentioned, things change. In a world where canon and non-canon matter, taking a major character to a change in behavior feels risky, but I do believe that people, even fictional ones, can change.

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Jackson

“When are you heading back?” Isaiah stretched his long legs in front of him, his lean frame extending from the back of the armchair halfway into the room, his bottle of blood balanced on his flat abdomen. Once upon a time, this King of both Kentucky and Tennessee had ranged across the American frontier. He was forged by hard living and many adventures. His human life left him with the instincts of a flat river fighter; violent, direct and dirty, and now, the lessons he had learned were being used to help his beleaguered fellow monarchs.

“If I don’t get back there in the next week, there won’t be a kingdom left to claim.” Bartlett was hollow-eyed. The stream of rogue vampires and the trail of orphans they left in their wake had slowed in most kingdoms, but not in Indiana. Humans in Bartlett’s state were up in arms. Authorities were calling for investigations and the detention or expulsion of all vampires. Citizens were being urged to start local militias and to carry silver and stakes so they could kill vampires on sight. “Safe now, Ask Later!” was showing up on billboards and as graffiti on walls. “I thought I was being paranoid, but now I’m convinced. This really is aimed at me,” and Bartlett shook his head.

Russell walked over and laid his hand on his mate’s shoulder, before turning to Isaiah, “We have exhausted our networks…”

“Not that we have that many willing to stand with us anymore!” Bartlett exclaimed. “It’s like watching roaches scurry from the light!”

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” Isaiah growled, “Bunch of pussies, the lot of them! Never had much use for James or Roland. Won’t believe it of Maude, though. That old girl don’t know anything but fight! Never knew a woman to be so contrary. She’d argue over a sunny day!”

Isaiah had been married to the Queen of Minnesota years ago. They found they were too much alike, and rubbed each other like friendly sandpaper, but sandpaper nonetheless.

“James hides behind his walls in Rhodes. He has his own problems. There are rumors that members of his Court are forming a paramilitary group. They call themselves, ‘Vampires First.’ Bill Compton met one of them at the Amun Summit last year. He invited him here for a visit, but ended up sending him home. Compton said the vampire’s views were dangerous. He told me he thought these Vampire First types could get us all finally dead.”
“I’ve heard about those folks,” Isaiah nodded. “They want to see vampires take their so-called rightful place at the head of all world governments. Kind of a vampire-only world where we are the only predator and everyone else gets to be prey.”

“It would make the chase deadly dull,” Russell sniffed.

“Humans would hunt us to extinction,” and Bartlett admonished his mate.

“You reach out to the Pythoness?” Isaiah asked. It was a logical question. The Ancient Pythoness had established the clans and kingdoms in this country. It was the force of her vision that held the vampires together. With the instability being introduced through Indiana’s problems, it was not unrealistic to think she would wish to become involved.

Bartlett nodded, “Several times. I get as far as Cataliades’ niece, Diantha. She apologizes, and then she tells me the Pythoness has withdrawn for a period of tranquility. I don’t know what that means.”

“Do you think the demon is holding the old girl hostage in some way?” Isaiah asked.

“I don’t,” Bartlett shook his head. “I can’t explain it, but I believe Diantha. I think the reluctance is all on the part of the Ancient One.”

“So, I guess we’re going to have to figure this out on our own, for now,” Isaiah drawled, “Won’t be the first time, won’t be the last.” He looked around, “Kind of wondering why you didn’t invite Northman? Isn’t he your go-to planning guy?”

Russell rolled his eyes, “I won’t deny we have leaned on him a bit, but lately? We saw him in Indiana. He looked terrible. Apparently there are side effects to being married to a Fae,” and the Mississippi King narrowed his eyes, “So, all in all, I’d say things turned out for the best for you, Isaiah.” Kentucky hissed, but they all knew the lanky King had considered making a play for Sookie Stackhouse before she pledged to the Viking.

“As it turns out, it’s a good thing we did leave Northman out,” Bartlett told them, “He called me last night. This witch business?”

“The blackmail?” Isaiah’s eyes narrowed and he sat forward.

“Northman told me he found the source; in fact, he’s sure of it,” Bartlett didn’t need to say it in this company, but did, “The witch has been eliminated.” Isaiah made a sound and Russell nodded. “Before you start celebrating, he also took out a local leader of the Silent Witness movement. Wrong place, wrong time. The woman was a former Palace employee and she knew things, too many things. What was interesting was that after the witch removed the employee’s glamour, she somehow made her immune.”

“I don’t understand,” Isaiah was paying close attention. This business of witches and blackmail was the latest in the list of woes to beleaguer them all. First rogues, then protesters, now it was witches plotting to bleed them financially dry.

“I mean, the witch figured out a way to spell the woman so she couldn’t be re-glamoured,” Bartlett nodded at Isaiah’s horrified expression. “After I heard that, Russell and I decided to pay a special visit to our detention center. Our special guests were a little reluctant at first, but with some extra persuasion, they sang for us. I can’t speak for all of them, but at least for the two we picked up, that ‘little something extra’ wasn’t something the witch shared.”

“Who knows?” Russell shrugged, “Maybe the witch, Amelia Broadway was her name, maybe it was a skill that was particular to her and it couldn’t be taught.” This made sense to the vampires. They
were known to inherit or develop special skills that were unique. Why wouldn’t it be the same of other species?

“It’s just as possible she wanted to sell it for extra and your guests either didn’t know or didn’t have the money,” Isaiah suggested. Isaiah wasn’t surprised to hear the Kings had imprisoned and tortured witches. The Kentucky King had vampires hunting witches in his own territories at this very moment. He pulled out his phone and his fingers moved over the screen. “I’ve sent word that the witches in my states will be asked about that glamour thing.” When he finished he looked up, “It’s bad business. We haven’t had trouble with witches in a while. Figures they’d pick now to become a problem. Lots of bodies. My hidey holes are going to get crowded!” The King chuckled at his own style of humor before saying, “So, Northman’s convinced he got the one who started it? If we can verify that, it would be a piece of good news.”

“Even if the source is gone, cleaning up the mess will take time,” Russell sighed.

“If the problem wasn’t so dangerous, we might have been able to ignore it. One of our little guests said that the charm she bought from the Broadway woman didn’t work well. She used it to pull the veil from only two people, and then it failed. She was pretty angry about it. One of the humans she chose had nothing, but the other gave her enough to have one of our Sheriffs assembling a ransom.”

“You have to admit, it is trouble for us every which way,” Isaiah said sourly. “They find a human and pull off the glamour. Then what? The witch blackmails, but what does the vampire get in return?”

“The human…” Russell replied, “And how many vampires will try to re-glamour? They’ve just been shaken down.”

“And the source of their humiliation has been handed over. If they re-glamour, who’s to say another witch, or the same witch, doesn’t just pull the glamour off again. So they pay the witch and kill the source,” and Bartlett shook his head.

“Then, the witches count on the vampires they target to be too embarrassed to let their superiors know. Leaving loose ends can be a staking offense,” Russell added.

“Our need for secrecy runs deep,” Isaiah agreed. “Hell, if one of my Sheriffs told me there were un glamoured humans running around telling his secrets, I’m not sure I’d let him continue, even if there was a witch involved. That stuff just says sloppy work to me, and who can tolerate that? I can’t. Hell, I have plenty of things I’ve done over the years that wouldn’t look too good if it was being told by some stupid human on one of those new shows. Kind of makes me happy humans die so quickly.”

“Well, if there won’t be more of these charms made, and the ones that are out there don’t last long, that would be the best news. It still means we are back in the witch-killing business, and that will start a war,” and Bartlett sighed and looked at his mate, “And I don’t mind saying, I just don’t have the heart for it. The problems with Indiana are all I can think about.”

Russell nodded and then turned to Isaiah, “We were thinking about asking Northman to take more a leadership role in the Clan. We are going to call him and ask him to represent us at Moshup Summit. He really is lucky, for all the trouble he brings on himself.”

Isaiah smirked, “I’ll be damned, but that Viking does seem to have a way of floating to the top. He’s like a turd in a punchbowl.” Russell Edgington watched Isaiah. Of all the monarchs in Amun Clan, he was the one most likely to have a problem with the idea of Northman as Clan Chief. Russell still hadn’t worked around to asking Bartlett to pass the title, but for the Mississippi monarch, it was only
a matter of time.

After a moment, the rangy King nodded, “What? You think I’m harboring some grudge against the Viking? He looks pretty good on television. If it’s true what he’s saying about that witch in New Orleans, he’s done all vampires a favor. That’ll help some overlook their low opinion about his choice in mates. I can see him getting called out for some honor or another,” and then he smiled, “Did you boys didn’t think I was going to challenge you, did you?”

“You know we did!” Bartlett huffed.

“Well, then I guess I’m flattered,” the King grinned. “Truth is; I wouldn’t want to have anyone looking to me right now. We have trouble every which way we turn. I had a messy killing in the southern part of my kingdom recently and I’ve got my hands full trying to clear it up. Times like these require politicians who don’t mind toadying to folks and kissing a lot of ass. Northman’s good at that. I’d just tell them all to go to hell and start kicking butt and taking names. Probably get us in even more hot water.”

Russell laughed out loud, “I’m not sure that’s how I would have said it, but let’s just say that I agree.”

“So, Northman goes to Moshup to wheel and deal with the high and mighty,” and Isaiah leaned back again. “Think that means he’ll be leaving his Queen at home?” and Isaiah winked.

“You are a naughty boy!” Bartlett exclaimed, “And don’t think we wouldn’t know. Our famous author is returning to Bon Temps soon.”

Russell nodded, “Bill Compton told us he received his official permission a few weeks ago. He’s been figuring out his schedule and then he’ll be leaving us again. Oh, the life of the rich and famous!”

“You think folks are really going to pay good money to see some romance movie about a vampire and a human?” Isaiah couldn’t fathom it. The last vampire movie he’d seen, the women screamed, and the men got pitchforks and torches. That had made sense to him.

“His books are a huge success,” Russell shrugged. “He showed us his royalties statement and it was more than respectable. He’s started another series although it hasn’t hit the shelves yet. He’s switching publishers. He said he had some problem with the last one, the editor was too pushy or some such thing, but that’s his business and he handles it well. I told him he should think about writing a book about his experiences in the Civil War. He has such a way with a story, and there is always a market. He could be the next Shelby Foote.”

“Another Southerner writing about the War Between the States…” Isaiah shrugged.

“Another proud Southerner with a first person perspective,” Russell persisted.

“Good luck making him mainstream,” Bartlett laughed, “Our Bill rather enjoys the attention writing bosom heavers gets him. We had to insist he get his own P.O. Box. The fan mail was overwhelming.”

“It will be quieter around here without him,” Russell smiled.

“So, Indiana…” Isaiah brought them back to the other business at hand.

“Northman suggested we insist on having vampires taken onto the police forces,” Bartlett nodded, his face turning serious. “We say we should be involved in policing our own, that we are all on the
“That will sound good to the humans,” the Kentucky King agreed, “provided they trust us enough to let us in.”

“We have been in touch with a civil rights group. I have candidates identified. Several were law officers before they were turned, so there won’t be any concerns about experience,” Russell sat down next to Bartlett. “The group has a network and they have been helping our people to get their applications in for open jobs throughout the state. It will take a few weeks to hear back, but the group is committed to making this a cause if our people are rejected out of hand.”

“Setting up those police departments who refuse for a discrimination suit…” Bartlett added.

“Who cares about discriminating against vampires?” the Kentucky King laughed. “You really think that you can get a fair hearing about this?”

“I don’t know,” Bartlett shrugged, “but it is a start. The other thing we’ve done is put a call into Thalia.”

Isaiah grunted, then said, “Now you’re talking. I didn’t know you knew her.”

“She was our guest of sorts for several months,” Russell replied.

“She is the one who smuggled Sookie out of Louisiana,” Bartlett added. “We sponsored Sookie for Sanctum and in exchange, Thalia stayed here, serving with our guards.” The Kings were referring to the time after Sookie Stackhouse’s marriage to Sam Merlotte failed. It turned out that Sam had been selling information about his wife to Freyda, the Queen of Oklahoma. Freyda paid the shifter extra to abuse his wife and record it. When Freyda became angry with her reluctant husband, she would play the videos, knowing that in the end she could punish the ones he loved the way he was punishing her with his indifference.

Felipe de Castro caught wind of Sookie’s troubles, but by the time he made his move to retrieve the telepath, Thalia had spirited Sookie out of Doctor Ludwig’s hospital and across state lines to the safety of the Jackson palace.

“I’m not sure I’d be comfortable having Thalia living under the same roof with me,” Isaiah chuckled. “Course, I shared a bed with Maude, and that was mostly dangerous most of the time. Guess I could have got used to it.”

“I am surprised Maude didn’t whittle pieces off you if half the stories I’ve heard are true,” Bartlett grinned.

“The stuff of lies,” Isaiah drawled, “Was never nothing but a gentleman with her,” and they all laughed, knowing a tall tale when they heard one. The stories of the ways the monarchs had teased and tortured each other during their hundred years were legend. “So, you push for vampires on the police force. Plays good and it gets you inside information. Allows you to clean up shit before it hits the evening news.”

“It does work for us, all the way around,” Russell agreed.

“And Thalia? How does she fit in? Can’t see anyone wanting to put her scary face on the television.” And Isaiah chuckled some more, picturing the small vampire hissing, fangs descended, talking with one of those late night comedy hosts.

“I know these rogues are about me,” Bartlett told Isaiah. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. I am
asking Thalia to help me find the source.”

“You think someone is trying to take your kingdom?” Isaiah asked.

“No, that’s the thing. If this was a takeover, it would be more straightforward. This is like salting the earth. It’s making the people of Indiana hate vampires, really hate vampires. There are people talking about passing laws that no vampire can reside in the state at all!” Bartlett glanced at Russell. “I have worked hard to create partnerships there. My businesses are there. If this continues, it won’t just be me that’s out in the cold. No vampire will be able to show his or her face.”

“But you think it’s especially about you?” Isaiah cocked his head as he considered it, “You think it’s another vampire? I can’t imagine one of our own ever doing business like this. It makes no sense,” and Isaiah sipped his blood. “You know; it could be Were’s clearing the way. Half the time I don’t think they like us any too well either.”

“We have a long association with our local Were’s,” Russell scolded, “And I believe that if this was in any way connected to their community, someone would have said something.”

“Fair enough,” Isaiah conceded. “Still, a vampire?”

“I can’t escape the feeling that there is something personal about this,” Bartlett sighed.

“I’ve told him it’s likely a test,” Russell interrupted. “Someone trying out a new way to create and marshal forces.”

“Well, that’s a thought that could keep me from my day rest,” Isaiah nodded. “Let’s say all these folks could be coordinated in some way…”

“Like some sleeper cell, through a common Maker,” Russell agreed.

Isaiah let his thoughts drift, then said, “With all the orphans we’ve killed, if there was a common Maker, that vampire would be insane by now.” The Kings nodded. Losing progeny was terrible. It tore some part of you, and though you didn’t bleed externally, the hole it left in your psyche lingered.

“It’s one of the reasons I have never created a child,” Bartlett nodded. “The thought that I could lose it is overwhelming.”

“How many does Northman have?” Isaiah asked

“Let it go!” Russell scoffed, “He had two and you know it!”

“Pretty extravagant, if you ask me,” the King continued, “If he needs so many, he must be compensating for something.”

Bartlett rolled his eyes, “Oh, don’t go there! Northman was here a long time ago, before Russell and I were pledged. It was that whole dust-up with Lorena, anyway…” and Bartlett gave Russell a knowing look, “There was a young vampire here who told stories about the night he shared a coffin with the Viking.”

“Hearsay!” Russell laughed. “No one’s dick is that big!”

“I don’t know, Rusty!” Bartlett teased, “Vampires are known to have perfect memories.”

“Well, shit!” Isaiah sniffed, “Good with humans, married to a royal, fearless child maker and hung like a horse? I better mind my manners. A vampire with all of that could end up being king of us all!”
They laughed, but Russell found himself thinking, ‘It wouldn’t surprise me.’

Bon Temps

Sookie couldn’t think what woke her up; she squinted at the clock on the bedside table. It was almost five thirty in the morning. The sun was rising. She rolled over, hugging Eric’s pillow, searching for his scent. Her eyes closed and she dreamed she heard talking. It was a soft sound, like bees buzzing and it tugged at the edges of her brain.

“Sookie?” Dream Eric called to her. “Sookie? Lover?”

“Stop it! I’m dreaming,” she sighed.

“Wake up, Sookie. There are things I need to tell you before the sun takes me.” Dream Eric became Naked Eric and he was inserting himself into their bed. Sookie sighed and reached out for him. When her fingers were stroking flesh that seemed very real, she took a deep breath and fought against her foggy brain.

“How long was I asleep?” she yawned. It didn’t make sense. Eric was supposed to be gone for days. She wondered if she had fallen into some kind of coma, if this was a side effect of the bonding sickness and she’d lost all that time.

“It’s the same night, Sookie,” he chuckled, and then he said in a more serious tone, “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Now Sookie did open her eyes and her Eric was there, his face glowing softly. The doors to the bed chamber closed. “What happened? Why are you here?” she asked.

“Witches have been blackmailing vampires,” he told her, “I went to investigate. Indira and Rubio found something that suggested the problem started in New Orleans. A witch found a way to remove glamour. Are you listening to me, Min Hustru?”

“Yes,” the telepath scrubbed back her hair and sat up against the backboard. “Witches, glamour, got it.”

“I found her, the witch who started the problem in New Orleans. She has been selling charms to other witches. These charms allow the witches to remove glamour from humans.”

“So what? What happens when they remove the glamour?” Sookie wasn’t sure she was following.

“The witch charges the human to remove the glamour. She makes money that way. Then she collects secrets from them. If she hears something she can use against a supe, a vampire, she goes to the vampire. She uses the knowledge for blackmail. She can collect much money. Some secrets are small. Some are very bad.”

Sookie was wide awake now. “So, what happened then?”

“If the vampire didn’t want the secret revealed, the vampire paid.”

“But what kept the human from telling someone else?” Sookie asked. She could hear her voice getting a little shaky, and she had the feeling something really terrible was coming.

“The witch sold the identity of the human, Lover. The witch stepped aside and allowed the vampire to end the problem that wouldn’t have been a problem if the witch hadn’t interfered in the first place.”
“Why not just re-glamour the human?” Sookie whispered, but she knew the answer before Eric said it.

“Only to have the witch remove the glamour and have to pay twice?” He glanced toward the wall she knew faced east and then leaned toward her, “So I found her…” and he stopped, as if he was unsure what to say next, but Sookie could see his eyes were gleaming.

“I know her, don’t I?” Sookie gulped. Eric nodded, his eyes holding her. “Octavia?” Even as she named Octavia Fant, her once roommate, Sookie knew she wasn’t right.

Eric stroked her cheek as one would gentle a child, “No, Sookie. It was Amelia Broadway.” When Sookie made a noise, Eric took her hand, “She admitted it. She found the secret and she’s been selling it to all comers. There was a stack of envelopes at her door, waiting for the morning mail. Who knows how many of those charms have already been mailed out? I sent Karin to New Orleans to examine the computer to see if we can find her customer list.”

“Where is Amelia, Eric?” Sookie asked. Eric didn’t say anything and then she knew. “Oh my God, Eric! You killed her?” and she choked, her chest clenching. “How could you? You always hated her!”

“She hated us both, Sookie!” Eric said quickly. “She told me she did this to punish us both. She was a bitter person, Alskade! She was not your friend, no more than Claude.”

“So you had to kill her?” Sookie felt nauseous just saying it. “And now you’ve come back to Bon Temps to crawl into bed… why? Did you come all the way back just so you could tell me in person?”

“You need to know all of it, Sookie,” Eric said quietly. “There was another person there. Meg came in. She saw what was done. Amelia had removed her glamour. She remembered things, the donors…”

“So, you just re-glamoured her?” There were tears falling down Sookie’s face now.

“Amelia charmed her. Meg was immune to glamour, like you are,” and Eric waited again. When her face started to crumble, he pulled his wife into his arms. Sookie stayed there for a moment, her hand curled against him and he thought she might accept this, but in another minute, she struck her hand against his chest and then pushed him away.

“How do you expect me to live with this, Eric? These are women I know, women I liked. I’m supposed to what? Accept it? Be okay with it?”

“I have only moments, Sookie,” Eric pleaded. “Day is coming. Please, Lover. Please keep an open mind until I rise. Charles and the Weres can’t help. They have been glamoured. It is possible someone will come tomorrow while I rest.”

“Someone?” and Sookie took another breath, the bands around her chest tightening, “The police? That’s why you came home, isn’t it! So I could lie for you?” and Sookie realized she was at the crossroads she had dreaded. Her husband was telling her he had killed humans. He was telling her he had followed the laws of the Supe world and done what was expected. Now she would need to decide if she would hold him to human rules and turn him into the authorities, or if she would find a way to accept this for what it was and cover for him. “Oh, Eric!” she sobbed, and in that moment, he was gone.

He fell down, all animation stolen, the glow extinguished. She could still see his quiet face, his
profile so pure, making him look so young and innocent. “You dick!” she said out loud, and
smacked his shoulder in frustration. Not knowing what to do, Sookie leaned back against the
headboard, drawing her knees up and laying her cheek down. Her sleepiness was gone. She stomped
her foot on the bed, and then stamped both feet before turning to yell, “You left me alone with this?!”
at Eric’s still form.

It really was too early to be up and around, but Sookie couldn’t stay in the bed with Eric anymore, so
she took her pillow and the quilt and headed downstairs. Once she was in their family room, she
propped the pillow on the couch, and lay back down. “Oh Meg,” she whispered before sleep
reclaimed her.

It really was hours later when Sookie opened her eyes. The quilt had fallen off her feet and her toes
felt like ice cubes. Sookie shivered, but knew it was more than her body being chilled. She felt
chilled all the way to her soul. “What you doing down here?” Owen looked surprised as he walked
into the family room, and he turned on his heel and walked right back into the kitchen.

“When did Charles get back?” Sookie asked. She knew she shouldn’t, but she felt she needed to test
how things were.

“Where did he go?” Owen asked, and Sookie could see he really was confused. Her heart fell
further.

“Wow,” she said and sniffed a little, “It must have been a dream. I thought he went somewhere,” and
she plastered her Crazy Sookie smile on her face. “I’ll be headed out today,” she knew her voice
sounded strained, but she did her best to look normal as she headed up the back stairs. She had to
stop at the top to steady herself. She saw the closed doors to their bed chamber. She didn’t want to
see him, so she dropped the quilt and pillow on a chair and walked through to the closet to get
clothes. It didn’t take long to get back downstairs, only to find both Charles and Owen chatting as if
nothing had happened. ‘Good thing they can’t read my mind,’ Sookie thought, ‘cause I’m screaming
on the inside!’ She kept her smile plastered in place as she accepted the cup of coffee and refused the
offer of breakfast.

“Where were you thinking of heading out today?” Owen asked her.

“I told Hoyt and Holly I’d stop by Maxine’s,” Sookie replied. These were standing plans and both
Weres would know that, “And after that, I was thinking I’d like to stop by the church for a bit.”
Sookie felt the need of some time sitting alone in a restful place. The thought of the pew, the feeling
of the light spilling through the stained glass window, warm and full of the memory of her Gran,
called to her.

“Oh,” Charles looked mildly curious, “Something going on over at the Church?” It had been awhile
since Sookie had attended services and she thought the last time she just went to sit had probably
been before she was married. She could understand Charles’ surprise.

As Sookie started to put together an explanation that wouldn’t raise suspicions, she realized she was
staring at the guard a little harder than she should have. In the back of her mind, she wondered if
somewhere inside he knew he’d been glamoured and if that bothered him. When Charles’ eyes
turned puzzled, she caught herself, “Nope, nothing special. Guess it was that dream I had. I’d just
like to sit a little and talk with Gran.”

Within the hour, Sookie was at Maxine’s. Sookie was settled in the back office looking over the
books while Holly Fortenberry hustled out front, setting up silverware, and talking with the
waitresses. There were two cooks in the kitchen most days now and they were making noise as they got ready for today’s lunch crowd. Sookie couldn’t help looking around at this place that had been Sam’s office for so many years; Sam’s office, and then her office, and now Holly’s office. She bit her lip and turned back to the column of figures in front of her. According to what she was seeing, business had picked up quite a bit, and she was happy for the Fortenberrys.

Holly walked in, wiping her hands on her apron, “How things looking?”

“Well, the changes you suggested have all worked out,” Sookie replied. “You should be real proud. You really are making a go of this.” Sookie quizzed Holly about waste for the week and how to arrange menus to minimize what spoiled, and they went over the deliveries schedule again. When they were done, Sookie closed the book and started to stand up.

“There’s something I think I should tell you,” Holly said the words quickly, and then looked down before meeting Sookie’s eyes. When Sookie didn’t say anything, Holly said, “You know I dabbled with witchcraft a while ago, before I married Hoyt.”

“I do,” Sookie nodded, but inside, Sookie was chanting, “Pleasenopleasenopleasenopleasenoplease!”

“I heard from Amelia Broadway a few nights ago. I meant to call you and tell you, but I kind of wanted to wait until I could talk with you face to face,” and Sookie could hear her. Holly had always been a clear broadcaster and she was nervous Sookie would think she was mixed up with Amelia. Something her former roommate had said to Holly had really upset the younger woman.

“She started asking all kinds of questions about you… you and Eric. She wanted to know when you came here and how long you stayed. I told her I didn’t know you well enough to know the answers to any of her questions, but she got mad at me,” and Holly’s eyes dropped again. “She told me I’d better get the answers for the next time she called or I’d be sorry, and then,” and Holly wiped a tear from her face, “she said Hoyt and Cody would pay if I didn’t do like she said.”

Sookie wasn’t sure where her sense of calm came from but before she knew it, she was standing next to Holly and rubbing her arm. “Now don’t you worry about it,” she heard herself saying, “The next time Amelia calls, you tell her she can come and ask me her questions direct. I can’t imagine why she’d think she needed to call my friends!” and Sookie smiled and shrugged as if she didn’t have a care in the world. “That Amelia! She always was a little flighty!”

Holly didn’t look convinced. “Sookie, I don’t think you should take this lightly,” she told the telepath. “Amelia didn’t sound friendly. I try to stay away from witches these days, but I still hear things. There are some covens who are trying to stir trouble between humans and vampires, bad trouble. Amelia is in deep with them. You and Eric have been good to us,” and Sookie could hear Holly’s sincerity, “I just think you should watch your back. Eric, too.”

“Thanks, Sweetie,” Sookie hugged her briefly, and just that contact screamed Holly’s concern through her, jangling her nerves, and making her draw a shaky breath.

Sookie struggled to keep her smile firmly in place. “Holly, I’m sure it will all be fine. You know how careful we are. Hell, Owen’s sitting right out there waiting for me!” and Sookie picked up her purse, “Now, I’ll just get out of your way. From the looks of things, you get pretty busy for lunch. You don’t need your landlord looking over your shoulder. Someone will stop by later for the tray.”
Sookie made it a practice to order a tray of prepared food from Maxine’s at least once a week when she was in town. Between the boys who came over to care for the horses and the guards, nothing ever went to waste. Sookie was pretty sure tonight would be fried chicken, a big favorite.

When Holly still looked worried, Sookie added, “Thank you for being our friend. We will take care.
Promise!” and Sookie hugged the woman before heading through the hallway and back into the front of the restaurant where Owen was waiting for her.

As he walked her to the car, he asked, “Where to next?”

“Like I told Charles this morning, I’d like to stop by my Church for a little visit.”

“Sure thing, Mistress,” Owen said, laying it on a little thick for the few clients that were walking past them.

Sookie shook her head. She didn’t say another word until he pulled the car up to the double doors of the white church. As she stepped out, she said, “Owen, would you mind waiting out here? I’ll just be inside, I promise.” The Were nodded. She could ‘hear’ him wondering whether Sookie was feeling all right. He was thinking about his wife during her pregnancy and the odd things she craved, but he smiled and said nothing.

The first thing that struck her as Sookie walked inside was the quiet. The sun was out and the light was shining through stained glass to fall across her Gran’s pew. It looked like every memory Sookie had of this place. She sat down in her Gran’s place and closed her eyes, turning her face so she could feel the heat of the sun’s rays. She sat still, her hands clasped in her lap, leaning back a little. She thought about Meg, both the young woman who had befriended her in her first days in New Orleans and the woman who stood behind the barricades, her face a mask of hate. It made no sense, but Sookie had learned that lesson long ago. People changed. They liked you one day, and then something happened. Maybe it was circumstances, maybe it was because you were different or you believed in different things. You woke up to find that everything you believed had changed and your friend was now your enemy. Sookie felt a tear slip over her cheek. She knew she was emotional, but she couldn’t help it. “It’s all those damn injections!” she whisper-hissed out loud.

There was the sound of a door opening and she opened her eyes to see the Reverend Collins step in through a side door. He had something in his hand that he set down near the pulpit. As he turned, he saw her and his eyes lit up, “Sookie!” He kept his voice low as he walked forward. When he saw her face a little more fully, his smile fell a little. Sookie could ‘hear’ him wondering about her. He wondered if she was fighting with her husband.

“No, Eric and I are fine!” the telepath said out loud. She knew right away she’d startled him. It had been a little mean to respond to his thoughts. That kind of thing always bothered humans so Sookie said, “Sorry,” and meant it.

“No, not at all,” the pastor said, but she could see he was still flustered. “I am glad to hear it, though. I would hate to think all my hard work in marrying the two of you went for nothing!” and he winked before asking, “Would you mind if I joined you?”

Sookie moved over a bit and the Reverend Collins sat next to her. “I am surprised to see you here.” She knew he could see her wet face, so she explained, “I’m not really this upset. It’s hormones,” and then she blushed because she’d just said ‘hormones’ to her pastor.

“It’s okay,” he said and patted her knee, “I know what hormones are,” and then he said, “Are you sure that’s all that’s bothering you?”

Sookie was so tempted to tell him. She could see herself spilling all of it; Meg, Amelia, the killings, and the cover-up, but she didn’t need to think more than two seconds to know it was a terrible idea. Instead she asked, “Do you always stand up for Mrs. Collins, even when you think she’s wrong?” It was a silly question since Sookie couldn’t ever imagine the balding Reverend Collins and his
rounded, grey-haired wife hunting down witches and killing them.

“My wife is my rock,” the Reverend Collins said quietly. “It is rare we don’t agree, so I don’t have
the worries you describe. Now, it wasn’t always so apparent to me that we were in agreement,
especially when we were first married. I would think she was wrong-headed or working against me
and I would try my hardest to set her straight. It was frustrating for both of us, I assure you!” Sookie
had a pretty good idea that ‘frustrating’ was code for fighting, although she couldn’t imagine these
two fighting with each other either.

“After a time, an interesting thing happened,” the older man looked back into the Church, the light
falling across his face, “I realized that when she was fighting me or being confrontational, she wasn’t
doing it to work against me. She was doing her best to support me, to have me be my best self. She
was willing to fight with me and let me hurt her feelings to make me a better person, and I was the
one who was too hard-headed to see it. I realized then that although she loved me, that was only a
small part of the gift she gave. You see, I realized that my wife would always put me first. She would
even disagree with me, but, in the end, she was doing it for me, because that’s what friends, best
friends do. And what is your mate except your best friend?”

Sookie found herself thinking about Niall’s visit yesterday, how he’d told her how proud he was that
she was learning to stand with her husband.

It wasn’t a whole answer and the memory of Meg’s face still made her heart ache, but there was
something about what the Reverend Collins said. Sookie thought that her heart might ache less at
home, so she said her goodbyes and walked back outside to find Owen waiting to drive her back to
Hummingbird Lane.

When they pulled into the yard, Sookie could see that the boys were there, JC and Robert duRone.
They were in the barn shoveling manure and teasing Sarah who had come with them. Sarah dropped
the carrots she was feeding the horses to help her ‘Aunt’ Sookie with a tray of iced tea and cookies.
“No Bit?” Sookie asked.

“Not today, Aunt Sookie,” JC confirmed. “He got himself in big trouble by stacking things in the
baby’s crib. He told Momma that Michael Eric was too pushy and it was best to hide him for awhile.
Momma said he needed some time to get his attitude straight and he was sitting in the corner chair
when we left.”

Sookie smiled, her hand moving almost automatically to her abdomen. ‘Two weeks,’ she thought. In
two weeks they would be taking her in to remove eggs. In three weeks they could be starting the
clock to see if she would become pregnant. She looked again at the young people. This could be her
life, her life with Eric, and she knew she’d mostly made up her mind about what she would do.
Sookie headed inside and took the stairs two at a time. When she rounded the corner to the
bedchamber, she slipped inside, and then crawled up on the bed until she was lying beside her dead
husband.

“Eric Northman,” she said, laying her hand on his cheek and speaking as if he was sleeping and not
truly dead, “You are mine!” and she kissed him. Somehow, it was enough.
Chapter 12 - Promises Fair

Chapter Notes

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Jackson

“I have to congratulate you,” the tall, skeletal, red-headed publicist drawled, her New York accent making her seem just a little taller, “You made the right decision. Calling me was the best thing you could have done under the circumstances.” She finger-waved to Brock, her assistant, “Come along!”

As she stood at the door, waiting for Brock to pull it out of her way, she turned and said, “I’ll be in touch with a proposal within the week. Ciao, ciao!” Brock brazenly winked at the Kings, and, with a click of high heels, the door closed, leaving the room feeling as though a vacuum had suddenly sucked it dry.

Bartlett settled back a bit before glancing at his mate, “Rusty, do you think we’ve made a mistake?”

“No, Bartie,” Russell grinned, “No, I don’t. I think Cruella and her flying monkey are exactly what we need!”

Bartlett nodded. He was feeling better about this having seen how the woman had prepared for this initial meeting.

Maude made the recommendation. When they called Minnesota, they asked to speak with Pam Ravenscroft. Since Pam was in the entertainment business, they thought her the most logical choice to advise them, but Pam had not been in the Palace, Maude didn’t leave it at that. She wheedled the reason for their call from them and then announced, “Oh, you don’t need to ask Pam! I know exactly you who want!”

Maude went on to describe the publicist, Twy, in glowing terms. She described her history with Eric Northman and how Pam was so impressed with the woman’s ability to pull off minor miracles that she hired her to work on the ground floor of her new events planning venture, the one Pam launched under the Fangtasia brand. Maude assured them the woman and her work were brilliant, and she gave them Eric’s name as a reference. The Kings had met Twy before. They knew she was arranging things for Bill Compton at the upcoming Moshup Summit, but this was the first time she would be working for them directly. “If she’s all that,” Bart had asked, “Then why would Pam part with her?”

“Trouble in paradise,” Maude sniffed. “There was a personal relationship, but you know Pam. Pam is ready to move on, but who lets Pam go gracefully? I know you won’t make the same mistake of playing with your food. Stay out of her bed and out of her vein and I think you’ll be thrilled with the result.”

Within 24 hours of their call, the publicist was in their study in Jackson, projection board in place, and a clicker in her hand. Her grasp of their situation, and the way she demonstrated that knowledge
Twy started by recapping the current status of vampires, and Bartlett Crowe personally in Indianapolis, and then Indiana in general. She accurately identified the key players in the local Witness movement and those local politicians and authorities who were either actively supporting the Witnesses or passively allowing them to harass vampires. Twy moved on to recap the Kings’ history in the community. She, or her assistant, had done a lot of homework. They had pictures and facts that went back over a hundred years, from when Bartlett had first taken over as King. She documented the donations he made to universities and the new businesses he started that employed state citizens. “That’s one thing you people do that no one else does,” Twy smirked, “You vampires keep it in the states. You don’t outsource!” When Russell asked why that was important, Twy pointed out that places that were dependent on manufacturing, like Gary and Indianapolis, had suffered when those jobs moved overseas. “You provide steady, predictable employment for humans. You make a difference. You are the best-kept secret in this country!”

She presented a listing of the more well-known of Bartlett Crowe’s business holdings, his auto parts design and manufacturing operations. She had statistics including tax revenue and how many people he employed. She had some information on how many were employed elsewhere because there were jobs in Bartlett’s businesses, including shipping companies and assembly plants across the state border. “Vampires are investors in those, too, aren’t they?” Twy asked. The King told her about his minority ownership in those firms. Isaiah held the largest share in the assembly plants. “See?” she said triumphantly, “and no one knows this! By fighting against you, humans are literally biting the hand that feeds them! You guys are as American as apple pie!”

Bartlett had rolled his eyes as the publicist ladled it on thick, but Russell patted his hand, silently asking his patience.

Twy went on to talk about some of Bartlett’s more private holdings. She knew about his foundation work and his contributions to both Engineering and Graphic Design Departments at state universities. She had names and outcomes of students that had benefited from a scholarship program Bartlett personally funded. “And no one knows about this, either!” she said as if the King should feel badly about not making the public aware.

Twy moved on to talk about state demographics. She painted a picture of Indiana as a place with a long history of self-determination and hard work. “This is the Crossroads of America,” she declared, using the state’s motto, “a place where everyone meets. That implies that this is a place you wish to be, but that is not the vampire experience at the moment, and it goes against everything the state stands for. Something drastic happened, but people are so caught up in the moment, they can’t see that it is not vampires that are the danger, it’s the new criminal element, and you are the only one who is standing up and offering to help.”

Twy ran a short clip of Bartlett that had seen very little air time in which he asked for a partnership between police, government, and vampires to address the rogues and the damage they were doing to their community. When the clip ended, Twy turned, “I really think there is a story to tell here!” and she flashed forward to a montage of Bartlett, Russell, and then pictures of the two of them together.

“This is a story about a loving couple who have dedicated themselves to living quietly and respectfully within their community. This is a couple who doesn’t try to hide what they are, but are mindful of the sensibilities of others.” Twy had photos of the two of them at benefit events. There was a photo of them applauding the Fishers High School Debate Team at a regional meet. There was another photo of the two of them attending a meeting of their local Jaycees. There was a photo of Bartlett handing a gavel to his human successor at a Business Chamber meeting. They were both smiling and shaking hands. In another photo, Bartlett was applauding at an affair where there were a
great number of uniformed police in attendance. “You have gone above and beyond to fit into your community. You have brought jobs that pay a living wage and you have made an effort to improve things for everyone. What sets you apart from most vampires is that we can show you interacting with humans. I don’t know if you are really such Dudley Do-Rights, or if you are doing it to scout out dinner, and it’s none of my business. These photos and your history here will let us sell you as someone who is just plain folks, oh, and who happens to be a vampire.”

Twy flashed pictures of the Fishers Renaissance Faire. There were smiling people looking at the lighting the vampires had contributed, and photos of the Kings in costume surrounded by some of the actors who played parts during the festival. “Sure, you have a fun-loving side, but all in all, you are conservative. You support clean, fun, family-oriented events. You have money and you own businesses, but you don’t live in a way that pushes it in your neighbors’ faces. Even though you don’t have children of your own, you provide support so that the children in your community have a better chance,” and then Twy turned to them and said, “You don’t feed from children, do you? I’m not going to find some kind of sordid, sex scandal lurking to derail all this?”

Bartlett flashed a quick look at Russell. He knew his mate had run a kind of floating boy toy party for years here in Jackson. Once they married that had stopped, but it wouldn’t surprise either of them to find out minors had been involved. “Nothing in Indiana.” Bartlett confirmed. “I am pretty much all those things you say, conservative and quiet. I do have a donor pool,” and he glanced at Russell again, “but those people are adults and they chose this. I haven’t… well I don’t know anyone who sources their pools by abduction anymore.”

Bartlett had anticipated the New Yorker would react negatively to that bit of news, but instead she just nodded, glanced at her assistant, and said, almost to herself, “I’ll need the dates and more background. We should be able to finesse that without looking like we’re hiding something.”

When she turned back to them, she said, “I think we sell the idea that you are strawberries and fresh air! When bad guys moved into your neighborhood, you did the all-American thing. You sounded the alarm and you offered your help. You were willing to stand up against the criminal element in your own community, but what did it get you? You found yourselves unfairly labeled a criminal, too, just because you happen to be vampires.

“Well,” Twy concluded, “I don’t know how a state that contributed so many of its native sons to this nation’s wars could be so short-sighted. Like those warriors of the past, you were ready to sacrifice yourself to fix this, and a few small-minded people just threw that offer back in your face!

“We are going to tell the story of a couple who has tried to do everything right, a couple whose efforts resulted in their being made a target of the worst kind of prejudice. We talk about how you’ve rolled your sleeves up and succeeded through good, old-fashioned hard work. Where you have donated you’ve done it anonymously, not insisting that your name be on the building, or by flashing around big money. That’s important out here. These are people who respect people who work hard. They don’t like glory hounds and braggarts.

“I have assembled a list of those people in positions of influence that I think could be of the most help.” She had names, titles, and contact information of humans across the state. “We start with personal outreach before we start public appeals. If we can get some of these folks to stand beside you on television, it should go a long way to making these humans stop and think about what they’re doing.” When she hit the last slide, she rocked back on her heels and waited.

Bartlett had lived in Indiana for a long time. While his time walking openly as himself was recent, only since the Great Revelation, he had formed an opinion about the people who came and stayed in Indiana. They had been farmers at first, willing to work long hours and face the uncertainty and
hardships that entailed. They formed great cities and built factories that made metals and machines. Stubborn and quietly proud were words the vampire associated with Indiana and he was impressed at how the publicist had captured that spirit.

Now, with Twy gone, Bartlett looked at his mate. Russell said very little during the presentation, and now he appeared to be waiting for Bartlett to start, so he did. “Okay, this might work, but she is going to try and package us up to look like that couple on the television show.”

“You mean “Modern Family?’” and Russell nodded, “She will want to sell the gay couple angle. It admits we are different, but in a more acceptable way. The other ‘little’ difference that we also happen to be vampire, can get shuffled a little lower on the radar. It makes it more acceptable to humans that way,” and Russell looked at the bottle of blood in his hand. He started toying with the label.

“What?” Bartlett caught him out. “I can tell something is bothering you, Rusty. Out with it!”

Russell knew that once they were made to look like the poor, misunderstood gay couple, it would be difficult to maintain their leadership of Amun Clan. Vampires would understand the need for using humans by creating stories, but the portrait of victim, in other words, weak, that this woman would paint would be convincing. They would have enough trouble enforcing their wills within their states while keeping it out of the public eye. It would do no good to spend time and money to create this fantasy, only to have it undone by an unexpected power play or forceful word. Holding onto their kingdoms would be challenging enough without having to worry about the Clan as well.

Both the Kings knew they would likely find themselves the butt of jokes for some time to come, but instead of saying what needed to be said, that Bartlett needed to step down as Clan Chief, Russell said, “Do you suppose she will make us dress in pastels and plaids?”

Bartlett rolled his eyes, “I suppose she will insist on turning us into Ken dolls. I don’t know what you’re complaining about. You look wonderful in pastels. They make me look sallow,” and then Bartlett shook his head, “Besides, that’s not what you really want to say. You want to tell me that I should hand over my role as Clan Chief until this thing blows over,” and Bartlett gave his mate an arch look.

Russell couldn’t hide his look of surprise, “Bartie! How did you know…?”

“Like you could hide anything from me!” The Indiana King walked over to sit on the arm of the chair. He wrapped his arm around Russell’s shoulders and kissed the top of his head. “You really are a terrible secret keeper! I’ve been watching you wrestle with this for weeks.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Russell asked.

“Because I wanted to see how long it would take you to work up the nerve,” and Bartlett hugged him. “Rusty, don’t you know that you never need to be afraid to discuss anything with me?”

“I didn’t want to hurt you, Love,” Russell said softly and then turned his face to kiss Bart. “Don’t you know you are the most important thing to me?”

“Well, aren’t we just the most precious couple?” Bart chuckled.

“Well, yes, Bart, I believe we are,” Russell chuckled, too, and then he pulled Bartlett into his lap so he could more fully claim his husband’s mouth. When Bartlett pulled back, leaning his forehead against Russell’s, the Mississippi King asked, “So, do you want me to call, or will you do it?”

“Northman is the only logical choice,” Bartlett sighed.
“I agree,” Russell nodded.

Bartlett sighed again, “Do you think she will make us pretend to like children or adopt mindless animals?”

“Stop stalling!” and Russell pushed Bart to his feet. “Go get it over with, and then we can head upstairs. I could find all the places your ego is bruised and kiss them all better.”

“Oh, well, if there’s a reward involved!” and Indiana kissed Russell’s forehead before he fished his phone from his pants pocket. “I love you, Rusty,” he said.

“I know,” Russell Edginton replied.

Lafayette

Thierry’s day man bowed and then walked out of the room, pulling the door closed behind him. The Sheriff stared at the envelope. He didn’t need to see the crest to know who sent it. Most vampires today embraced the electronic age. They texted and surfed the net. They bought and sold electronically, they face-timed and Skyped. Only the oldest among them, and those few who affected to appear old, held firm to the old ways. ‘I wonder if she saw it,’ he thought, and had the question answered in the next moment when Thalia walked into the study.

“You have a healthy correspondence,” the small vampire observed.

“I am fortunate in the interest of my former employers,” he answered, skirting the real question and proposing a possible answer.

“Of course, you have informed your current King of your former’s continued interest,” and Thalia met Thierry’s eye. The French vampire knew he had a choice. He could lie, which would make her attack him, or he could tell her everything. Thierry knew either option was a gamble, but only one gave him the possibility of avoiding certain final death.

“I have encouraged the New York monarch’s correspondence,” he said evenly, never dropping his gaze. “I have given him the impression that I am willing to spy for him. I have assured him that if I see something of interest I will pass it along.”

“And what have you offered that keeps him coming back?” Thalia was stepping to the side, her words slow, her head tilted, capturing the Sheriff in a raptor’s stare. Thierry had been in danger many times, but nothing compared to the chill he felt now under this vampire’s gaze.

“I gave him information about the fallout between Pam and the Master. I told Misha of the slowing of the nomads in Louisiana. I told him of the actions of the Witnesses and the problems we are having with witches.” Thierry remained perfectly still, even when Thalia stepped out of his span of vision. She was behind him now. It was everything he had not to turn or flinch. He hoped by standing his ground she would understand he had nothing to hide.

“What else?” she purred in his ear and he did jump, and then cursed himself for his weakness. “What else do you tell this great friend of yours? Do you tell him how much you miss him? Perhaps you think he will help you with some great ambition?” Cool fingers closed over the side of his neck. She need only twist and he would be finally dead. “You sleep with a Queen. You correspond with a King not your own. I find that vampires who play the game of kings wish a crown for themselves. Is that what you seek, Frenchman?”

‘She knows!’ he realized. She might not know everything, but she knew enough. “Yes,” he said steadily, focusing his gaze on a particularly fine piece of crystal, thinking that if he had to choose one
last thing to see in this unlife, it should be beautiful. “I do wish a crown. I wish to rule, but far from here, and not for the reasons you might think.”

The hand stilled and he counted, ‘One, two, three,’ before she hissed so close to his ear, “Good, little Sheriff. It appears you can still tell a truth when you wish.” The hand withdrew and it was everything he could do not to collapse. Thalia moved back into his field of vision. “And you have pulled your King’s other Sheriff into your ambitions?”

“No one knows I wish to take New York,” Thierry said out loud. “He knows my reasons and understands my resolve. He has made it clear that his first duty is to the North Man,” and Thierry drew himself up before he added, “As is mine.” When Thalia sneered he explained, “I wish to make the Viking my ally. I wish to demonstrate my skills and my worthiness. When the time comes, I will ask for his support.”

“You would place him and his kingdom in danger!” she hissed.

Thierry lifted the heavy envelope that rested in his hands, “Misha already places my King in danger!” he countered. “These nomads who have ravaged us, endangering our relations with the humans? I know they are tied to New York.”

“What proof do you have?” Thalia leaned forward, less threatening, more interested.

“None,” and he could see her eyes turn cold again, “but I know it is there. Their point of origin is within his borders. Indiana has been particularly hard hit…”

“What does that have to do with it?” she challenged.

“Misha hates Bartlett Crowe,” Thierry nodded. “It is too much of a coincidence.”

“And you caused that problem?” Thalia asked. Her voice was soft now, a snake once more, waiting for an excuse to strike. Thierry rocked back and gathering himself, he told her the story. He told of his relationship with the King, how Misha kept him close for his laughter and his sense of play. He spoke of how their friendship grew stronger and how Misha sent him to Indiana, a spy in the form of a gift. He told Thalia about how Bartlett nearly destroyed him, crushing bones and ripping limbs, before sending him back to New York.

“Misha was angry,” Thierry stated, refusing to allow emotion to color his words. “After Misha punished me for my failure, he swore to me that Bartlett would be sorry. He said that maybe I should wear Bartlett’s crown.” Thierry’s eyes dropped, “I told him it was not possible, because my Maker lived.” Thalia hissed. When Thierry raised his head, he felt his blood tears spill.

“I had no idea my words would have such consequences. He found her, my Maker, and he killed her before me. He told me he was freeing me for my destiny.” Thierry drew himself straighter. “And, Thalia, he was right. Every step I have taken from that day has been to find a way to destroy Misha. It will be that bastard’s dust that will be my dance floor, his fangs will dangle from my wrist! That is my destiny!”

“And where does Nabila fit into this great plan of yours?” the small vampire asked.

“She represents money,” he said smoothly. “She is a Clan Chief, a means to an end, no more.”

Thalia nodded, but Thierry could see she didn’t wholly believe him, but why should she? He didn’t wholly believe himself. “And you would recruit Thomas into this disaster?” and her eyes narrowed.

“Thomas is my brother,” Thierry nodded. “As I said, he has told me his first allegiance belongs to
our King, but he will help me if there are no conflicts.” When Thalia continued to stare at him he added, “Karin also knows of this. She pledged her talents.”

“What you do with your ambitions better be on your own time!” she hissed. “It’s thin, this suspicion of yours, but if you’re right, then Misha presents a danger to our King,” and she waited to allow what she was saying to sink in. “But if I find that your side project is to the detriment of this kingdom, I will end you. Since you have so conveniently told me you have no Maker, I won’t have to worry about paying retribution, except to your King.” She leaned into him, “You swore your fealty to Eric Northman, and you would do well to remember that! Your first priority is to his safety and that includes making sure his progeny are safe. Karin is rash. If you steer her into harm’s way, know it will be me you answer to first and the Viking next.”

Thierry nodded, and then looked again at the envelope in his hand. “Thalia?” he asked, “If you are so faithful, why have you abandoned him?”

Thalia sneered, “Who says I have?”

“He believes it,” Thierry persisted. “I traveled with him recently. He does not speak of it openly, but it is between every word. He wonders what he did to offend you, why you avoid him now.”

“My motives are none of your business,” Thalia smiled. It was a hard, cruel smile, one that made him feel colder. “But I have not abandoned him. I am doing what is necessary, staying near, but not too close. In time, all will be revealed, but believe me. There is purpose.” Thalia rocked back on her heels, that same smile playing across her face, “And know this, little Sheriff, never doubt my loyalty to Eric Northman. I will stand with him until the mountains are dust and you are one more faded memory to our kind.” When Thierry nodded, Thalia glanced at the envelope, “Now, open it, Sheriff. Let’s see what your victim has to say to you.”

Thierry smiled, that open, sardonic smile that gnawed at Thalia, and with a flourish and a bow, he held the envelope out to her, “If you will do the honors, Ma Dame!”

Thalia sneered at him for a moment, and then jerked the thick, heavy paper from his outstretched hand. “This isn’t making points with me,” she hissed.

“I think it did,” he replied and then straightened, rocked back on his heels, and crossed his arms, “He tends to ask direct questions. Last time he asked whether Bubba was real.”

“What did you tell him?” Thalia asked as she pulled out the single card.

“That Bubba was a myth until you heard him sing,” Thierry answered in an equally distracted way. Thalia’s brow furrowed. “He asks if the rumors that Pam Ravenscroft came from an upper class family are true.”

“Is that all?” Thierry asked, and Thalia flipped the card around so the vampire could see the writing as clearly as she did.

“Does he code or cipher other messages?” she asked.

“No,” Thierry shook his head. “He does not. He feels that messages delivered through any means should be crafted to be read in an audience. If he has a message for ears only, he contrives a way to send a messenger.”

“And has he?” Thalia asked him point blank.
“No,” Thierry responded, ‘Not yet,’ he thought.

New York

“Pull up the interior on the camera. I wish to see the rooms.” Misha waved the woman holding the laptop closer to the bathtub. She was using her finger on the touchpad to bring the images into focus.

“All the oriental elements have been removed,” the voice of the designer came through the feed. “Fortunately, the former tenant retained the original woodwork and cabinetry. The house was built for a family with strong ties to the shipping industry. There are many small embellishments and details that are most charming.”

“Tranh was nothing more than an opium whore who rose from her ashes,” Misha said dismissively. “I didn’t expect that her tastes would be acceptable.” Misha jerked his chin and a young man extended his arm. The King licked twice to numb him, then bit and sipped. He didn’t require much, and the blood from the donor was acceptable if not extraordinary. With a wave, he dismissed the donor, turning his attention back to the screen. “Show me the master bedroom,” he instructed. The image moved chaotically as the person following the decorator climbed stairs. One flight, and then two, and a room painted in buff with dark wood trim was revealed. The bed was a large canopy affair, “It’s not the original?” Misha asked, half joking.

“Actually, it is,” the decorator nodded. “We found the headboard and footboard stored in the basement. As soon as I saw it I knew that it had been created specifically for this space. Look at how perfectly it is proportioned for the ceiling…” the decorator continued, rhapsodizing about first one detail and then another. The furniture was created by famous New England builders; the rugs were antique Persian.

“It will do,” the King interrupted, and then signaled to have the feed terminated. He turned to Carlo, “You can give my suite at the Colonnade to our Clan Chief, my gift to honor her visit to my city. Have my things moved to my new Beacon Hill residence.” He smiled, and turning to the woman charged with making arrangements for his contingent at the Moshup Summit. “Oh, and inform Pam Ravenscroft that she is welcome to come to my city so far in advance. She will be my guest, and have her taken to the Beacon Hill house.”

Carlo chuckled, “You don’t think she will protest?” Pam had sent back his last two gifts.

“Of course she will,” Misha chuckled, too. “Tell her that I will not stay in the residence unless she invites me.”

“Are you sure you want to give up your suite, Majesty?” his organizer asked. “Accommodations are becoming difficult to arrange. I wouldn’t…”

“You worry too much!” he chided her. “I will have a place to stay. Did you make the other arrangements?”

The woman nodded, “The Chamber Music Society will perform the selections you requested. The Boston Symphony Hall has been secured for the evening. There will be the one table. You will be quite alone. Once the concert is concluded, you will be taken across the street to the Museum of Fine Arts. A private viewing of the Textiles and Costume collection is arranged, and the Monet gallery will be open just for you.”

Misha nodded, “Good, good. Take care of the details yourself. I want yellow roses in the residence and on the table during the performance.” Misha nodded. It would be enjoyable, spending a night with a companion who appreciated such things. “Now, take me through the Summit agenda.”
The woman nodded and opened her portfolio. There was an official ‘unofficial’ event the first night for a private showing of “Viking’s Bond.” This was the romantic movie based on Bill Compton’s books. The human stars of the movie would be there. There would be cameras and carpets, interviews and an after party. According to advance reviews, the movie was acceptable. No one was talking about awards or Oscars, but it was hoped it would capture the young female audience. The official opening would be in Rhodes in five months’ time.

After that, activities would fall into the usual way these things ran. Business meetings were held the first night. Kingdom business and Clan business were conducted the second night. There were no trials or pledgings this Summit, so the Ball on the last night would be thinly attended. Misha intended to sit in on the business presentations for the sex club franchise. He knew Pam was involved. Her partner, Felipe de Castro, would be in Boston. While the Kings ran in the same circles and even competed on some deals, Misha had never met the Nevada King. The Summit of Clan Chiefs on the witch problem was the second night. Misha smiled. As the host King, he was entitled to sit in that session. He wondered who else he would see there.

When the woman left, Carlo sat in the slipper chair in the corner of the bathroom, “You are quite taken with this Ravenscroft woman.” The King knew his second was asking a question.

“She is special,” the King nodded. “I can’t explain it myself. There is something about her. I have inquired about her background. She is different from most female vampires, Carlo. She is no guttersnipe who had the misfortune of beauty, no whore plucked from the brothel by a vampire’s desire. I believe she comes from aristocracy, perhaps some minor house to a lesser son. It’s in the way she holds herself, the way she speaks. She has the unmistakable stamp of quality. It is… beguiling.” The King said that word without any effort to hide the amazement he was experiencing at his own reaction to her. It was unprecedented. The more she sent back his gifts, the more she politely deflected his suggestions, the more he wished to be with her.

“Enough,” the King announced, and stood up, water streaming from him. Carlo picked up a towel and tossed it to his monarch. “Tell me how our other projects progress,” the King prompted.

“Your friend in Indiana is still licking his wounds. He and his fuck buddy remain in Jackson,” Carlo examined his fingernails. “The Indiana troubles continue. The humans have been ranting on their televisions, but don’t have the balls to do what needs to be done.”

“What are they suggesting? Do they think slapping hands or placing fines will stop blood-thirsty vampires?” and Misha giggled.

Carlo knew this was a sign the King was honestly amused, “Perhaps they will offer them community service next,” he suggested.

“Humans are weak,” Misha agreed, “Monitor the rhetoric. There are vigilante groups starting. I will suggest we form a coalition at the Summit. We will be able to leverage our contacts here in New York and in Washington to form a task force and get a hearing. Once we move in and clean it up we will be one step closer in both directions.”

“Unofficial enforcers for humans and Bartlett Crowe deposed,” Carlo supplied the remainder of the speech he had heard more than once.

“Yes,” Misha’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t like having his speeches trumped. It grated his ego. “What about the Carolinas?”

Carlo dropped his eyes and sketched a half bow, correctly gauging the need for subservience, “The information has been fed to the Witnesses who picket her palace. Our people will ‘stumble’ across
the documents that will spell out how she has been bribing officials and bank executives. I must say, photoshopping is an amazing thing. I would never be able to tell those images were fakes. By the time she gets to the Summit, she’ll be wondering if her house will still be standing when she returns.”

“I will enjoy being Clan Chief,” Misha drew in a deep breath. “King and Clan Chief! Who would have guessed…” and he grew silent, lost in memories of times when he had not been powerful or surrounded by beautiful things. After a moment, he flicked his eyes back to Carlo, “And you are sure no one can trace it?”

“We have been careful, Majesty. All is either by hand or in cash. The only records are kept here.” Misha nodded. He hadn’t survived this long by being rash.

“Any word on who will be in the Amun contingent?” Misha asked.

“Not yet, Majesty,” Carlo replied. “It is possible our friend will be here. The business agenda includes several presentations on solar and wind initiatives. It would be logical that he would be interested. By all reports, Northman continues to favor him and he does well.” Misha smiled. There had been a video that had been intercepted of the French vampire singing alongside the Michigan King. Misha had watched it several times.

“It would be perfect,” Misha had dressed in a robe and soft pants, “He could add to Carolina’s woes by tossing her aside, making her destruction complete.” Misha was aware of Thierry’s affair with Nabila. He knew it was his favored one doing as he had been taught, taking what was offered and waiting for the opportunity to see what advantage it would yield. In this case, the opportunity would be one last stab at Nabila before she would slink back to her sinking reputation. ‘Another piece of gutter trash,’ Misha thought, ‘Not worth the blood that was wasted in making her.’

Misha checked the clock. It was time and he jerked his chin at Carlo, “I am satisfied. You have done well. Now, my friend, I have another appointment.”

Misha walked Carlo downstairs to the front door, and then, once the door was locked, continued down the stairs to the sub-basement. The walls had been dressed simply, but retained their dirt-colored brick texture. It brought back the memories and allowed the King what he needed. In his more self-reflective moments, Misha realized this was a ritual, a reenactment of his own history. The difference was that in his version, the young boy was not left bleeding and broken on the dirt floor. In his version, the boy was already a professional prostitute. They each played their part. Misha played the part of Appius Livius Ocella, an ancient Roman vampire who had come to the city when the Five Corners still functioned as its own kingdom. The part he had played, a scrawny human sold to the highest bidder, was now acted by a succession of boys over the years. They had all been instructed beforehand on what to say, how to act. Each did well, according to their skills.

Misha would walk through the moments, embracing each one through the role play, and then, at the right moment, he would kill the boy, snapping his neck cleanly. He would give the child the release that he had not been given, taking back his control of the situation. It was a freeing moment for him, cathartic.

He did not reenact as often as he once had. He considered that progress in this strange therapy. Still, he didn’t blame the ancient Roman. In fact, he thanked the experience for making him what he was today. There were nights Misha wondered if the Roman had thought him dead, but he knew, somehow, the ancient had known he lived still. He would have heard the ragged heartbeat, the breathing through a throat raw with screaming. He knew now, as he knew then, that Appius Livius Ocella had left him alive for a reason, and now, Misha was fulfilling that destiny.

Bon Temps
The call from the police in New Orleans came the next evening. Eric had already risen. Sookie knew right away it was official business from the way he turned his body from her and dropped his voice lower. When he started moving from the room, she laid her hand on his arm and shook her head. He held her eyes as he said, “Of course my people will cooperate, but I will insist my attorney be present at all interviews. While we have nothing to hide, there have been some ugly things said, and I want an impartial witness.”

“Which one was that about?” Sookie asked when Eric disconnected the line.

“Meg,” he replied. “Lover…”

Sookie shook her head, “Don’t,” she told him. “I’ve had time to think about this. I am not happy about any of it, but I know you, Eric Northman. You are not some savage killer. You did what you needed to do,” and Sookie forced herself to smile, although she knew she wasn’t looking very convincing.

“You mean that, Älskade? You are not blaming me?” and Sookie could see the skepticism. “You are being sarcastic?” and he searched her eyes again.

“No, I am not being sarcastic,” Sookie huffed. “I am your wife, and I…” and Sookie didn’t get any further. She was being crushed against a very happy Viking. He was twirling around and, at some point, she was sure they were a foot off the floor and floating toward the ceiling. When they landed and he let her go it was only to give her the mother of all kisses, and it seemed selfish not to return the favor a little. One thing led to a naked thing and the next time she was coherently thinking, her head was hanging over the edge of the coffee table and her breath was racing her heart.

“You know I love you,” said her husband.

“Uh huh,” Sookie answered, not able to find the strength to raise her head to look at him.

“I don’t know how to say this, Sookie, especially now that you have made me so happy.” Now the telepath did raise her head. She gave her husband the stink eye and he laughed, “It’s just that you smell different.”

“I know,” Sookie sighed. “Grandfather told me it’s the hormones. Once the injections are over, I should return to normal.”

“Good!” and Eric gave her a big, goofy grin. He laid his chin on her belly and stroked her passage slowly with his fingers. Sookie ran her fingers through his hair, but there was something, and then it clicked.

“It’s not just my smell that’s changed, is it?” she asked, and her fingers slowed. “Are you telling me that I don’t taste the same either?”

“It is a little… medicinal,” he chuckled, “and your blood…”

“Cheese and rice!” and Sookie sat up, shaking him from her. “So I’m like making love to a big old medicine cabinet? That’s just great!”

Eric wrestled her back under him, “But it’s temporary, lover, and in a few weeks this part will be over. We will stay in the Shreveport house and visit the clinic more often, and,” the Viking turned his head and nipped the skin next to her navel, “soon you will be smelling even more sweetly. I will be unable to resist, and you will be able to ask anything of me.”

“There’s a possibility it won’t take,” Sookie swallowed. She didn’t want to consider having to do
this all over again.

“No, Sookie,” and Eric’s face had been serious, “It will work. With you, all is possible,” and he had kissed her briefly before drawing her up to move on with their evening.

“I must really stink!” Sookie exclaimed. When Eric’s eyebrows drew together, she explained, “Since when do you stop at once?” Eric laughed, but he hadn’t made any move to get busy again, and Sookie figured she had her answer.

The official visit came two nights later. There was a knock at the door and Charles escorted Alcee Beck and Andy Bellefleur into the front room. The men were detectives on the Bon Temps police force and they knew Sookie and Eric. Andy attended their wedding the year before. Once they were settled with iced tea, Andy said, “I’m so sorry to bother you folks, but I have to ask you a couple questions. There is a woman in New Orleans who is missing. She used to work at the place you all have down there…”

“This is about Meg, isn’t it?” Sookie asked. She was surprised how easily she was able to say it, as if she was truly concerned about the young woman.

“We received a call from the New Orleans police two nights ago,” Eric supplied.

“Yes, Meg and…” and Alcee Beck flipped some pages in his little notebook, “there is another woman, too, Amelia Broadway. Former roommate of yours, isn’t that right, Mrs. Northman? Some folks thought she might be visiting here. Seems she’s gone missing from her home in New Orleans and no one’s seen her in days.”

“Can you tell us where you all were five days ago?” Andy asked, and then he squinted a bit and said, “Oh hell, I’m sorry. I guess I should be saying, five nights ago.”

“It’s no big thing, Andy,” Sookie assured him. “We’ve been here. We traveled up, what, about a week ago, and we’ve been here ever since.”

“So, no side trips to Shreveport or New Orleans,” and Alcee Beck looked at them both in a way that reminded Sookie how much she disliked the detective. She could hear him thinking he wouldn’t believe anything they told him, that between her oddness and Eric’s fangs, they were probably responsible for plenty. There had been inquiries over the years, men and women whose paths led right to his parish and somehow disappeared. Alcee was convinced in his heart that the Witnesses were right and vampires, like the stone cold killer sitting across from him right now, were responsible.

“Nope, no side trips,” Sookie shrugged. “Just hanging around here.” She could feel Eric watching her and she cut her eyes to see him grinning.

The way the Viking was doing it made Sookie blush, but before she could enjoy the moment, Alcee saw it, too. He must have thought it meant something else because he said, “You sure look like you’re guilty of something,” and then he fixed Sookie with his best detective stare.

“My wife and I are making plans to start a family,” Eric said smoothly. “We have to be close to the clinic, which is in Shreveport. In a few weeks we will not be able to have sex, so we are using our time wisely,” and he smirked at Sookie again, making her glow brighter.

“Well, that’s great news!” Andy said a little too enthusiastically. Sookie knew he was uncomfortable with Alcee’s behavior and the situation in general. Eric’s interaction with Jason Stackhouse’s children had made a big impression on Andy. “You all will make wonderful parents and I wish you
the best of luck,” he said, and Sookie could feel his sincerity.

As the police wrapped up their questions and rose to leave, Alcee warned them he might be back. He told them they needed to let him know if they planned to leave town, but Andy Bellefleur let them know it wasn’t too serious when he rolled his eyes behind Alcee’s back.

As the car lights disappeared down the road, Eric wrapped his arm around Sookie, pulling her a little closer as they stood on the front porch. There was movement to their right, and Bubba appeared at the edge of the woods and then walked up to join them. “Think we’ll see those police folks again?” he asked.

“Could be,” Sookie told the formerly famous vampire. “But I think we’re safe for now.”

“Come, Lover,” and Eric kissed her hair briefly, “It is time for training. Tamsin will scold me if you are not showing progress.” Hand in hand they walked to the barn. There was a space cleared out in the central area where Eric and Sookie sparred. Once inside, Eric opened a cabinet and pulled out a dagger which he tossed to this wife. Sookie deftly caught it, a skill she wouldn’t have considered herself capable of only a week before. Each day brought more confidence. Sookie dropped into her stance and waited for Eric’s advance. He wasn’t using weapons, but then again, he didn’t need to. Bubba settled himself on a hay bale and hummed as the couple lunged and feinted. The second time Eric caught her and threw her to the ground, Sookie lost her temper. She was really angry with herself. She realized her mistake a second too late and the thumping was her reward. Still, she could feel her otherness rush forward and she was hissing in frustration.

“Damn, Miss Sookie, that’s as scary as any fairy face I’ve ever seen,” Bubba chuckled. “You make me want to stand up and run!”

Sookie blushed, but Eric scolded, “No Lover! Don’t be embarrassed! If you had shown this part of yourself at the Assizes, they would have fallen on their knees. Never be afraid to show your strength!”

Sookie brushed the hay from her butt, “You really think that? You think if I’d gone all nasty Fae it would have made a difference.”

“Sookie!” and Eric kissed her forehead, “I know it would! Come with me, Lover, and you will see. You will stand by my side at the next Assizes. There is one scheduled before the Summit. There will be an opportunity for you to become angry, and when that happens, I will step back and you will reveal your beautiful face.” When she bit her lip and nodded, Eric leaned in and added, “Oh, and make sure you show them the claws!”
Chapter 13 - Planing Under Sail

Chapter Notes

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Nautical Note: There are times in sailing when the wind is constant and the sea sets up in great, even rollers. On these days, you can set the sails and with a little attention, surf the tops of the waves, the hull of your boat almost totally exposed. It is a fast, frictionless ride, a hiss and rush that makes me laugh, and it’s called ‘planing.’

Minden

The Assizes was held in a warehouse just outside Minden. Because of the continuing problem with orphans, and now the threats the witches were making, Eric moved the location every month with notices going out by text twenty-four hours in advance. Maxwell Lee was in attendance tonight, as was Karin. Eric’s oldest daughter was being called ‘Chief,’ which Sookie knew was short for War Chief. It was an ancient title and one whose history dated back to the wars between the vampires and the Fae, which was ironic, all things considered.

There were the usual disputes to be heard and judged this evening. There were vampires who were encroaching on each other’s declared territory, a woman who was alleging that another vampire had sampled her bonded, violating blood law. Sookie had taken a place just behind Eric’s shoulder, but he pulled her to stand right beside him. Maybe it was Karin’s presence, maybe it was the news of the witches, but everyone was bowing and on their best behavior. That was, until the nest stepped forward.

They were four vampires who had moved into a little town just across the border in Arkansas. As their Sheriff, Thomas had prepared and sent along a report that was read into the proceedings. Initially, these vampires had blended well into their community, but as they became more comfortable in the town, they started pushing boundaries. At first, there were reports of mischief, but then there became more serious reports of mayhem. They had been caught with several local young people, some minors. There had always been rules about these things, but now, with all the unwanted attention vampires were getting, reminders and directives had been delivered. There was to be no molesting of minors, no playing if consent wasn’t confirmed and reconfirmed. Everyone knew that securing donors through the Federal Registry was the party line in this kingdom, not securing blood ‘free range.’ According to their Sheriff, this nest had stepped back and forth over the line many times and the implication was that it was time to make an example.

Eric questioned them, using his words to reinforce the ways these vampires had transgressed. He turned to one, a tall woman with thick, brown hair pulled back in a severe ponytail, and asked why she thought that the rules about donors didn’t apply to her. As bold as brass, she slid her eyes to Sookie and said, “I follow the examples I see.” It was disrespectful, but it also implied that Sookie was nothing more than a donor. There was no intake of breath, no hiss, but all eyes slid to Sookie,
Sookie wasn’t sure where her anger came from. Maybe it was years of being looked down upon because she was different. Maybe it was all the times women and men had seen her standing beside a vampire and assumed she was nothing more than their feed and fuck. Maybe it was the unfairness that life could dole out, where it didn’t matter what she did, there was always someone ready to tell her that it wasn’t good enough.

Sookie could feel her face shifting. Her whole body felt as if it was stretching, getting taller. Her chin lifted and her shoulders went back. There was a gasp from her left, but Sookie ignored it. “I think you should explain that remark,” Sookie said. She could hear a slight lisp in her voice, but she refused to think too much about it. If she got distracted, she knew she would lose her resolve, and this was too important.

The vampire’s eyes went wide, and then she took a small step back. “I’m waiting,” Sookie persisted. After another long moment, the vampire’s eyes dropped and she said, “I meant nothing by it.”

“Nothing?” There was something enticing about this, this feeling that she was winning, and Sookie leaned further forward, embracing it.

“Nothing, Mistress,” the vampire whispered, and then the woman made a stumbling bow and the other members of her nest did the same.

Sookie stepped back. She could feel she was trembling, but she held herself rigid. Eric pronounced his sentence and called for a recess. He offered Sookie his hand and waited for her, not moving until she moved, making clear to every watching eye that she had an equal place beside him. He held her together, sending her pride and courage until they got behind a door, and then he swept her into his arms. “You were magnificent!” he told her.

“I don’t know what to think,” Sookie grasped his shirt. Her emotions were in a whirl, and she knew it would take her a night and some quiet to sort it all out.

The remaining cases ran smoothly, and more than one vampire bowed first to Eric and then to Sookie. Everyone felt it. Everything had changed.

As they sat with Karin afterward, the vampire grinned, “I’ve seen it before, but I have to tell you, Sookie, that is one scary face.”

“Guess I won’t be asking to have it on any of our anniversary photos,” Sookie laughed, but she was already feeling some regret and not a little guilt.

“I don’t know,” Karin continued, “It was a good look on you,” and then she had moved on to give a report on her findings from Amelia Broadway’s computer. Karin found the mailing list. There were also some emails from unhappy customers who wanted replacement charms. Clearly some of the items Amelia made stopped working, but there were others who were writing that the charm they received was a gold mine and thanking Amelia for making their lives so much more lucrative.

“Can we trace those individuals? I’m assuming she shipped her charms, so there would be mailing addresses,” Eric asked.

“ Mostly,” Karin nodded, “But a fair share of those charms were mailed to P.O. Boxes. The names these people use? Some of them have to be professional names. Who names their kid “Moonlight Rayqueen?”
“Old hippies?” Max shrugged.

Karin smirked and turning back to Eric, she said, “I haven’t had the opportunity to congratulate you. It is an honor that is well deserved.”

Eric nodded, and shrugged as if to say, ‘oh well, someone had to do it,’ but Sookie wasn’t fooled. When Bartlett Crowe called the Viking, asking him to accept the position of Clan Chief, Eric had expressed some reluctance. Both he and Sookie knew this meant Eric would be required to attend more meetings, be more present in the world of vampire politics. It was a title that had implications for Sookie as well. Had the title come to them even a year earlier, it might not have worked. Now, they both thought it would.

Sookie still had days when she wondered if her decision to step away from her more human sensibilities was the right one, but with each small triumph, triumphs like tonight in the Assizes Court, she became more certain. Alcee Beck had been back to the Hummingbird Road house as he’d promised. FBI agents had come as well. Each time, Sookie played her part as southern hostess. She served tea, offered cookies or cake, and repeated the story. Eric and she had been in Bon Temps at the time of the disappearance. They were motivated to be near Shreveport. While she was sorry to hear about Meg and Amelia, things had changed between them some time ago, and Sookie hadn’t seen either of the women, socially or otherwise, in close to a year in the case of Meg, and many years in the case of Amelia Broadway.

Each time she told the lie, it became easier, and she could hear how her own growing ease in telling the story was translated to greater credibility with her listener.

What was more, each time she demonstrated that her first loyalty was to Eric and their marriage, her Viking got happier. Almost overnight, the playful vampire who took things in stride had returned. When she chided him about socks on the floor, he teased her about making money selling them as souvenirs. “After all,” he’d smirked, “I am a Clan Chief!” He asked if his lovemaking had improved. She asked him how he fit his head through doors. He demonstrated his new and improved Clan Chief dance, which was more of a striptease. She demonstrated how the wives of Clan Chiefs could still make their husbands beg.

Now, as they drove home under the light of the moon and stars, music playing, and the Corvette’s engine humming, Sookie realized she was happy. It wasn’t temporary happy. It was a big life, every cell singing kind of happy. “I’m still not really sure how comfortable I am turning myself into a monster,” she told Eric.

“You can never be a monster,” he said quietly, reaching down to thread his fingers through hers. “You think of your Fae self as ugly or other. It is not, Lover. It is a strong part of you, and it is beautiful to me,” and he lifted her hand halfway to his lips, stopped, and instead settled it in his lap.

Sookie snorted, “I will be so happy when I don’t stink anymore!”

“Me, too,” her husband mumbled.

“Nice!” Sookie exclaimed, and taking her hand back, used it to swat him instead. She worried her lip a little, then asked, “You sure you want to come to the clinic all those times?” Tomorrow night, Sookie would be given the purple shot, the one that was supposed to jumpstart her ovaries. The telepath was expected to drive into Shreveport and check in at Jane’s clinic every night after for blood work and ultrasounds. Jane had assured her that within the next few days, they would be harvesting her eggs and her journey to becoming a mother would start. “Tara told me she would be happy to do it…” and Sookie trailed off at Eric’s hard look.
"I have told you that this is my place," he said evenly. "I am your mate. I will not have you placed in any danger if I am not by your side." He turned his head away from her, but Sookie could feel his determination as he said, "Your blood is mine, Älskade, I have told you this."

"Don’t get your knickers in a twist," Sookie huffed, "I’m just trying to be nice here! Who knows what night it will be and you know what they said. It’ll take an hour or two and I’ll be right back home. The only thing you’ll be able to do is sit around and wait, and we both know how good you are at that!"

"Du är en smärta i röven!" Eric growled.

"I know what that means!" Sookie sniped back, "and you are a bigger pain in my ass!"

"Enough!" he growled, and Sookie could feel he was actually angry. "I will not be shut out of this!" his words were clipped. "I will be with you!"

Sookie’s breath caught, "Is that what you think I’m doing? Shutting you out?"

"No," he said, but he didn’t take his eyes from the road. He was quiet for a bit, then he said, "There is little enough that I can do in this matter. To drive you, be with you at this time, it is a small thing. It is important to me," but as he said it, Sookie felt something from him. It wasn’t the first time. It was as if she could taste his reluctance.

Sookie nodded, "Okay. I’ll tell Tara." It was on the tip of her tongue to ask, ‘Do you even want this?’ Eric had said he did, but that was in Nebraska. It was a heady time and they were surrounded with plenty of odd stuff. Most times now, he seemed to be going along, but not exactly leading the charge, but instead, Sookie asked, "Do you think the witches are really going to make trouble?"

"Yes," he growled. He tightened the grip on the steering wheel, and Sookie was sure she felt disappointment from him. He relaxed his fingers, sighed and said, "Yes, Lover, I do. I have been summoned to a meeting of the Chiefs to be held the second night of Moshup Summit. Already there are reports that there may be witches coming here to conduct their own investigation."

"I’m kind of surprised they haven’t already," Sookie replied.

"Your friend was not liked, Sookie," Eric told her. "Even among those witches who knew her in New Orleans, she made enemies. It was known she had money, and she had some skills. She refused to share any of those things with the sisters of the City, but she was the first to demand help when things weren’t going her way."

"Same old Amelia," Sookie shook her head. The telepath wanted to remember Amelia a different way. She wanted to remember the laughing woman who had lived in her upstairs rooms and made the house a less lonely place, but instead, she kept thinking about the way Amelia offered a room in her house to Octavia Fant without checking with Sookie first, and how much she’d hated Eric. "Have you heard anything about Octavia Fant?" Sookie asked, the memory jogging something.

"The other witch is living in the City again," Eric still wasn’t looking at her and Sookie could feel there was something he wasn’t saying.

"I’d like to talk with her, if that could be arranged," and as soon as she said it, Eric did look at her then and it wasn’t in a good way. "I can ask her questions, Eric! She and I got along, at least we had an understanding. There were times I thought we might even be friends if things had been different."

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"I will see," he said, but Sookie knew he was really saying 'no.'

Sookie sighed, "Look, Eric, if I let you be the one to give me that big-ass, gonna hurt like hell, shot in my butt tomorrow night, will you just tell me what’s bothering you?"

He didn’t rise to the bait. Instead, he gave her his Mr. Superior look, and said, "Why would you ever think I would want to hurt you?"

"You really are going to make me work for this, aren’t you?" Sookie sighed. "Well, okay then! Eric Northman, how about this?" and she unclipped her seatbelt and slid as closely as she could. Laying her head on his shoulder, she placed her hand over the place where his heart should be beating, and she said what was in her own heart as clearly and completely as she could.

"I love you, Eric. I get up every day knowing that the best part of my day comes when you open your eyes to me. It feels like a miracle because just when I don’t think my heart could hold any more love for you, somehow you do something, or you say something, that makes me love you just a little bit more."

"You are telling me you think I’m pushing you away, but I don’t know how you feel about having a baby with me, not really." Sookie felt him shift a little under her hand, so she stroked his shirt. "I know I sprang this on you, and I know Niall has done everything he can to push things along. I know there is nothing you wouldn’t do for me, and that’s both a gift and a burden. I don’t ever want to take advantage of you, Eric. I don’t want you to ever do something you don’t want just to make me happy, but I have to be honest with you too."

"I want you to know that the thought of growing a little bit of you inside of me? Of waking up in the morning to a new person who was made from us? It feels like a gift that I just can’t describe. It’s everything I ever wanted, growing up. A man I adore beside me and the family we made together all around us." Sookie sniffed a little, "Of course, we won’t grow old together, holding hands on the porch, but that’s okay. I get forever with you and that’s better than anything I ever could have imagined."

Eric turned toward her, and kissing the top of her head said, "Jag älskar dig, Sookie."

"I love you, too," she said. As Eric brought his hand to cover hers, Sookie felt Eric’s love for her. It wasn’t the words she wanted to hear, but in this moment, it felt like enough.

Shreveport

"Almost ready," Jane announced, removing the ultrasound wand and handing Sookie some towelettes.

Eric stood near the head of the examination bed, "Then you believe tomorrow?" he asked. They had been at the clinic for three nights in a row. It was four nights since the shot and Sookie was beginning to wonder if something wasn’t working. She spent her days cleaning and fretting, and her nights practicing and fretting some more.

"Yup, tomorrow it is!" Jane chirped. "My nurse will give you a pamphlet explaining what I need you to do. No eating anything after noon, and I’m going to send you home with a mild sedative." She looked at Eric, "I would suggest you abstain from feeding from your mate when you rise tomorrow. I will expect to see you both here by 6:30."

Sookie sighed as she rubbed goo from between her legs. Jane’s approach to this smacked of mad
scientist glee and Sookie was having a hard time warming up to her. She knew that doctors sometimes struggled with bedside manner, look at Amy Ludwig, but Jane made Amy look like Wanda Warmth.

"Are you in distress?" Eric asked.

"Nope, not at all," Sookie sighed again. Jane bowed to Eric and practically bounced out of the room. "I should call her Doctor Frankenstein," Sookie grumbled. When Eric raised his eyebrow, she just shrugged again, "I can’t explain it. I guess I just thought I’d be more... excited." Eric nodded, but Sookie could see that he didn’t understand.

As they had done the other nights they were sent home from the clinic, Eric drove them to Fangtasia. The crowds were larger. Word traveled that the King was appearing nightly and it drew interest. Sookie could hear the speculation as they walked in the door past the line of those waiting for entrance and the bowing bouncers. She scanned the crowd, screening for dangers. She heard two thinking about drug transactions. She heard the underage boys who hoped the rumors were true and that vampires were gay. She heard the police detective who was looking for clues. All these things she whispered to Indira when the small vampire embraced her.

Mustapha was waiting in the corner booth. He greeted Eric, then smirked at Sookie, "Hey, Baby Fangs! I heard you gave quite the performance in Minden. Vampires here are saying when you get your mad on you look like Jaws on steroids."

"It’s nice to see you, too, Mustapha," Sookie said sweetly, then more quietly, "By the way, the guards you sent over are working out fine. They’re nice folks. Thank you."

"Why?" and he looked curious, "Did you really think I’d send over people that would be hard to like? I’m not some folks. I don’t go out of my way to hire assholes." Sookie laughed. She knew Mustapha was poking fun at Eric. Over the years, Eric had a tendency to hire day people who were efficient, but whose social graces could be lacking, including Mustapha.

"No, I didn’t expect a bunch of Bobby Burnhams, but they could have been different, so thank you!"

"You’re welcome," the Packmaster answered sincerely. They watched as Indira’s people worked the floor, cleaning out each of the potential problems Sookie had identified. "So," and Mustapha looked at Eric, "you all ready for Moshup?"

Eric nodded, "Yes. I leave late next week. There was some thought that I should be there for the movie event, but I am reluctant to be away from my mate for too many nights. I am sending Thierry. He has business the first night, and Stan will be there. I will be in Boston for the talks the second night, and then I will come home.” He glanced at Sookie. They would be waiting by then, waiting to see if things were settled and she was with child.

"Don’t you worry none," Mustapha grinned broadly. "I got you covered during the day, and Indira arranged some extra folks at night. You remember Heidi, the tracker? Well, she volunteered to be around. And, of course, you got your own special watchdog."

"Bubba is the best," Sookie nodded. "And funny! I had no idea he knew so many stories!"

"He is welcome everywhere," Eric replied, but his eyes were scanning the crowd.

"What is it, Eric?" and Sookie squeezed his thigh under the table, a move that earned her an interested stare.

"It could be a trip to the office if you don’t move your hand,” he smiled. When she did, he looked
disappointed, "I can hear people talking about witches."

"You think they’d come here?" Sookie scanned again, looking for the static signature she’d come to associate with magic minds.

"No, but I think we must be ready when they do present themselves," and then he gave her his smirk, "but that is not tonight, Lover. Are you feeling up to dancing with me?"

"I could take a turn or two," Sookie smirked back and they slid from the booth. Sookie figured out the comment about the office wasn’t entirely in jest when the Viking’s hands firmly brought her hips back and she felt him, hard against her back. "You need to take care of something first?" she whispered.

"It won’t take long," he rumbled and they continued down the hallway and into his old office. He didn’t turn the lights on, but then again, he didn’t really need light to see. Sookie found herself herded forward and then bent over the desk. Eric pulled her skirt up and her panties were gone in a flash.

"You a little anxious, Cowboy?" she giggled, and then groaned as his head eased into her, gliding easily in the lubrication Jane had applied earlier. He groaned behind her, his hand smoothing over her bare cheeks, and then he slapped her right cheek just enough to have her clench down on him.

"I will miss this," he growled. "A month. A month without you holding me like this."

Sookie had a moment when she wondered if she should be worried, but that moment flew away as he shifted one hand beneath to rub her clit and another above to massage her rear entrance, and she found her hands scrabbling to find something to hold on to as her blood roared in her ears and her walls contracted so hard around him he could barely move. She was calling out, but she wasn’t sure if she was saying words or just making incoherent noises as she felt him twisting and then twitching within her. He groaned, collapsing over her back, taking her hand in his, his weight pressing all around her, making her feel safe. The quick sheen of sweat that had formed on her skin started to evaporate and she felt the chill of the desk surface, "Eric? We should go," she breathed.

He flexed his hips, still semi-hard within her, "We could just head home," he purred, then lifted himself, kissing her neck in the process. He slipped from her then, and headed into the small bathroom to get some hand towels.

"Good thing I wore a skirt," she sighed, lifting it to keep it from getting stained and accepting the towels he offered. He had a wet spot on his shirt and she knew she looked fucked out, so she shrugged and shot him a grin, "Tell the fellas to get the car started, ‘cause I think we’re just warming up!"

Sookie couldn’t help thinking how handsome Eric looked, his head thrown back, laughing.

Jackson

"If you don’t leave, we will call the police!" It was everything Bill could do not to growl and confirm what these humans thought of him.

Bill had walked into the Silent Witness office just after sundown. He tried explaining that he was Bill Compton, the famous author. He brought a copy of his book, a hardcover one so he could show the people in the office his picture.

The minute he walked in, he knew it would be an uphill battle. Two older women who were at desks near the front door of the little storefront had made ‘eep’ noises and hustled their solid, sweated
bodies out the back door. A younger, unattractive woman stood up and crossed her arms while a middle-aged man with a balding head gave Bill a fierce look before demanding, "What do you want here?"

Bill tried to explain his sincere interest in joining the group. He held up his book, pointing to his picture, "I think you are right!" he said more than once, "I want to help. I want to show that I do not agree with what vampires have done. Having me with you would be a powerful message."

"You are a monster! You offend me just by standing there!" the younger women shrilled, "If you had any decency, you’d just lay out and let the sun take you! You were meant to be dead, not walking around!"

The man’s face was equally closed, and Bill came to the conclusion that these humans would never be able to hear his words. He considered trying to glamour them, but just as quickly saw the camera, so he made a courtly bow, apologized for interrupting their evening, and left.

He turned on his Michael Bolton CD as he drove back to the palace. The plan had seemed so perfect. He’d drive into town, walk into the office, and they’d welcome him, the answer to their prayers, a vampire who hated being a vampire. 'This could still work,' Bill thought, 'I just need someone who can make the introduction and who won’t take no for an answer,' and he immediately thought of the offensive woman who was arranging the Moshup Summit, the one who had badgered him into coming out a week in advance. Turning down the music, he pushed the buttons that would dial the number and allow him to talk hands free.

"Don’t tell me you aren’t coming!" the snarly voice snapped, "I’ll come down there and get you myself!"

"I am coming," Bill quickly replied, then felt sour that he had so quickly come to heel for her. "I’m calling because you told me you are a genius at arranging things, and I need something arranged."

"It depends," she now sounded cautious, and then she exclaimed, "What is that sound? It sounds like cats humping!"

Bill hit the button that turned off the radio, "I want to offer my services to the Silent Witnesses," he told her. "I tried to talk with the people here in Jackson but they refused to listen."

"I’m surprised they didn’t just stake you!" Twy snorted, "Not the most forward-thinking group. Is that all you want?"

"Well... yes," Bill wondered what else she thought he wanted.

"As it turns out, this is my last gig for the events people," Twy drawled. "I have another gig that is going to have me traveling as soon as I’m done with your part, and it involves the Witnesses. Small world!"

"Are you going to represent them?" Bill wasn’t sure why that thought should concern him, other than he’d come to fear this woman’s abilities.

"Hell, no!" she snorted, "Those people have chump change. Vampires are where the money is! I’m going to be working for your main squeezes, the Kings!"

"I don’t sleep with them," Bill huffed, "I watch over their house..."

"Potato, Po-tah-to," he could see her finger-flipping in his mind’s eye, "Anyway, the job involves getting conversations going with Witnesses, so you’re in luck. I can make some inquiries up here and
I should be able to get you in to see them once you reach Boston.”

Bill turned it over more than once. She seemed so confident, he wondered what the angle would be, but when he realized she was waiting for an answer, he said, ”That would be great. I’ll see you next week.”

”I’ll have a car waiting for you at Logan. Look for the driver this time. The sign will say, ’Compton,’ and before Bill could snarl, she had terminated the call. Bill turned the volume back up. It was his favorite passage, the clarinet playing over the sound of the orchestra. ’It’s all coming together,’ he thought, ’I’ll be standing with them, accepted as being more human. I’ll be on the right side of the barricade and once Northman is gone, she’ll understand.’

Shreveport

”She’s fine,” and Amy Ludwig placed her hand on Eric Northman’s arm, a rare show of affection. ”She tolerated the anesthesia well and we were able to harvest a...well, a really amazing number of eggs. That place of yours in Bon Temps must be fertility central. I don’t think you have a thing to worry about!”

Eric wanted to thank her, but he wasn’t sure he could get the words past the lump in his throat. He was surprised, and then angry when they told him he couldn’t stay with her. It had taken Sookie backing him up and practically ordering him to pull his shit together to get him to stay in the waiting area. ”You can sit with her while she comes out of the anesthesia, if you want.”

Dr. Ludwig didn’t need his answer. She walked, knowing he followed. When she opened the door to the room, he was beside her, holding her hand, his eyes on her face. Amy smiled and turned to leave, but stopped when he said, ”I have questions.”

”You could ask Jane,” she shrugged. It seemed logical to the Doctor that Northman should ask Jane. After all, Jane had been his Sheriff.

”She is too pleased at the possibility of earning her Nobel Prize,” he snarled, ”I’d rather ask you.”

Amy walked back to stand next to the Viking. He looked more stable now that he was in physical contact with his woman. ”You have two minutes, Deader, ask away.”

”How is it that this baby is truly a part of me? I have never heard of a tooth making a child.” He didn’t look at her, but he didn’t need to. Amy wondered how long he had been trying to figure this out.

”It’s not your tooth anymore,” she told him. ”They have a way to extract the cells, the building blocks from your tooth. That’s what will be used.”

”Will it be me?” He squinted, and then said, ”Me as I am now?”

”Vampire?” Amy asked. When he nodded, she said, ”No. Those cells from your tooth were you in your human life. Becoming vampire doesn’t change your DNA, those building blocks, it covers them up with a blanket of magic that reanimates them.”

”Then why do some of us have gifts?” Eric asked, ”Gifts we did not have as humans?”

”You really have been giving this some thought,” the doctor chuckled. ”Nearest I can figure, the magic gets its own set of building blocks. Some of you get a little extra, but it doesn’t change the fundamentals, what’s down below. Now, you will need to exchange during the pregnancy. You both need it, and that blood exchange may have some effect on the baby, but as far as I can tell, this will
be a mostly human child.” When the vampire didn’t ask more, the Doctor thought to give him one more piece of information. “You know Phoebe Golden?” Eric glanced at her. ”She’s doing her own research and sharing the results. Your father-in-law is involved. He is letting her use Fae.”

Eric almost asked why the Doctor considered that important enough to tell him, but Sookie chose that moment to make a noise. She groaned a little, then groaned more. ”Oops!” the Doctor smiled, ”You’re going to need this!” and handing Eric a basin, she left the room. Sookie started to make a sound that Eric recognized and he helped his wife roll on to her side so she could be sick in the basin. She smelled terrible, and her nausea made it worse. Eric wished he had chosen to hold his breath, but now it was too late and all he could do was stop breathing to minimize the effects. A nurse bustled in. She left, but returned shortly with a clean basin. She swapped it out and handed Eric a covered cup of water with a straw.

”She’ll be out of it for a little while longer,” The nurse announced. She checked Sookie’s vitals and said, ”She’s fine. Jane will be here in just a minute.”

Eric watched the nurse’s retreating back, and when he turned his eyes back, it was to find Sookie looking at him. ”Hi,” she said weakly.

”Lover,” he purred, and stroked her face. He smoothed her sweaty hair from her forehead. She looked pale.

”I bet I look like a car wreck on a Saturday afternoon,” his wife mumbled, her words slightly slurring.

”Why not Saturday night?” he asked. These descriptive flourishes of her usually had a point.

”Because if it was night, you couldn’t see just how bad it looks,” she chuckled.

”Are you in pain?” he asked. He couldn’t feel discomfort from her, but, then again, the sedative worked to suppress their bond.

”Nope,” she shook her head, then drew her eyebrows together, ”Nope, no pain. Just woozy.”

”There she is!” Jane said brightly as she walked through the door, ”You feel up to talking?”

”Sure!” Sookie drawled. Eric didn’t think Sookie looked ready for any kind of conversation, but Jane didn’t ask him. When his wife tried to sit up, he put his arm under her shoulders and gently lifted, careful not to disturb the needle and line that ran from her arm. He positioned himself on the edge of the bed and pulled her to rest against him, protecting her from the metal headboard.

”Everything went really well,” Jane enthused, ”I sure wasn’t expecting this many eggs, so we have plenty for this try and we’ll freeze the rest. That way next time we can try right away.”

”I’m a good egg maker!” Sookie giggled at Eric, sounding more drunk than sleepy.

”You sure are,” Jane was sounding giddy, too. ”And we should be ready to get this started the night after tomorrow. You’ll come back, and we can have you in and out in under an hour. No anesthesia next time, and you don’t have to starve yourself.’

”Good!” his wife giggled some more, ”Because right now, I could use a big steak!” and then she jerked a little, and Eric had just enough time to tip her over the basin again.

”Guess she doesn’t do well with anesthesia,” Jane sniffed. ”She should be over that in the next half hour or so. Feed her anything she wants. Oh, and you should have sex, as much as possible over the
next two nights. It will prepare her for implantation. Nothing too crazy of course, and if she had
some residual tenderness from today, avoid whatever activity hurts, but it does help.”

Eric was confused. They had been told different things at different times. He had thought their sex
life would be cut off earlier, once the purple shot was administered. When that turned out not to be
accurate, he was told sex needed to end once the harvesting was done. Now he was being told to
have sex often. “You are sure?” He asked.

“Orgasm brings on a thickening of her inner walls. It will make implantation easier, so, the more she
reaches completion, the better your chances,” and Jane winked.

Eric anticipated Sookie’s furious blush. She was bold in bed, but she held that Southern sensibility
that prevented her from talking about those things in public. He felt her shake and turning her,
realized she wasn’t embarrassed, she was laughing. ”Guess I’ll get to fill that ol’ jar to overflowing!”

"Jar?” Jane asked.

"It’s a private joke,” Eric smiled, but Sookie threw her head back, smacking the back of her skull
against his shoulder blade.

"My orgasm jar!” she announced. ”I fill it up so when he’s not around I have some for later,” and she
rolled her head so she could see him. "Right, sweetie?” Sookie’s eyes were a little glassy and her
breath smelled like a refuse can.

"When can we head home?” Eric asked.

"As soon as she stops taking her clothes off,” Jane laughed. Sookie was, indeed, trying to strip the
johnny from her shoulder. Jane stepped forward, expertly removing the needle, and holding up
Sookie’s forearm for Eric’s lick.

"I would like the room,” Eric told Jane, and the Viking wrapped his protesting wife up in his arms,
preventing her from disrobing further. It took a combination of substituting clothes, promises about
things he would do to her, and her re-emergence from her anesthesia-induced wantonness to get
Sookie ready for the drive back home. There had been talk of getting a hotel room in Shreveport,
but, in the end, they decided Sookie would be more comfortable resting between procedures in her
own bed. One concession they had made was to use a town car instead of Eric’s Corvette.

Once they were underway, Eric helped Sookie bring her legs up on the bench seat and he drew her
into his lap. ”You are sure you are well, Älskade?” he asked.

“Damn, why’d I have to be such a hussy in front of Jane?” Sookie groaned.

“Why would you treat her any differently than you treat everyone else, Lover?” Eric chuckled and
was rewarded by hearing Owen, who was driving them, chuckle, too.

“You’re an asshole!” Sookie grumbled. “I should throw up on you again for that!”

“I can think of different ways to get dirty,” Eric replied.

“Well, apparently so can I and I’m willing to tell everyone and their brother about it!” Sookie rolled
her eyes, and then cuddled her face into his shirt, “Just tell me when we’re home. I don’t think I can
take any more self-humiliation in one night.” Being Sookie, she made good on her promise. Her
breathing evened out and her mouth fell a little open.
“Everything go okay?” Owen asked, glancing in the rearview.

“She did well,” Eric nodded, hugging his wife a little closer.

When they arrived at the house, Bubba came down the stairs to open the car door. Eric was out of the car with Sookie in his arms and he carried her into the house. He set her down on a chair in their suite, one that was close to the bathroom, and then he rushed to start the bath water. The plan was to undress his wife and bathe her before taking her to bed. He had not anticipated they would be able to have sex, but since having a great deal of sex was now the doctor’s orders, he thought he’d be up for the challenge.

Eric glanced to make certain the oils and soaps his wife preferred were nearby. They would not entirely cover the smell the hormone injections created, but they did make a temporary difference. Eric remembered not to add oils to the water itself. He didn’t wish to risk any infection, although he would exchange as soon as Sookie was able. That would prevent any complications. He disrobed and headed back into the bedroom to find the chair empty.

It only took a moment to locate her, her heartbeat drawing him to the office on the other side of their fireplace. She was standing there, leaning against the doorframe. “I was thinking bunnies,” she said.

“Bunnies?” He thought she must be talking about getting a pet, although rabbits seemed an odd choice.

“For decorating his room,” she smiled in a way that let him know she was still half intoxicated, “Little bunnies, hopping across the walls and over the floor. There are all kinds of sweet bed sets. Not Disney bunnies, though. More Beatrix Potter bunnies, like Peter Rabbit.”

“You think a boy should be surrounded by bunnies?” he asked, realizing that Sookie was serious about converting his office into a baby’s room.

“Why? What do you think would be better? Super heroes?” and she scrunched her face up until she resembled a bunny, and then her eyes opened and her mouth became an ‘o.’ Eric knew this face. She’d thought of something she thought would needle him, and she exclaimed ‘Thor! We can do the whole room in Norse God!’”

Eric growled playfully, “Now, Sookie, you know there is only one blond boy toy allowed in this house, and it’s not Thor!” He scooped her up in his arms, not sure if she was up to being tossed over his shoulder as she deserved. “So, let’s get you into your own personal fjord, and we can play find the longboat until you remember who that is.” Eric tossed her in his arms once, and when she shrieked with laughter, did it again, before standing her up beside the tub and helping her out of her clothes.

As he settled her back against his chest in the warm water, pressing her head to rest against his shoulder, she giggled, hiccupped, and then giggled again. “What, Lover?” he asked, amused by her amusement.

“Bunny boy!” she snorted. He wasn’t sure why she found it so funny, but she was laughing, so Eric shifted forward, and together they found something that amused them both.
Pam threw the end of her scarf over her shoulder and started her professional airport terminal stride toward the baggage claim area. She could have taken Anubis to Boston, but she opted for commercial instead. She loved flying into this city. She loved seeing the lights of land give way to the dark of ocean. Somewhere, straight ahead, was London and a life she had happily left behind her. Pam wasn’t sure what had her thinking about her childhood lately, but she was pretty sure the charming Victorian mementos the New York King had been sending her had something to do with it.

She supposed it did seem like a game to him. He sent gifts. She returned them. Flowers were one thing. The very first evening she returned to Minnesota, Misha sent her an arrangement of yellow roses. The second night, a second arrangement arrived, but this time the flowers were not alone. There was a box set in the middle of the arrangement that contained a brooch cunningly crafted of cut crystal and cloisonné enamel to resemble two ripe strawberries hanging by their stem. Pam smirked, and then found an envelope and FedExed the brooch back. Doubtless the gift was a reference to his remarking that she tasted like strawberries. Pam strengthened her resolve not to encourage Misha any further.

On the third night, more yellow roses arrived along with a rare prayer book, beautifully illustrated and bound in velvet. It was an elegant gift. She expected it was meant to convey that he was hoping, or ‘praying’ for something. It was the kind of thing a suitor from her human days would have done, found gifts that carried meanings. Pam had a hard time not feeling flattered. Still, it didn’t stop her from asking that it be carefully packaged and returned to sender.

On the fourth night, the roses arrived along with a strange, rigid box. It was large, the size of a portfolio. “He is persistent,” Maude observed. “You must have made one hell of an impression!”

“He likes to pursue, like every other male vampire we know. If I was smart, I’d just give in to him for a month. He’d get tired and we could both move on,” Pam sighed.

“But you’re not,” Maude said quietly. “Any reason?”

“I don’t have time to waste in satisfying his ego!” Pam huffed, but deep down she knew that wasn’t the real reason, and from the way Maude rolled her eyes, she knew it, too.

In the box was a frame cocooned in bubble wrap. Pam untaped the wrap to find an exquisite pencil sketch. She didn’t need to check the signature. It was by Edvard Munch, a study the artist had made of his lover, Tulla Larsen. The card that accompanied the drawing had only one word, handwritten upon it, ‘Zolotse.’ ‘Oh, fuck a zombie!’ Pam exclaimed.

“You are going to have to speak with him if you really want this to stop,” Maude told her. “These
are not small gestures.”

“And what would I say?” Pam sighed. “He is the most stubborn, aggravating person! He knows what returned gifts mean! He’s just goading me, looking for my tipping point.” She ran her fingers along the frame, “And he’s pretty fucking close with this one. Bastard!” With another sigh, Pam covered the surface back up and slipped the picture back in the box. “Return!” she declared, and left the kitchen.

“He’s not going to stop, is he?” Deirdre wiped her hands on her apron.

“I think our girl would be disappointed if he did,” Maude replied.

The next night there were no roses. “Looking for something?” Maude chuckled when Pam walked through the front hall a fourth time.

“I misplaced my favorite pen,” Pam huffed, but they both knew it was a lie.

The sixth night, a florist’s box arrived with two yellow roses tied with a ribbon. In the box was a thin metal palm tree with an odd bent wire that ran its length. The card inside read, ‘Zolotse, I must ask a favor of you. I was presented this item and I have been unable to identify it. Can you help?’

Deirdre peered over Pam’s shoulder, “I give. Any idea what that might be?”

“It’s a hair pin,” Pam mumbled, her finger involuntarily stroking the beautifully intact piece.

Maude was sitting at the table sniffing combinations for a new sesame sauce. The table surface was covered with tall-necked jars designed to allow the scent to concentrate. “So, what you going to do this time, Missy?” she asked.

“Return it,” Pam replied, but she took the card, wrote the answer, and placed it in the padded envelope along with the pin.

The next days were a stream of Victorian trivia, a mustache brush, a chatelaine, a nosegay holder, a needle case. Each item brought back a happy memory from her childhood, taking piano lessons and running in the garden. For some reason, the unhappy memories of her society marriage, indentured to an older man who shut her away like another Victorian treasure, didn't intrude. The night before she was to head to Boston, only roses arrived. The card read, ‘Thank you, Zolotse’ and nothing more.

Now, in Boston, Pam joined the stream of travelers, her pumps clicking against the tiles. There was so much to be done this week. She had six days until the Summit, six days to narrow down choices for locations for the new sex club venture. She had to inspect Fangtasia North and Fangtasia Back Nine. There were the last minute details she needed to approve for the Summit itself with the simmering détente that was her relationship with Twy.

Back when they were still a couple, Twy had rather enthusiastically booked them a suite at the Colonnade. Now, the last thing Pam wanted was to share rooms with her temperamental ex-lover. The vampire had made a series of calls, but there were no rooms to be had in the City, and even being across the river in Cambridge was not an option with the business Pam needed to complete.

As she approached the exit doors she sighed, “Maybe I should just turn her. If she’s my progeny I can order her to shut up!”

Pam was pulling out her baggage ticket when she had felt the unmistakable feeling of being watched. She looked up and found herself face to face with Andrew, Misha’s house man from New York. “Good evening, Miss Ravenscroft,” he said smoothly.
Pam struggled not to show her surprise, “Andrew, what are you doing here?”

“This is for you,” and he held out one of the thick bond envelopes Pam had come to recognize as Misha’s personal stationery. When she reached to take it, the houseman took advantage of her movement, taking the baggage claim from her fingers, the coat from her arm, and the carry on clutch that contained her laptop, “His Majesty offered me a week off to visit friends in Boston in exchange for transporting you from the airport and delivering that,” and he gestured again at the envelope.

Despite her better judgment, Pam knew she had to open it. Instead of the usual card, there was letterhead folded in half.

‘Pam,
It is unthinkable that a woman of quality should stay in a city as charming as Boston on second hand sheets. I offer you the sanctuary of my townhouse. Please use it as your own home during your stay. I will be arriving in the city in two nights. I have alternate accommodations, so you do not need to worry about being crowded.
I am sure you have business meetings you need to conduct. The house is a perfect setting. The housekeeper, Mrs. Graves, has been instructed to treat you as Mistress. She is capable of making any arrangement, from small group to large affair, and I encourage you to exercise her inventiveness.
I ask only one thing in repayment.
Please plan to spend the evening I arrive with me. There are things I enjoy about Boston that I can’t find anywhere else in the world, and it would give me great pleasure to share those things with you. Mrs. Graves will make sure you have the right attire for the evening.
You can give Andrew your answer.
I hope ~’

“Fuck a Zombie!” Pam said softly and then glanced up to see Andrew grinning at her. “You know what’s in this?” she asked.

“His Majesty was not discrete,” Andrew said smoothly. “He has been busy redecorating, but he accelerated the project recently. I believe he is proud of the outcome.”

“So, he’s been here to see it?” Pam asked, tapping the letter and buying time.

“No, Miss,” Andrew leaned forward. “He has only seen the results over the Internet. You will be the first to see the finished residence in person.” That made Pam pay attention. There was something about Misha allowing her to be the first to experience his new lair that was touching. Andrew was still speaking, “The King had an apartment here, overlooking the harbor. It was pleasant, but the King wished for something that felt more permanent.”

Pam didn’t know why she asked. Andrew was so clearly Misha’s man and he would have no possible motivation for telling her the truth, but the words came anyway, “What does he intend to happen with me, Andrew?”

There was no sign of guile in the man servant’s expression, “I don’t know how to answer that, Miss. He has never shown this kind of interest in any other being. You may wish to remain unengaged, but I would ask a favor of you. If you decide not to pursue what my King would offer, be kind to him. He is unsure when it comes to you. You are… different,” and Andrew bowed low.

“Get up!” Pam chided him. The vampire’s movement had caught the attention of other travelers, and people started taking photos, assuming she was royalty, a celebrity, or both. When he straightened, his expression was mischievous, “You’re going to tell me that if I don’t at least take a look at this place, things won’t go well for you, aren’t you?”
“My King would be right to doubt my ability to persuade,” Andrew agreed, “There might be personal repercussions.”

“You need to get your King to double your pay, Andrew. You really know how to deliver a line, and I’ve met some masters!” Pam snapped.

“As you say, Miss,” Andrew smiled broadly, and with a gesture, he waited for her to precede him through the doors to the loading area outside. There were two vampires on the sidewalk. Andrew handed one Pam’s baggage tickets while the other spoke into his wrist. By the time Andrew laid her coat across her shoulders, a black town car had pulled smoothly to the curb and Pam was assisted in.

For some reason Pam assumed they would head out of the city, but instead the car made the turn out of the tunnel that would take them further into town. “Where are we going?” Pam asked.

“The King has regular business in town, so being headquartered near the Garden was most convenient.” Pam knew Andrew was referring to Boston Garden, the public area near the heart of the old city. When they turned into a street of brownstones with gas streetlights and red brick sidewalks, Pam realized it felt inevitable.

“The King’s new apartment is in Beacon Hill?” Pam asked.

“The King now has a home here, yes,” Andrew confirmed. They made a second turn into a narrow street, just wide enough for the vehicle. The road was paved with cobblestone and the red brick row of houses stretched in either direction, punctuated by windows framed with black shutters and recessed doors outlined by carved pediments. The buildings had been built into a hill, and it looked odd, the lines of the buildings sloping down, and the doorsteps not quite square to adjust for the angle.

The car stopped and the door opened to a shiny, black house door. The white granite step was curved out into the sidewalk and there were clipped topiary bushes in pots to both sides. The house door opened, spilling warm light onto the sidewalk. “Welcome home, Miss Ravenscroft,” Andrew said beside her.

“My home is in Minnesota,” Pam said softly, but her eyes never left the hall she saw beyond the door as she stepped forward.

“As you say, Miss,” Andrew replied. An older human woman Pam assumed was a housekeeper waited inside. She bowed, smiling graciously, and Andrew made the introductions.

“Everything is at your disposal,” Mrs. Graves reiterated. “Donors are available on call at any time. I have been informed you will want to conduct business meetings here. Your guests are welcome to visit or stay. We have several additional bedrooms and they are fitted with the latest safety glass. As long as you are here, Miss Ravenscroft, you should consider yourself the Mistress of this house. I certainly will.”

It was overwhelming. Mrs. Graves stepped past her, “Please allow me to show you your house.” As Pam followed, she noticed a formal dining room to the right. It featured a lovely fireplace with a marble surround. There was a chandelier wired for electric, but there were also sconces on the walls that held real candles. “We can take the stairs or the elevator,” Mrs. Graves was saying, “Your bedroom is on the third floor, but there are two floors above. The fourth floor is the second best, and has its own family room. There are additional bedrooms on the fifth level under the roof, which gives the rooms spectacular views and their own charm.” The housekeeper nodded before walking up the beautiful winding staircase.
Pam was shown the second floor, with its living room, library, and office space. The electronics and equipment in the office would allow Pam to speak with anyone anywhere in the world. The desk was Queen Anne, and Pam could see herself sitting there, perfectly at ease.

“Of course, you won’t mind my sweeping for bugs,” Pam said archly, at which Andrew, who was trailing her, laughed.

“I think His Majesty would be disappointed if you didn’t!” he chuckled.

When they rounded the landing on the third floor, the housekeeper opened the dark, heavy door, revealing the luxurious suite beyond. The tall, canopy bed was impressive, rising just to the perfect height. There was a large fireplace in the room and the bathroom suite was sumptuous. A whole half of the floor was taken up with a walk-in closet that had its own small fireplace. From the closet or a hall leading back from the stairs she could access a private deck from which there was a spectacular view of the Charles River and the lights of Cambridge beyond.

Pam turned to Andrew, “This is the master suite, isn’t it?”

“It is your suite, for as long as you choose to stay,” Andrew answered. There was a sound and they turned to see a vampire entering the closet area, followed by Mrs. Graves. Pam’s suitcases were opened and the older woman began expertly shaking and hanging clothing in the empty cupboards. She slid open cedar lined drawers for sweater sets and silk lined drawers for socks and lingerie. For Pam, it was like every dream come true.

Pam turned away to look out across the river again, “Your King lives very well,” she said out loud. She didn’t need to see his face to know he was smiling, “My King did not always live well. He makes it a point to do so now that he is able.” After a bit, Pam turned to look at Andrew again, and she realized he had been waiting, “What should I tell him, Miss?” He could have been asking about the house. He could have been asking about the request to meet in two nights. He could have been asking about any number of things, but Pam knew there was only one answer to all the questions.

“Yes.”

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“I can’t believe you found a place on the Hill, too,” Angie said a little too brightly. The woman had spent almost fifteen minutes talking about the accommodations she secured at the vampire-friendly hotel located next to 15 Boston. Angie had dropped ‘Beacon Street’ at least three times during her babble.

Pam was sure that the cost to secure the room had been astronomical, but it was the kind of grand gesture Felipe de Castro required. He wanted to rub it in the face of every vampire he met that he was staying on ‘The Hill.’ The other Clan Chiefs and their contingents had rooms at the Colonnade in the Back Bay. The Summit itself used rooms in the hotel as well as the Hynes convention center across the street. The accommodations were suitably luxurious, but there was something about being on The Hill that was an automatic prestige card and Angie thought it would impress Pam.

It was petty, but Pam couldn’t resist, “It’s a residence that was loaned by a friend. If you like, we could go there after we finish looking at the places and compare notes.”

Pam could tell Angie wanted to be snarky, but Felipe smiled smoothly, “Thank you, Pam, that would be delightful.”

There were four pieces of real estate lined up for their review. One was near the downtown
crossings. It was an upper floor and the ceilings were high, but the entrance and surrounding area were seedy. “Pass,” Pam declared shortly.

“But it’s near Chinatown!” Angie pointed out, “The Orient, mysterious! It could give that film noire feel.”

Pam was impressed Angie knew what ‘film noire’ meant, but she spelled it out, “We want them to feel dangerous, not in danger. I want them to feel like they are walking into dark velvet. Just being on the sidewalk around here feels like slumming.”

The next place was a walk down, but the stairs were wide and the address was Newbury Street. There were interesting shops and cafes on both sides and there was a lively parade of well-heeled street traffic. The interior would need work, but the dimensions and ceiling height were sufficient.

After that, there was a place on Commonwealth Avenue and another near the Custom House. All three were real possibilities; right neighborhood, access to transportation, and the right dimensions. It was close to two in the morning when the town car provided for Pam glided to the front of the Beacon Hill residence. “You’re kidding!” Angie huffed.

“You didn’t mention who this benefactor was,” Felipe said smoothly.

“A friend,” Pam shrugged. She led the way up the stairs and Mrs. Graves opened the door to them.

“Good evening, Miss Ravenscroft,” the woman bowed. “May I take your wraps? There is warmed blood upstairs in the library.”

“This is King Felipe de Castro, the Clan Chief of Narayana,” Pam made the introductions, ‘and Angie, his second.’ She turned to the Nevada vampires, “This is the housekeeper here, Mrs. Graves,” and Pam smiled at the human, “Thank you for staying up for us. This must be late for you.”

“Not at all, Mistress,” the woman chuckled. “I have had the privilege of caring for vampires for most of my life. I don’t think I could go back to those other hours at this point.” She turned to the King and bowed formally, “Majesty, please let me know if there is anything I may do to make your stay with us more pleasurable.”

Pam had a sinking moment when she worried that he would ask for live donors. Pam remembered another time De Castro and Angie had been guests at a party at Eric’s house. Angie had destroyed Eric’s table, dancing on it in her high heels, and the King had filled the house with cheap whores and worse acquaintances, but Felipe only said, “I will let you know.”

Pam gestured toward the staircase and together, they ascended to enter the formal living room. There was a fire in the fireplace, and soft lighting around the room made the polished wood of the antiques shine. Each item in the room was a treasure, each place you set your eye spoke of old money and refined taste.

“Wow, what a mausoleum!” Angie said dismissively.

“It reminds me of Spain,” Felipe said quietly, and Pam saw his coldly appraising stare. The King continued to walk around the room, and then made a sound when he spotted the library through the pocket doors. “Querida!” he purred, running his fingers over the leather spines of the books.

The blood was on a tray in this room, and Pam poured it into three heavy lead crystal wine glasses. Felipe seated himself in one of the matching leather chairs. Pam handed him the goblet and felt relieved when the King used the matching leather coaster when setting the goblet on the cherry table. “You are sure your friend doesn’t mind us being here?” Felipe asked, hinting yet again that Pam
hadn’t revealed the identity of the house’s owner.

“This is Mistress Pam’s home,” Mrs. Graves said as she brought a bowl of fresh cut yellow roses into the library and set them on a console table that was set by the shelves. “She is welcome to use her own home to entertain anyone she chooses,” and the housekeeper bowed to Pam, saying, “I’ll be downstairs, Miss. Call if I can provide anything. When your friends are ready, I can ready rooms or call the town car to take them wherever they wish.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Graves,” Pam stammered. She was at a loss for words. She didn’t want to call the woman a liar, but it was an outrageous statement to make and she wasn’t sure how she would respond to the questions she knew would follow. Pam pasted a smile on her face, and when Mrs. Graves had disappeared, she turned back to Felipe, “Look, it’s a long story, and all I can tell you is the real owner has an overdeveloped sense of courtesy, but as someone who understands the culture of ‘mi casa, su casa,’ I’m sure I don’t need to explain.”

“Well, perhaps this will be the little mystery that keeps our relationship fresh, Pam,” Felipe smiled, but Pam couldn’t help noticing that the smile didn’t travel to his eyes. He suspected her now, and that was probably for the best, because she’d never really stopped distrusting the Nevada King.

“Are we going to make some decisions about the locations?” Angie drawled. She looked happier now, and Pam knew it was because her boss wasn’t trying to make nice any more.

“Of course,” Pam nodded. “I like Newbury Street and the Custom House location. The traffic at Custom House will be quieter at night, but it’s close enough to the financial district to keep it from getting rowdy. Commonwealth is just too close to Newbury.”

Felipe shrugged, “I would prefer Commonwealth to Newbury. While Newbury is attractive, I think it’s too busy. Too many will know what happens behind the door. It may work against us.”

Pam nodded. Hearing the King put it this way, she was surprised she hadn’t seen it herself, “I agree, Felipe. So, we are decided?”

Felipe smiled, “We are. If you wish, I can have my agent make the call. The contracts will be reviewed by both of us, of course. Do you have an attorney who is doing your review?” Pam texted the information for her legal team in Minnesota to Angie’s phone, and within the hour, Felipe made an excuse and the car was sent for. It wasn’t a long drive, but De Castro knew the power of a gesture. He would be observed by the hotel staff and others exiting the private black car. It would add to his mystique.

As they walked through the small lobby toward the jewel-like elevator that would take them to their rooms, Felipe turned to Angie, “That is two you can strike from your bed list.”

“Pam, and who else?” his child asked him.

“Mikhail,” Felipe nodded.

Angie shrugged, “Even if he’s interested, she’s not. There may still be a part I can still play between them.” Angie smirked, thinking of the possibilities, but De Castro shook his head.

“I don’t think so,” the King said, “If you are willing to be their surrogate, it puts you in an inferior position. Think, Angie! How do you defeat the unbeatable enemy?”

“You become their friend,” the vampire repeated the lesson she had been taught.

“And what better way than to offer a partnership in a venture located within his own kingdom? We
offer Misha a piece of the action so he needn’t ask, and we do it before Pamela does, then we watch and we learn. If he has a vulnerability, we’ll find it,” and De Castro smiled indulgently. “Who knows, perhaps if we are very smart you can have Pam as your consolation prize.”

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When Pam rose, it was with a certain excitement. She had agreed to meet Misha, and she still had no idea what was planned. It was lucky the venues for the sex clubs were resolved, but it only meant that the next phase would start, and the inspections and recommendations for the Fangtasia clubs were still ahead. Pulling out tonight left her precious little time to conclude business before the start of the Summit. Under any other circumstance, Pam would have been angry, but she wasn’t and it surprised her.

Pam pressed the bell that would summon the housekeeper, and Mrs. Graves appeared rather quickly. “Good evening, Miss Ravenscroft,” and the woman moved to open curtains. “I should let you know that Andrew will be here to collect you in two hours. I have something special for you,” and she walked to the tray she had carried into the room and poured from the carafe. “Now this is not spiced with fae blood or anything like that, but it does have a special quality.”

“What kind of quality?” Pam had no intention of being in any way impaired for this evening.

“It has a natural carbonation which I’m told is very soothing,” the housekeeper beamed. “It’s regular A positive, which I understand is your favorite, but it was shaken over a prolonged period of time which gives it a lighter texture.”

Pam could smell nothing amiss with the blood in the goblet. She could see small bubbles against the inside of the glass, so taking a deep breath, she sipped. It tasted like well-filtered blood, and it was her favorite flavor. The bubbles played across her tongue and she found herself smiling, almost involuntarily. “That’s remarkable,” she complimented the housekeeper.

“I am so glad you approve,” Mrs. Graves smiled. “Now, if you will indulge me, I will lay out some clothes for your evening.” In no time, Pam had a choice of dark pants or a longer skirt. A pink sweater twin set was laid out and a twisted multi-color pearl necklace joined the ensemble. “I would suggest you forego the pantyhose,” the housekeeper said. “Pumps are appropriate for the first part of your evening, but you will want something informal that you don’t mind being damaged for later.” That had Pam frowning.

“I don’t suppose I can ask what we’re doing,” Pam sighed.

“You can ask,” the housekeeper responded, but in a way that made clear Pam wouldn’t gain any insight if she did.

With a pair of canvas espadrilles in a bag, Pam walked to the vestibule to find Andrew waiting beside the door of the car. He bowed, smiled, and in no time, they were driving slowly through the night traffic of the City. Pam recognized the Prudential Center, and within a short time, the car pulled up to a curb where a vampire awaited. Pam vaguely recognized the building, but she wasn’t sure. The vampire bowed and gestured her toward the building. As she walked up the wide stairs, Misha emerged from between the columns, “Good evening, Pamela! Thank you again for agreeing to give me this evening,” and he kissed her on both cheeks before offering his arm.

“Thank you for giving me the use of your beautiful house,” Pam answered sincerely. “It is… well, I feel like a Princess there.”

Misha didn’t look at her, but Pam could see the smile curve up. He escorted her into the building and
through a small lobby. They walked into a concert hall where there was one table set on a wooden floor, and a small group was assembled on the raised stage. The King pulled out her chair and once she was seated, took his seat next to her. There were yellow roses in a bowl on the table, and at his nod, the group began to play, first Telemann, and then Bach. There was a quick piece Pam recognized as Mozart and then the group started the Summer portion of Vivaldi’s Four Seasons. The group was small, but the sound of the music was so pure it was as if she was within it. As they neared the end of the first movement, Misha leaned across and said, “The acoustics here are near perfect, one of the few halls in the world that can make that claim,” and Pam understood as the music encircled her again the gift that was being given her ears.

The group didn’t play long, only a little over an hour. The King rose and offered Pam his hand. Together they walked to the stage and Pam thanked the group, praising each for some detail of their performance. Beside her, Misha beamed, and when it was his turn, bowed and thanked the group as well.

Next, he tucked her hand under his arm and they walked to the curb. Misha handed her into the waiting car, and once seated himself, apologized. “Normally I would walk to our next stop, but there is much traffic and your shoes look very high. I understand you brought a flatter pair?”

“I did,” Pam laughed. “Are you going to tell me what we’re doing?”

“Oh, no, Zolotse!” he grinned. “The look on your face, and surprise, that turns to delight, it is something I wish never to forget!”

The car was stopping almost as soon as it started, and Pam saw they were at the entrance to the Museum of Fine Arts. “I love this place!” she said out loud.

“I hope you will enjoy what I chose for us,” and the King squeezed her hand.

There was a human who met them at the door, and Pam realized that like the Symphony Music Hall, they were the only people in the Museum. “You arranged a private showing for us?” she whispered.

“Yes, Pam. I wanted to share another moment with you, as we did with Adele in New York. But first, I have a surprise that I think you will like.” He turned the corner and showed her into the Decorative Arts and Textiles exhibit. All around them were showcases demonstrating fashion through the ages. The King took her hand and soon they were laughing over shoes and dresses, embroidery and corsets. Pam got the impression when Misha gave her the tour of the Garment District in New York that he enjoyed fashion, but now she realized his interest was as lively and informed as her own. They compared modern houses to looks and cuts from by-gone designers and speculated on the next trends that would hit the runways of Europe.

“Now, you must come with me to Fashion Week!” the King laughed, “If only so I can collect on my bets!”

“You will lose,” Pam said archly, “And I’ll be deciding how you’ll pay me back!”

“Don’t think you can shame me, Zaichik! It will take much imagination to devise a forfeit that will bother me!” As they rounded one of the last galleries, Misha said, “Ah, and now, it is time for us to see the real beauty that I wished to show you tonight!”

Together they walked up the stairs and then made a series of turns. Pam found herself in a gallery, and there, at the end was a single bench sitting before Klimt’s ‘Adam and Eve.’ “When I heard it was visiting here, I knew I had to bring you,” Misha sighed, his eyes never leaving the picture. “Who else could appreciate this as I do?” Slowly, reverently, he held her hand as she sat, and then he
moved so he could sit beside her, far enough away that they didn’t touch, and together they looked at the canvas, not speaking.

After a while, he said, “Of all his paintings of women, it is in this one that she is the strongest. She faces you, unafraid and dominant above the man. She is beauty without parallel.” Turning to her, he said, “She reminds me of you, Pam.” Before Pam could protest, he stood and held out his hand, “But, if you are ready, I have one more thing I like to do here, and I hope you will indulge me. It was not always this way, but now, with the Charles so much cleaner, and the park so beautiful… come with me. We will get your walking shoes!”

In no time, they were crossing the bridge that took them from the city down to the river’s edge and onto the Esplanade. They walked the paths, Misha talking about the things he was doing in the City and Pam finding herself talking about the venture with Felipe de Castro. When they came to a dock, there was a pair of vampires waiting for them. They were holding the rope to an elegant row boat. “Do you trust me?” the King winked.

He rowed them with strong, steady strokes out into the river. Bridges stretched over the river connecting the twin cities, Boston and Cambridge, both competing with their lights and liveliness. Somehow, being here, out in the middle of the slow current made the immediacy of the city noise lessen. “Where did you learn to row?” Pam asked.

“When I was younger, there was money to be made in taking people and cargo to ships, things the custom men shouldn’t see. I became a strong rower,” and the King shipped the oars and leaned back, letting the current take them. He checked his watch, and then leaned over, and took her hand in his. There was a noise, and then overhead, the first of the fireworks exploded. Pam found she couldn’t pull her eyes from the show above her, and somewhere she knew that in all the time she stared and smiled, Misha never stopped looking at her.

When the fireworks ended, Pam looked at him, aware that blood tears had formed in her eyes. “Why did you do this?” she asked.

“Because you have captured me,” he answered, “and I wished to see if I could capture you, perhaps, a little bit.” He smiled his crooked smile, and Pam leaned forward. Misha didn’t move to meet her. Instead, he lifted her hand to his lips, “Zolotse!” he whispered against her skin.

Pam closed the distance between them, kissing the top of his head. He looked up then, his eyes so patient, “I think you should come home,” she said softly.

“I demand nothing of you,” he told her, his thumbs stroking the hand he held between them.

“I know,” she nodded, “But I also know we are sophisticated people,” and he laughed to hear her use his words, “and I bet we can figure something out.”

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It became clear Pam had no intention of showing up to use the suite, and frankly, that suited Twy fine. She found an amenable bed companion, worked out some kinks, and got her tablet warmed up. As soon as this Summit was over, there were plenty of potential clients to approach, and the farther away Pam stayed, the better Twy’s chances of finding a few more paying customers over the next week or so.

For now, there was Bill Compton. He had managed to make it to the hotel from the airport. He announced rather late in the game that he wouldn’t be staying for the entire Summit, which was okay, since it relieved Twy from having to babysit him. The writer told her he was leaving for some
‘family’ obligation or another which sounded like a pile of bullshit. After all, everyone knew vampires didn’t have families; they had blood ties and alliances. In the end, who cared? Compton’s Hollywood handlers were paying big bucks to sell the ‘softer, kinder’ vampire angle. With the recent bad press about vampire/human relations, including the debacle that was unfolding in Indiana, the producers were anxious to convince anyone and everyone that vampires were just like you and me, only sexier – not scarier. Scarier didn’t sell tickets to young women, and that’s where all their advertising dollars were aimed.

In her follow-up with the producers’ publicist, Twy let drop that the Indiana King had engaged her services to help turn around the bad publicity in that state. She’d said enough that the producers offered to pay her an under-the-table bonus if she was successful. ‘Yes!’ she thought, ‘vampire business is good business!’

She couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of the Silent Witness angle herself, but since she was the one spinning the story, it would be easy enough to suggest that Bill Compton becoming a vampire face to the largely human group was her idea. If she spun it right, she could come out of all this with more personal brand to sell than when she’d met Eric Northman, and that was saying a lot. Any doubts she’d had about the chances of success were gone the first time she walked into the Boston office and found herself face to face with her former assistant, Sonder. It was serendipity.

It had taken all of five minutes to convince the young woman that Twy firing her had been her own fault, and that Twy had actually done Sonder a favor, leading her to the Silent Witness movement. Twy played Sonder’s emotions, and when she got to the point, which was getting Bill Compton into the group, Sonder had rather blankly nodded.

“I think I know him,” Sonder said, her voice taking on a strange, distant tone. Twy had to work hard not to show her disgust. She wondered if Sonder had started using drugs, she looked so out of it.

Instead, Twy manhandled her professional tone into place, saying, “I wouldn’t be surprised, Dear. He was at several of the events we arranged from Mr. Northman. He was in New Orleans at the palace when we were there, and then he was at the Summit when Eric was pledged to Sookie Stackhouse.”

“Yes, that must be it,” Sonder still had that vacant look. “I don’t hear from Meg anymore,” the young woman rambled. It was a strange thing to say, and Twy had no idea who Sonder was talking about, but if being kind to this nutcase would get the job done, so be it.

“I’m sure you’ll hear from her again, soon, Dear,” she patted Sonder’s arm, “So, you’ll introduce Bill and allow him to get involved? He has the ability to really help your cause. He has media coverage, and with his books and that movie coming out, people are following him.”

“Yes,” Sonder nodded, and then she shook her head and her eyes looked a little clearer, “Yes, of course.”

‘Good,’ Twy thought, ‘Back from Prozac Nation,’ when Sonder pulled up her calendar. They made arrangements for Bill to come over and meet with the leaders of the Boston chapter the following night. It would time perfectly, because if all went well, he’d be wearing the group’s button for his Hasty Pudding induction at Harvard. Those liberal types would eat it up. Bill, with his books and his movie might even get picked up for national news. Twy poked at her tablet, instructing Brock to arrange a photographer.

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Bill smiled, feeling the dark part of him unwinding, threatening to step forward. Seeing Sonder, the
woman he had abused, smiling and accepting him, had been an unexpected gift. Of course, she had been glamoured and he had done his job well. He could tell she had some residual recollection of him. He might have muffed the cover story, but Twy rather quickly constructed the idea that the younger woman found Bill attractive in their past, and Sonder had accepted it, including a blush.

The others in the office had taken more convincing, but Bill talked about his family in Bon Temps, the way he had been taken by Lorena, and soon there were sympathetic nods. He avoided mentioning Northman or Sookie. That had been hard. They asked about the people who inspired his book, and he wanted to tell the real story, but his instincts warned him it was too soon. If he told too many people, Northman would hear and find a way to trip him up.

“I’d be flattered to stand with you at a press conference,” Bill told them, using his courtly Southern gentleman accent. “There are bad characters among vampires, just as there in any species. I think it’s high time we spoke out together!”

Twy arranged a professional photographer, and Brock, her new assistant, was tweeting and posting shots in no time, announcing the wonderful new partnership. “Famous vampire author vows to help the Silent Witnesses be silent no more!” As they left, Bill was so tempted to capture Sonder, suggesting she come to his hotel, that his palms itched, but he kept his frozen smile in place and allowed Twy to guide him from the office.

“You really are a marvel, Compton,” she preened. “Look, I have some calls to make. Are you going to be able to look after yourself tonight?”

“I’m sure I can find something to occupy me,” he said, and then he asked the question that most concerned him. “You’re involved with the Summit. Is Northman coming?”

“Yes,” Twy said absently, poking at her handheld device, “But he’s not coming until the second night. Not sure what’s holding him up.” The publicist looked up from her device, “You know he’s no longer my client. He’s trying to do this press thing on his own.”

Bill ignored her, “Is he bringing his wife?” Bill was sure he sounded too anxious, but Twy seemed oblivious.

“No, Sookie’s not coming at all,” but then Twy looked at him and Bill was worried she had found him out. Instead she said, “Look, why don’t you take Brock and go clubbing tonight? It would be good to have you out and about, bon vivant on the city.” She stared at her assistant who stopped making waving hand motions when Bill’s head turned in his direction, “You have some ideas for where Bill could go, right Brock?”

“Sure, Boss,” Brock said through clenched teeth. Bill considered the assistant, but dismissed the idea of playing with him. The young man was too thin. Bill didn’t like skeletal. It reminded him of Sookie when she’d been sick in the days of Sam Merlotte.

“That’s okay,” Bill smiled, “I want to go back to my hotel. I’m working on a new story and I’m anxious to get some more down on paper.”

The assistant looked relieved, and Bill could tell Twy had mentally moved on. It was perfect. In only four nights Bill would be done with Boston. He would convince Portia to visit her good friend, Sookie, and she would take her children’s Papaw on the visit. Northman would be out of town so there would be no warden keeping a watchful eye. They would sit on her porch and talk as they used to. Sookie would see Bill for what he was, a family man who was more human than vampire. She would smile at him and he would hold her hand. His voice was sincere as he told Twy, “I really owe you.”
“No problem, Compton,” Twy finger waved him, “You’ll get my bill!”
Chapter 15 - Taking Stations

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Nautical Note: When ships travel on convoy, whether for pleasure or for mutual protection, they coordinate their placement. It allows them to move in concert, each in its expected place, so that no unforeseen collisions occur.

Lafayette

Thierry planned to leave for Boston within the hour, a full night ahead of the movie premiere, two nights ahead of the official start of Moshup Summit. His plans were earning him sour looks from Thalia. She wouldn’t ask him outright why he was in such a hurry. That was beneath her dignity. No, instead she made her displeasure clear in other ways. She quizzed him on the status of his Area’s business. She questioned his dedication to his Sheriff duties. She pointed out the high cost of hotel rooms in Boston and suggested he consider his business versus his personal budget.

Finally, when his fierce houseguest sniffed once too often, he challenged, “If you’re so worried about what I’ll be doing in Boston, why not come with me?” and before she could give him an excuse, said, “Oh, that’s right! You’d have to see our King and you’re too busy hiding from him!” That remark earned Thierry a prolonged hiss, but Thalia didn’t attack, which as far as the French Sheriff was concerned, told him his suspicions were right.

Since he’d confessed his motivations when it came to the New York King, Thierry’s relationship with Thalia had improved. That wasn’t to say that they were trading secrets or swapping spit, but at least now when they were in the same room Thierry no long felt the need to make sure his spiritual state was in order.

Thalia’s call from Bartlett Crowe came the previous night. Placing her on speaker phone, the Kings outlined their plans to return to Indiana. They would launch a media campaign aimed at shaming humans into accepting their help. The initial press conference was scheduled in three night’s time. The publicist, Twy, had managed to arrange several prominent humans, known on a national level for their contributions to law enforcement and human rights groups. These recognized faces would stand on the podium beside the Kings, reinforcing the ‘All In’ message.

The Kings were hopeful that this would signal a turnaround that would help to stem rising resentment. “The reason we are calling you, Thalia, is to ask a favor. It won’t matter how many goodwill gestures we make, or how much we try to convince the humans to allow us to handle vampire justice. If we can’t get to the bottom of this and finally stop the flow of rogues, it won’t matter. As far as we’re concerned, the injury and death toll is already intolerable. It is the most vulnerable among the humans who continue to be taken. We are fortunate the rogues have slowed and the media has not pieced it all together yet.”

“I think the only thing that’s saved us so far,” the Kings repeated what Twy had told them, “is that
the media doesn’t cover crime against the homeless. They are only interested in covering crime among the rich.”

It had been a long year and during that time some things had changed. The number of rogues ebbed and flowed, but part of that was due to what had been discovered. Rogues were insane. They seemed to have no conscious thought beyond traveling for some distance, sometimes with purpose, sometimes with no purpose, and creating nests. They would bury victims with one command and then leave them. Sometimes they would make multiple vampires in one night. Sometimes they would stay and work an area for several nights, creating more elaborate nesting sites. Often they worked in multiples, usually having started as nestmates. Many times, vampires had tried backtracking them, but tracking most often led to a nest in another territory. What seemed common was that once more vampires were incubating, the rogues became less stable. Many times they seemed to lose any drive to survive. There were reports of several sitting on a hillside, calmly awaiting the sun. Vampires now thought of them like an outbreak of insects. You missed one, you would have a temporary swarming, and then most would be caught and killed, the contagion contained until the next one slipped through the ever-loosening nets.

Most vampires, that was, except those in Indiana. True, the flow of rogues had slowed, but it was as if the rogues were monarch butterflies, and even across generations, eventually they would change direction to head toward the Crossroads of America. They arrived from all directions, sometimes simply stopping to meet the sun or sometimes moving with more stealth and purpose to find colonies of homeless or campers in the woods. When that happened, they created orphans who became rogues themselves.

“We know there is a vampire behind this,” Russell told Thalia. “We’ve known it for ages and we’re no closer to discovering the identity of this person than we were a year ago. At first, I didn’t think this was aimed at Bart and me, but lately, I know it is. We’ve racked our brains, searching for enemies and motives. We’ve sent spies and investigators. Neither of us has received a threat in the past fifty years from one of our own we can’t account for. There is nothing that we can remember that would account for the kind of money and time this must be taking. I thought it might be aimed at taking the kingdom, but what vampire would want this kind of mess? These rogues interfere with business and our ability to make profit. No vampire in their right mind would take the kingdom in its current state. This has to be personal.”

“When I think about the pain it must cause the Maker every time we end one of these vampires, I just cringe,” Bartlett added. Every vampire knew that the death of progeny caused a Maker pain, both physical and emotional. The tie of blood was strong. It was the part of this mystery that was most puzzling. When orphans were ended, there were reports that the rogues that had not already ended themselves reacted, the destruction of a nest prompting suicide.

Everything about the phenomena ran against conventional vampire lore. To make progeny was a sacred bond; it was to take on a responsibility that spanned the ages, recognizing the eternal nature of the blood ties created. These progeny made of rogues were blood squandered and their Makers nothing more than mindless robots. Whoever was behind this had no respect for vampire traditions, but it had to be someone with the kind of money necessary to buy secrecy, and that was a lot. While Russell and Bartlett wanted to find this vampire and prosecute him or her, there was a growing sentiment among others that perhaps it was simply better not to know. Their kingdoms were not playing Capistrano to these unholy swallows. If they handled the occasional inconvenience and didn’t look too closely, perhaps it would stay that way. Who wanted to anger someone with the kind of money and dedication it took to launch something this terrible?

“Thalia, you can go places among our kind that no one else can,” Russell made his request, “Who would dare challenge you? Will you help us?”
When she concluded the call, Thalia turned to Thierry and said, “If you are right, and these troubles are coming from New York, we could find ourselves becoming allies in this thing.”

“I’m surprised you agreed to help them,” Thierry frowned. It was the last thing he expected. Thalia had a reputation of going her own way, resisting any suggestion that she align herself with another vampire. That was, with the exception of Eric Northman.

The vampire shrugged and then smiled tightly. “I am always pleased to kill things that need killing,” then she dropped her scary smile, “The Kings did me a favor once. This is a chance to settle the score doing something I like.”

“This press conference they are holding will fall during the business sessions at Moshup,” Thierry observed. “Most of us won’t see it until the news recaps the following night. Perhaps there will be a way to maneuver things so I can see Misha’s reaction.”

“It is possible the human news channels won’t cover it at all,” Thalia said sourly.

“Don’t underestimate Twy,” Thierry sniffed. “She’s adept at getting what she wants. Something like this would enhance her reputation as someone who can manipulate the media. I don’t like how she panders and bullies the humans, but I do respect it. She could be a vampire.”

Thalia was about to say something, but she was interrupted by the chime on Thierry’s phone. He glanced to see an incoming text from Nabila, which was unusual. The Queen had texted him earlier, too, but Thierry hadn’t responded. He was reluctant to acknowledge, much less answer in front of Thalia. He believed the short vampire could decipher his message just by watching his finger placement and he didn’t need her any further into his business. Thierry would see his lovely Queen soon enough. Whatever message she had for him could wait until he was alone in the limo, on his way to the airport.

Thalia’s eyes flicked from his phone to his eyes, and he knew that not responding had been the right choice. “So, you know your former employer will be there,” Thalia said carefully.

Thierry nodded, “Boston is Misha’s territory now. He knows I’m coming ahead of my King,” and when Thalia’s eyes flared, Thierry said, “Not from me! He heard it through Nabila!” When Thalia rocked back a little, the Sheriff continued, “When I arrive he will expect me to pay court to him, jockeying for a place within his circle. Of course, once Eric arrives, Misha will expect me to transfer my ‘affections’ to my King.”

“So, he expects you to pay court to him?” Thalia said narrowly.

“It is hard to explain,” Thierry nodded. “It is the same for all of us who came through his kingdom. He takes credit for our success. He considers himself our mentor, our teacher. He expects us to show him respect, not through money or information but by…”

“He sees himself as your Maker,” Thalia finished.

Thierry was surprised how painful, yet how true Thalia’s words rang. “Yes.”

When Thalia nodded for him to continue, Thierry said, “If I do otherwise, he’ll be suspicious. I believe that what I need to know can only be found by being as close to him as I am to you now.” When Thalia hissed, he said, “I know my boundaries! I know how to play this game! If I can find this thing, this proof that he betrays all vampires by creating these rogues, there will be none who will dispute my right to give him his final death.”

“And if he gives that gift to you, instead?” Thalia smirked.
“Then, I’ll depend on you to make sure I’m avenged,” Thierry laughed, “After all, we are such good friends now, and what are good friends for?” and he raised his shoulder in that classic Gallic shrug.

When the Anubis shuttle pulled up at the door, Thalia walked him out, “Give my greetings to the Viking,” she told him.

Thierry nodded. He found he watched her as they pulled away. Fate made strange bedfellows, and forming an uneasy friendship with the legendary Thalia was proof. He pulled his phone from his pocket and scrolled to the oldest message from Nabila. It was a link to a newspaper item. It announced an investigation was being launched into allegations of corruption involving several national banks and a well-known female business person in the Charlotte area. The second text simply read, ‘Did you know?’

Boston

Thierry knew Nabila was already in the city, her place as Clan Chief requiring she come early so her people could conclude arrangements with the organizers before meetings started. Being first wasn’t all business. It also gave the Carolinas Queen her pick of spa services, entertainment venues, and hotel concierge staff.

Thierry no sooner tipped the bellhop and turned to his suitcase than there was a discreet knock at his door. He opened it to find a vampire guard wearing a familiar lapel pin. “I am at your Queen’s disposal,” Thierry bowed briefly, and then followed the vampire into the staircase and up several flights. These were the more exclusive floors of the Colonnade and the guard swiped a card to gain access. Almost every room on this floor had a guard or two. “Talk about Game of Thrones,” Thierry chuckled, earning him an eye roll from those he passed. At the end of the corridor, the double doors opened for him. The suite was beautifully decorated in blond wood and modern touches. Thierry stood in the meeting area, not moving toward one bedroom or the other, waiting for her.

“Did you know?” She walked toward him from the bedroom to the left. She was dressed in a pencil skirt, the pink silk of her blouse making her skin glow.

“I did not.” There had not been much more news available on the Internet, but seeing the stress on her face, he knew there was more, much more. “I am sorry I didn’t respond earlier. The great Thalia decided to become my houseguest and it was everything I could do to keep her contained.”

“Another cog in the great design of your ambition?” Nabila’s voice was light, but Thierry wasn’t fooled. She doubted him.

“It’s Thalia,” he smirked, thinking that should be enough to put Nabila’s suspicions to rest. He found he didn’t wish her thinking he was using her. He wished her to think well of him. “Tell me what I can do to help you,” he said, committing himself further, and not sure why he was.

“I think Misha is behind it,” Nabila sighed. She walked into the room now, and taking a bottle of blood from the warmer, sat down on the couch.

“What proof do you have?” Thierry sat down next to her, dreading the answer. When she looked away, he felt relieved and then guilty that he did.

“I don’t know for sure. I have this feeling that he wants to be Clan Chief. You know him. He’d never ask and he figures I’m too proud to just hand it to him, so he’ll destroy me to get it.” Nabila shook her head, “It’s not like this is new. It’s why I wanted the marriage with Northman. I figured Misha would think twice before going up against the Viking.” It was no secret that Nabila had almost succeeded in maneuvering Eric Northman into a royal marriage, but in the end Sookie
Stackhouse had won out.

“I will remember those days with some fondness,” Thierry smiled, running his fingers over her fingertips. “It is how we met.” She smiled briefly, but he could see her worry. For a moment, Thierry wondered what he would have done had Nabila produced proof. It would have forced him to make a choice, and he realized he was not sure which way he would go. To side with Nabila felt right, but it would mean revealing himself to New York before he was ready. “It is easy to blame the usual suspects,” he said lightly. He continued his motion to drag his fingers up her arm, but even as he leaned in to follow fingers with lips, he felt he was betraying her.

She was tense, but Thierry knew he would be under similar circumstances. ‘This play is enjoyable for both of us. It is nothing more than that,’ he told himself, but somehow he wasn’t sure he believed it.

“If I really needed you,” she whispered, and he stilled, his lips positioned under her ear. He waited, but she didn’t continue her thought. Instead, she turned to him and he saw her resignation. She kissed him then, and her hands pulled at his shirt and then his pants. Thierry found he was more motivated, more determined than in past. He wished to give her comfort. He wished to give her protection. He wished to give her things he could not.

As dawn approached, he lifted his head to trail kisses over her small breasts. As he rubbed his cheek on her belly, he whispered, “Vous demandez si l’amour rend hereuse; Il le promet, croyez-le, fut-ce un jour.”

“My French is rusty,” she whispered. “What does it mean?”

“It’s a poem by a woman, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore. She asks if love can truly make her happy. Her lover promises her it will, if only for that day.” Thierry stroked her hip, laying his cheek against her. He thought about the rest of the poem. The poetess wonders if the sadness, the torture that comes during the moments she is not with him is worth the flash of happiness that comes only in moments.

“Do you love me?” Nabila asked. Thierry had no words. He moved back to cover her with his body, to place his mouth on hers and hoped that his actions told her what he wished he could say.

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The human actors from A Viking’s Bond clustered around their producers, and then around Bill Compton. Photographers and television crews took pictures, the bright lights making the area look as if it was day. Bill was wearing a new tuxedo and Sonder, Twy’s former assistant, was standing at his side in a designer dress. Twy had gone out of her way to make sure the reporters understood that Sonder was a key organizer with the Silent Witnesses here in the Boston office. Bill sported a button supporting the group on his lapel and was busy spouting his well-rehearsed sound clip about common cause and collaboration.

“Is this the inspiration for Shanna?” one of the reporters shouted.

“She certainly could have been,” Bill made sure he used the smile he’d practiced in the mirror, the charming, courtly one. “But, sadly, I didn’t know Sonder when I was writing the original books. No, Shanna was inspired by another wonderful human woman, a true Southern belle.” He let the smile drop just a bit when he leaned forward, causing the reporters to lean forward too, “The strength of this story is in how it shows that two people can find true love if they are willing to look past their physical differences and just see the real people that are underneath.” The crowds that were following the interviews on the large screens positioned up and down the street sighed and cheered.
There were hardly any protesters in sight, but then again, it has hard to protest when one of your leaders was standing next to a vampire in a sequined gown.

“But a Viking?” the reporter gushed.

Bill struggled to maintain his smile. He found he often conveniently forgot the way his story had been destroyed. In his heart, the real heroes, Shanna and Troy, found their way to each other, not Shanna and Leif. “I’ll grant you, it’s a pretty thick layer to peel back,” Bill said in what he hoped was an amusing way and then he winked.

The reporters moved on and Twy appeared at Bill’s elbow, “Don’t wink!” she hissed.

“What do you mean?” he said from the side of his mouth.

“It makes you look crazy,” the publicist hissed, then grabbed Sonder’s elbow and pushed her forward so she was standing closer to Bill. “Smile more!” she instructed.

From their vantage a short distance away, the New York vampires watched the action surrounding the celebrity guests for tonight’s function. “What do you make of that?” Misha asked Carlo, pointing at the interplay between the publicist, Compton and Sonder.

“The woman with Compton looks drugged,” Carlo whispered.

“Or glamoured,” Misha agreed. “You see the button Compton is wearing? I heard his escort is being introduced as an organizer for the Silent Witnesses. It is a curious choice for a vampire. You know Compton was Crowe’s houseguest in Jackson.”

“I do, Majesty,” Carlo was speaking through his professional smile, “And a neighbor to Miss Ravenscroft’s Maker.”

“I didn’t know that,” Misha turned, his eyes warmer. “You please me with your ability to find out interesting things.” Misha’s instincts sat up and took notice. “Do some digging.” Carlo nodded and then excused himself as Pam walked back toward them.

“I don’t think he likes me,” Pam arched her eyebrow, jerking her chin in the direction of Misha’s retreating second.

“Carlo likes Carlo,” Misha shrugged, “He worries you are too great a distraction for me.” When Pam said nothing, Misha held out his hand. Pam waited a long minute, forcing the King to meet her eyes before extending her own, “You are not a distraction,” the King told her. “You are a revelation.”

They turned to the sound of voices calling Pam’s name. Pam was being waved toward some reporters and a camera crew. A short woman with a clipboard approached them, explaining the reporter was interested in talking about Fangtasia and how the vampire fantasy club franchise had helped pave the way for the acceptance of a movie featuring a human/vampire love story.

Pam squeezed the King’s hand before turning to follow the woman. Misha followed her briefly with his eyes and then looked back at the other vampires who were standing in groups on the red carpet tonight.

When he and Pam arrived this evening, Misha had made a point of presenting himself to Nabila first. As his Clan Chief, his show of obedience to her was expected and he wished to be first in line, sending the remaining Moshup monarchs and others a not so subtle message. Nabila made the official introductions to Stan Davis and Felipe de Castro, though it wasn’t necessary. His Pam knew them both and soon they had moved away, chatting together, leaving Nabila standing apart from
them. Luckily for her, the other Moshup monarchs took their places, filing one after the other to present themselves, saving Nabila from looking foolish.

When Pam finished up her interview, she walked back toward him, Felipe de Castro in tow. The Nevada monarch immediately began doing his best to be pleasant, “I hope you’ll be attending the business presentations tomorrow. I count myself fortunate to have Pamela as my business partner in my newest venture.” Felipe was wearing a tuxedo and an odd cape. It was over the top, but the reporters around them seemed to find it irresistible. As for his Pamela, she managed to look regal and at the same time polite. “Her style, her elegance, will be critical to making our newest line of clubs a success,” Felipe continued, bowing briefly in Pam’s direction.

De Castro’s progeny, Angie, was acting as her Sire’s escort. Misha noted with some satisfaction that while Angie looked presentable, there wasn’t one vampire or human on the red carpet tonight who matched Pam. While the others wore couture, his Pamela owned it. It was in the way she stood, the tilt of her head, every gesture showing a lifetime of lessons in posture and deportment. While others dressed the part, Pam simply was quality. He found his eyes drawn to her even while De Castro spoke about the potential for profits and his hope that Misha would be interested in hearing more.

Misha realized that Felipe was asking him a question when the familiar French accent interrupted, "Misha! Surely you are not bored already? ”

Felipe stopped in mid-sentence, his face souring. Misha flicked his eyes to the Narayana Chief, then to Thierry, “You are impertinent, Thierry! Felipe was just making a most persuasive argument for my taking a share in his new venture!” Both Misha and Thierry knew that the French Sheriff had saved New York from making a potential blunder.

“I look forward to providing you details,” Felipe assured Misha, and then gave Thierry a cutting look as he took Angie’s arm and walked away.

“Tomorrow,” Misha bowed.

Thierry’s eyes widened as he looked at Pam, and then back at Misha. “Pamela! I didn’t expect to see you here!”

Pam gave the Sheriff a tight smile, then turned to Misha, “I have some business. I’ll see you later?”

“You have the number for the car,” the King smiled briefly, then taking her hand, kissed her palm. It was an intimate gesture, but he wished it known that his feelings for this woman were more than fleeting.

When she turned the corner, Misha wrapped the younger vampire in a bear’s hug. “Once more, you save me! Once more, I am in your debt!” Both of them knew there was no true debt, only a placeholder in the dance of favors between them.

“Her Maker is due to arrive here in two night’s time. He has been named Amun Clan Chief. Does she know?”

“She hasn’t mentioned it,” Misha shrugged. “So, Northman will not seek a reconciliation?”

“No, it is not likely,” Thierry shrugged in return. “He has moved most of his operations back toward Shreveport and seems very taken with his Fae Queen.”

“Sookie,” Misha smirked, “Rhymes with cookie.”

“It is an unusual name,” the French vampire agreed. He looked back in the direction Pam had taken.
“You seem very taken with her.”

“I think if it’s true that there are as many minds as there are heads, then there are as many kinds of love as there are hearts.”

“Tolstoy?” the French vampire smiled, but he didn’t find Misha’s sentiment amusing. He looked at this vampire who was so many things: his sponsor, his teacher, his mentor, his enemy. He knew with a certainty that he would drive the stake that would end Misha’s existence, but in this moment, he found himself captured by the way the New York King’s eyes shone as he spoke of Pam Ravenscroft. Almost unbidden, matching words found his lips, “When you love someone, you love the person as they are, not as you’d like them to be.”

“She is perfection,” Misha replied and Thierry realized the King hadn’t understood his words at all.

Xxxx

“I will consider what you are saying about wind turbines,” Felipe de Castro said smoothly.

“Stop playing with us,” Stan laughed. “The only way you’d be interested in wind turbines is if we dressed them up in pasties and had them do a high kick!”

“You seem to have an unfavorable impression of my business skills,” Felipe’s smile was in place, but there was a colder quality to his stare.

“Don’t take it the wrong way!” Stan laughed a little too loudly, “It’s just you are the King of Vegas. You show up here with a presentation for your sex club franchise. You’ve had miles of desert you could have carpeted in solar panels, but you haven’t. Just making an observation.”

“I will agree I have not truly considered it,” Felipe allowed some of the ice to thaw, “but neither have I had the opportunity to hear your compelling presentation until tonight. I will give it my full attention,” and he bowed slightly.

Stan turned to Thierry as soon as Felipe was reasonably out of earshot, “Maybe we should put on some stripper music in the background? Wouldn’t want him to zone out too early.”

Thierry tried to look as if he was amused by Stan’s joke. In reality, he found the Zeus Clan Chief crass, but he also realized that bawdy humor didn’t mean Stan wasn’t smart. Underestimating Stan Davis could be a fatal mistake. He looked at the doors again. The meetings would start soon and once they did, it would be hard to find a way to get Misha into the side room to see the television with its news feed. The seneschal who would signal the beginnings of the business presentations was just walking into the lobby when Misha and Pam appeared. She was wearing heels, which made her taller than him, but anyone seeing them could see they were together. It was still a jolt.

“Majesty!” Thierry rushed forward, “I am so pleased to see you are here. My presentation is first, and I would be pleased if you would do me the great favor of observing and providing me feedback.”

“Still fond of your first teacher?” Misha smiled indulgently. “For you, moyo Thierry, of course!” Thierry smiled and made to turn, then stopped and stared, giving just the right amount of surprise. Misha’s face changed to slight curiosity and then he turned too, to see the television screen. The Kings Russell Edgington and Bartlett Crowe were standing on a podium side by side, flanked by several recognizable faces, one in uniform. The scroll on the bottom of the screen informed audiences that prominent vampires were forming a coalition to fight vampire crime in Indiana.

Thierry saw the fury flow over Misha’s face, the cold, dead look his eyes took on before he ordered someone’s final death. He must have made a gesture, because Carlo was standing next to them.
Thierry hadn’t seen him walk in. “What is it?” Pam asked.

“Nothing, Zolotse,” Misha smiled up at her, the snake suddenly hidden. “I know you wish to meet your business partner before your presentation begins. Please, go on! I will be there in a minute!” Next, the King turned to Thierry, “You do not wish to be late. I will be there in a moment. I would not miss something so important to one who is important to me!” If Thierry hadn’t been watching closely, he wouldn’t have known anything was amiss.

The room with the television was one of a series of rooms made out of false walls. Thierry bowed and moved away as if to join his meeting, but instead of taking a right, he walked through the door that placed him in a staging room that was adjacent to the television room. He placed his ear against the thin wall and listened.

“How did they do this and you not know?” Misha hissed. “This ruins everything! How do I come in as the hero now if they have stolen my plans! I want to find out who told them what we were going to do! Find out! I will have their guts to dangle to the cats!”

“Calm yourself!” Carlo hissed back, “You’ll be heard! No one could have known. I’ll ask. I always do, but only you and I knew about this. The plans are in your personal computer. Only you and I have the codes. You know me, and I’ll give you my blood as often as you need. You would feel if I was guilty! It could be just coincidence. Good ideas can come to more than one person. Unless…” and the second hesitated.

“Unless?” Misha’s hiss was harsher.

“Would the Ravenscroft woman…”

“I told her nothing, you bastard!” Misha raved and Thierry was certain he heard the sound of someone being struck.

His suspicion was confirmed when he heard Carlo’s muffled voice saying, “I apologize. It was not my place.”

“You will make an excuse,” Misha hissed. “You know what I need and by the time I reach the house, I expect it to be arranged, and then you will get to the bottom of this. I want every detail. Who arranged this for Crowe and Edgington?” There was a scrabbling noise and then silence. Thierry knew all too well what would happen tonight in Misha’s house. He wondered if Pam knew about the ritual that allowed Misha to regain his self-control.

With a quick glance to make sure he wasn’t seen, he walked across the hall and then rushed to the front of the room. “Where were you?” Stan hissed.

“Blood break,” Thierry rolled his eyes, and then taking the remote, launched into his presentation on investment opportunities in solar technology.
Nautical Note: In the days before electronics, the way to figure out how fast you were traveling involved throwing a log attached to a line with knots tied at specific intervals. One sailor watched a time glass while the other allowed the line to run. When time was called, you counted the number of knots to see how fast things were moving.

Bon Temps

Eric and Sookie were lying on their ‘new’ bed in the master suite at the Bon Temps house. The Fae bed was back and Eric had to admit, there was something to it.

The night they were to leave for their in vitro appointment in Shreveport, Dermot showed up. He asked them to reconsider accepting the bed he’d made for them. “I built it for your benefit,” he explained. “It works with the land here. It will bring you success.”

“It’s up to you, Älskade,” Eric shrugged.

“You are sure?” Sookie asked, pushing her concern at him so hard he felt obligated to say more.

“I have no attachment to the other bed, Lover,” he assured her. “I am not just trying to be kind. It is a bed we only shared a few times before our time here.” Sookie nodded, and then she did something that seemed strange to Eric.

Sookie turned to Dermot and said, “Can I make you something to eat?” There was very little time until they had to leave. Of course, Sookie was ever polite, but there was something about how she said it, and the way she waited that caught Eric’s attention.

Dermot looked startled, but after a pause, he replied, “I would be happy to have cookies, and sweet tea? No one makes sweet tea like you.”

It was only after Dermot ate a bite of the cookie and sipped the tea that Sookie said, “We’d be honored to accept the bed.”

When they got in the car, Sookie explained what she’d learned about feeding Fae. “When he ate, I knew he wasn’t up to mischief, well, bad mischief anyway.”

“If Dermot truly meant us harm, Älskade, the wards would have prevented his approaching the house,” Eric shrugged.

“I don’t know, Eric,” Sookie told him, “I’m not sure how the wards react when the person who made them is the one being tricky. There are things that I’m learning that are making me pretty wary about Fae magic.” By the time they returned from Shreveport, the massive wood frame was in place.
and their former bed was already disassembled and stacked in their front room.

The procedure itself went well, just as quick and painless as promised. Eric and Sookie were offered the option to implant more than one embryo, but Doctor Ludwig recommended against it. “I’ve been to your place,” Amy rasped, “I have a feeling about this, and unless you want twins right away, I’d suggest you start slow.”

After the procedure, they were told that Sookie should rest as much as possible and Doctor Ludwig would come out to the house to check progress in one week’s time. “Don’t get your hopes up,” she warned them. “Tests can be inconclusive. Even with my nose, it can take several weeks to know for sure,” then turning to Sookie, the Doctor said, “Just try to relax. No travel. No stress.”

That had been two nights ago and all seemed to be going well. In less than an hour, Eric would leave for New Orleans. He had a meeting with Octavia Fant later tonight and tomorrow morning he would travel to Boston in his coffin.

“I wish I could go with you,” Sookie said again.

“You know what the troll said. No travel.” Eric made an effort to appear wholly confident. He knew that with the bond open between them, he would not be able to hide all of his worry, but he hoped by smiling and acting the part it would be harder for Sookie to find what he wished to keep hidden.

Somehow he hadn’t been surprised to hear Octavia Fant’s name. She was the witch who stepped forward to block ectoplasmic reconstruction at Amelia Broadway’s former shop. Sookie had mentioned Octavia’s name twice before, and Eric didn’t think it was coincidence. “Octavia has agreed to meet me at the Palace. Max and Emil both assure me this is a meeting worth the trip.” Eric tightened his grip around his wife, but he was careful not to breathe. The new injections were making Sookie smell even worse. This new hormone added a sharpness to the mildewed laundry smell that emanated from her pores. ‘I will have to replace the sheets,’ he thought. ‘The smell will never come out of them.’ Out loud he said, “It will only be for two nights. I will be back in time for the Doctor’s visit with stories of Boston and, perhaps, a gift.”

“Well, don’t you worry. I’ll have those trestles in place and when you open the lid you’ll be decked out like Sunday’s best china.” There was no elevator at the house, no way to move Eric’s coffin to an upper floor. When Eric returned during daytime hours, his coffin would have to rest in the front room and Sookie teased him that she would order flowers and set up the room to make it look like a wake. “You are dead, after all!” she laughed.

“Hiding from humans in plain sight,” he laughed. It had been a way vampires had hidden in the past, a macabre reminder of another time. In spite of their joking, they could both feel each other’s unease.

It was Sookie who allowed her smile to drop first, “Much as I love this place?” Sookie picked at his shirt, “I don’t see this being our ultimate home.”

“How so?” Eric asked. Her words took him by surprise. Sookie’s deep attachment to her ancestral home and Bon Temps was something he had taken for granted. This was something new.

“I’m not saying we wouldn’t keep this place. Goodness knows, we have more than enough money to keep it up like a vacation house, but I’ve been thinking it’s probably not the best for us in the long run,” and Sookie sighed.

“But I thought you loved this place. I thought you were happiest surrounded by your friends and in this place where you grew up. Why has that changed?” Sookie pulled away from him so she could face him.
“For one thing, there’s no easy way to get your coffin someplace really safe. I know we have guards, and I know we’re in no danger, but I worry. I’d be happier with you resting behind doors that lock. There was that time we were driving back here and the sun rose. You were in the trunk of that Cadillac and the police wanted to prove you were really in there. I’ll tell you, Eric, the thought that they could fling open that trunk and you’d be gone? It still haunts me. I know your travel coffins lock from the inside, but still…”

When Eric nodded, Sookie continued, “You know I love my woods. I love being out here in nature. It feeds some part of me deep down, but it also exposes us. It takes a lot of guards to keep an eye on what’s going on all around us out here. You always chose to live in a gated community, and the more I think about it, the more I can see some advantages.”

“What has happened to make you worry, Lover? Did you see something?” Eric asked her.

“No, nothing in particular,” and Sookie shrugged. She leaned forward, wrapping her arms around him. “Fact is, since we started all this baby business, I don’t feel very magical at all. Mostly I feel cranky and plugged up. I’m doing alright with my lessons. Tamsin’s drilling me every day on changing the appearances of folks, and she has me making things. She says creating with magic builds a good environment for growing other things,” and Sookie blushed a little. “Truth is; I think it’s all the hormones messing with me. I can’t stop thinking about you, about us. I’m happy, Eric, and I have moments I worry that I’m too happy, and something will come to take it all away.”

Eric could feel her anxiety, and so he chuckled, “Of course there will be challenges in our path, Lover. I have lived a very long time and I know for every moment of joy, there will come some moment of worry. But that, min krigare kvinna, is how it should be. If we had nothing but joy, we would grow bored with our existence. It is the troubles that keep things interesting.”

"If you say so!” she whispered against him, ”But do me a favor, Buster, and try to keep things as boring as possible over the next couple days?”

There was a noise from downstairs. It was Eric’s signal. “Your friends will visit tomorrow. Mr. Cataliades will be here every evening. He has the details on the land I must consider acquiring in Arkansas. If you could handle that while I am gone, it would put my mind at ease.”

When his wife nodded, he rose from the bed, ”You will be busy, Sookie, and I will text you when I rise, but try not to be too busy. In fact, if you wish to stay in bed and watch that Scottish man on television, I will try not to complain,” and Eric waggled his eyebrows at her.

When the cable people had finally come to sort things out, Eric had had a monitor placed in the corner of their bedchamber. It was capable of streaming content and Sookie had rather quickly discovered Outlander, a television show featuring an attractive couple set in ancient Scotland. Eric teased her about it, giving merciless criticism of the accuracy of everything from accents to dress.

“So, you know when we get the green light for sex again, I’m going to want you to dress up in a kilt, right? I mean, it’s only right we should christen the bed in style,” Sookie smirked.

Eric leaned over, and in his best Scottish brogue he growled, ”You dinna need to put me in a skirt to run your hands over my ass, Sassenach. Ye can explore that anytime!” and he nipped her lower lip.

As he straightened up and turned toward the door, Sookie whispered, ”I love you, Eric Northman,” and he felt it coming to him through everything she was. It was a lovely picture she made, her hair messy and the sheets twisted around her hips. She was sitting so straight in the middle of that huge bed in her PowerPuff Girls night shirt and the way she smiled at him made her eyes shine. ”I’m yours,” she told him.
"Yes, you are," he replied.

Boston

Thierry handed off the presentation to Stan Davis who spent the second part of the hour they had been allotted talking about the opportunities for wind farms along the Eastern seaboard. This wasn’t exactly news to anyone here. Humans had been working on integrating alternative energy in this part of the country for some time. It was hard to not find his eyes wandering to the door. Thierry knew it was unlikely that Misha would return to the convention center tonight. Thierry recognized the fury in the King’s voice, the barely contained rage. He hadn’t seen it often over the long years he served in the New York Court, and he had been privy to what followed only once. That once had been enough. Somewhere in the city, Thierry knew a youth was meeting his end. He also knew Misha had no qualms about it. At heart, the New York King was a vampire of the old regime. He believed at some level that humans were here to be consumed. Whether they served as his sustenance or served his body in some other way was of no consequence.

Stan finished and the question and answer period began. There were representatives from the Moshup kingdoms, including the Carolinas. Only two of the monarchs were attending, Grace from the Virginias and Luis from Florida. Thierry was not surprised that these monarchs had an interest in wind turbines. Their geography made them optimal candidates. Luis talked over the mechanics of organizing strings of wind farms with Stan, and then turned to Thierry, "I understand your King will be here tomorrow?"

"You have been well informed," the French Sheriff replied smoothly, bowing as was appropriate.

"It has been a long time since I’ve seen him," Grace said, all formal correctness, but then her eyes narrowed, "but I don’t think it’s possible that he could save our Chief from her disgrace."

Thierry’s smile froze as Stan nodded, "Yup, I heard they are really trotting out the big guns to take her down. I don’t know Nabila well, but something about this doesn’t add up."

"She’ll have to step down," Luis nodded. "If this was some common investigation it could be overlooked, an inconvenience, but they are talking about seizing her records."

"She will have to hand everything over, or run the risk," Grace’s words were noncommittal, but Thierry was sure he heard just a hint of satisfaction. He wanted to excuse himself to find Nabila. He agreed with Stan. This was not the woman he knew. He wanted to take her in his arms and protect her. 'Think!' his instincts warned him. 'Think who will be Clan Chief next. If you side with her, he will not forget!' As he fought with himself, Pam Ravenscroft walked in with Felipe de Castro and his second. Hotel staff were distributing binders and Pam fiddled with her laptop. A presentation blinked up on the screen, and those around him took notice. Thierry saw Pam look around. 'She’s looking for him,' he realized. With a thin smile, he walked to the row of seats against the wall, the ones for spectators, and settled himself. His fingers itched to pick up his phone, to text Nabila, but he clenched his fingers and instead he focused on Pam’s opening words.

Pam had brought him in as Eric’s Sheriff. Of course, the final decision had been the Northman’s, but it was this woman who had allowed him the opportunity. Still, he found he didn’t fully trust her, at least not enough to tell her everything as he had Thalia. He had seen the way she looked at Misha earlier, that same beguiled look he had seen in the mirror often enough. Pam hadn’t been given the gift that Thierry had, the gift of betrayal so harsh it removed the possibility of seeing the New York monarch as anything but a corrupt, venal bully who played with every creature around him, until tiring, he plucked their wings and left them for dead. She was still enamored by his conversation and the charisma that pulled everyone to him. Even those who didn’t agree with Misha could find themselves charmed.
'I will check with Thalia,' he thought. 'Thalia will know how much I can tell Pam. She will know what words will tell Pam to be careful.' He suspected Pam was in touch with Karin, and he figured that probably didn’t work in his favor. Thomas, Karin, and he had been playmates on more than one occasion, but during the last few encounters there had been an undertone of jealousy, a possessiveness that tarnished the pleasure. Thierry had returned to New Orleans, and shortly afterward received word that Karin had left Thomas. She used the excuse that she was restless. Thomas had not been forthcoming, but Thierry didn’t accept the explanation. Something had happened, and his instincts told him that he had become Karin’s excuse.

From her position in the front of the room, Pam settled in, walking through her presentation on autopilot. This part was always the easiest, the set words that flowed timed to the clicking of presentation slides. Angie would take over the second half, allowing Felipe the freedom to sit back and read the body language of their audience. ‘The privilege of kings,’ she thought, and found her eyes heading back to the door.

The past two nights had been hectic. Twy left this morning during daylight hours. Twy and Pam had handled the transition with Nabila’s people like adults, and, for that, Pam was grateful. Twy was officially back on her own payroll, and probably already in Indiana bullying the media. The thought of the pushy publicist and Brock in partnership with Russell and Bartlett almost caused Pam to stumble in her speech. She had a feeling they would get along famously. Pam scanned the small crowd assembled. She saw the Virginia Queen and the Florida King. Judith of Pennsylvania was not here, but Pam wasn’t surprised. Judith rarely spoke above a whisper anymore. Tranh’s death had finished any desire Judith had to assert herself. She really needed to step down before someone ended her. Pam wondered if this would be the Pennsylvania Queen’s last Summit. Charles of Georgia wasn’t here either, but Charles rarely left his beloved Savannah. He had sent representatives. That left only Misha and Nabila, and from what Pam had seen in the suite earlier this evening, Nabila might be the next to go.

The Carolinas Queen had been polite, but no one had that many attorneys talking on phones if they weren’t in deep trouble. It was all the gossip that the Queen would return from the Summit to a waiting subpoena. There was a rumor that her assets were already frozen, or would be soon.

As Pam swung into her last two slides, she spotted Thierry sitting against the wall. She found herself thinking about something Karin had told her, that the French vampire had the morals of an alley cat. There was something more than waspish in the way Karin spoke of him, and Pam had almost called her sister out on it. She knew Karin was running again, which was what her sister did when her feelings started crowding her. Pam knew Karin was running again, which was what her sister did when her feelings started crowding her. Pam knew Karin was desperately in love with Thomas, but she also knew that Karin might hurt herself before she would admit to it. 'Pride and fear,' Pam thought, 'a deadly combination.' Still, Pam knew that Thierry was also Nabila’s current favored bed warmer. The Carolinas Queen was nothing if not in need of all the comfort she could get, and yet, here sat the Sheriff, watching her as if she was the most interesting thing in the room. It was cold, almost as cold as the man Karin had described.

Angie stepped forward and started talking. When Pam sat down, she glanced over to find Thierry still staring at her. She knew Eric liked this Sheriff. He admired Thierry’s intelligence and wit, but Pam knew that wouldn’t be enough for Eric to accept him. Eric was a good judge of character, but it was hard not to compare this Sheriff’s behavior toward Nabila with Misha’s treatment of herself. Misha was funny, but not in the smirking, teasing way Thierry had. Instead, Misha was charming. He was interested in everything she said, everything she did. He was open in his admiration and demanded that others admire her, too. He fed her ego in a way even Eric never had, and Pam had to admit, it felt good.

She glanced toward the door again, 'Where is he?’ she wondered. She saw Felipe. He was stroking
his thin mustache. Pam knew Felipe intended to offer Misha a piece of the clubs in New England, and she was fine with that. She found herself thinking about Eric. He would be here tomorrow night, which meant she would need to make herself scarce. It hardly seemed worth it. There were almost no rogues in this part of the country, and, as far as she could tell, few to none up and down the coastline. Luis mentioned some reports in the panhandle of Florida. Judith seemed the only one to consider them anything more than a minor inconvenience.

The presentation ended and Felipe rose smoothly to take his place in the front of the room. Pam purposely deferred to him. There was some money here, but mostly the concessions sought were permission to open clubs in territories with reasonable tithes. Thierry was approaching her when Pam saw a movement at the door. It was Andrew, Misha’s houseman. Andrew stepped forward, but then his face lit up with pleasure, "Thierry!"

"Mon ami!" the Sheriff replied smoothly, and they bowed in the way of friends.

"He will be so happy to know you are here!" Andrew gushed.

"He knows," Thierry kept his face neutral, "I saw him earlier."

"And he didn’t invite you home?" Andrew continued, "I can’t imagine such a thing!"

"He is doubtless busy," Thierry replied, but there was something careful about his tone, and Pam saw the French vampire slide his eyes toward her.

‘Were you his bedmate too?’ she found herself wondering, and Karin’s unkind words came back to her. Thierry’s eyes met hers, and she knew he could see her doubt. He stood taller then, bowed, and made his apologies.

"Please, convey my greetings to your King," he said to Andrew in a formal voice. "It was good to see you."

Andrew bowed, but Pam could see he was confused. He turned to her, "If you are ready, Miss. I have the car here. We can head back."

It was on the tip of her tongue to refuse, but she didn’t. She walked ahead of Andrew to the lobby, and then through the doors the staff held open for her to exit onto the street where the black car awaited them. The ride back to Beacon Hill was quick this time of night. As they turned onto the first of the cobblestone streets, Pam thought she saw a cleaner’s van ahead of them, but that didn’t make any sense. In a few more minutes, Andrew opened her door and she stepped into the formal entry. Above her, she heard the sounds of a piano. Climbing the stairs, she could hear the waltz more clearly, “The Waves of the Amur,” slow and sad. Misha was wearing a robe tied loosely around his waist. His hair was wet. He glanced up at her, then moved a little on the bench, giving her space. She sat down, watching his hands. He played well, but as someone who was self-taught. His hands stilled, and she reached forward with her own, her fingers gracefully poised over the keys, her wrists arched. Almost unconsciously, she straightened her posture.

"You had a strict governess," Misha laughed dryly.

"Very strict," Pam agreed. "She’d hit my wrists with a ruler if I dropped them.” She began a Chopin piece she remembered loathing because it had been so difficult. Now, her fingers floated through the melody, muscle memory making the playing effortless. She concluded and turned her head to see Misha’s face close to her own.

"You will dance with me at the ball?” he asked.
"For this Summit?" Pam asked, and when he smiled hopefully, she said, "No. I’ll be gone by then."

"But, why, Zolotse?" he asked. "What business could be so pressing that you couldn’t spare a night to float in my arms?"

"I need to get back to Minnesota," Pam shrugged. "There’s no pretending between us. You know my Maker comes tomorrow night. Things are... difficult between us. I’m not banished. He hasn’t shunned me, but I have every reason to put some distance between us. This isn’t any surprise. You knew."

"Yes," Misha nodded, "I knew. But it seems selfish that he should come from his Clan territory to cast a pall over mine. There is truly no reason you shouldn’t be here," and he leaned toward her a little, "by my side, Pam." he whispered.

"You are very sweet," she smiled, and then turning back to the keyboard, said, "but there is no reason to be sad while we are together, so...” and she allowed her fingers to strike up the “Maple Leaf Rag,” her hands moving freely as she banged out the syncopated rhythms. Misha laughed aloud, and with a flourish, inserted his own hands between hers, taking over the melody and then transitioning into a raucous version of “Baby Face.” They finished together, their hands playing in tandem, laughing, racing each other up and down the keys to the end. As they sat back, Misha’s smile dropped, but his eyes warmed further.

"You have captured the heart of a King, Pamela,” he told her. His lips were warm and Pam wondered if this is what love felt like.

New Orleans

Octavia Fant sat in the crème and peach office of the Palace in New Orleans. Devrah sat across from her and Eric didn’t need to be told the women knew each other. It was in their easy way and quiet conversation. If Eric had to guess, he’d say they were old acquaintances. It made him feel more at ease.

Karin walked in behind him, taking a station near the door. 'Thalia has taught you well,’ he thought, and then realized she could just as easily have learned her guarded reactions from him. Emil Touissant, the Packmaster of New Orleans, and Maxwell Lee, Eric’s second, also walked in behind the King. Until they received the request from Octavia, Eric had been working on a plan that involved turning the zip drive of names Karin had retrieved from Amelia Broadway’s computer over to the vampire monarchs of the respective states or countries. These were the names of witches who had purchased the charm from Amelia, the one that allowed the user to remove glamour. As those whose subjects were now the subject of blackmail, Eric considered the monarchs in best position to take swift action.

Emil advocated killing everyone on the list. "Why take chances?" he told them. "Now that this knowledge is out in the world, what stops another witch from doing it again? You’ve eliminated the source," he told Eric, "now let’s clean up the rest of the mess. With the Internet, it will need to be coordinated. I believe you can count on the Weres to help carry out what needs to be done."

This plan had the benefit of simplicity, but the more Eric turned it over in his mind, the worse it felt. It meant war with the witches, and on a larger scale than any of them had ever seen. Witches weren’t like Fae. They were less predictable in their magic. Some were famous, witches who could alter weather or slow time. Others needed the collective skill of their covens, but when they did combine their efforts became a force to be reckoned with. Most witches were what Eric considered garden variety witches, dabblers in love spells and wards to protect property and person. To turn all witches against the vampires created too many variables.
Octavia Fant stood to greet him, and Devrah rose, too. Eric bowed, "It has been many years since we have seen each other." Indeed, the witch looked little changed. She was short, even a little shorter than Sookie. Her graying hair was braided against her head, emphasizing her sharp features. Where Devrah carried the unmistakable mark of French Creole blood, Octavia’s cheekbones rose high and her eyes tilted. She bore herself as straight as any Queen, and Eric supposed in her community, she was. "The years have been kind to you," he said. He found this to be an acceptable comment for older females.

Octavia’s lips curved up, "And I could say you haven’t changed a bit, but I expect you get that a lot."

Eric grinned, almost in spite of himself. He had not had much occasion to speak with this woman, for all she had also been Sookie’s roommate. Octavia had done Sookie, in fact all of them, several good turns. She had helped with the ectoplasmic reconstruction that revealed Maria-Starr’s murderer and helped to remove an evil influence from the woman who would become mate to the Packmaster of Hotshot. She had come under Sookie’s roof at Amelia Broadway’s request, a fellow witch fallen on hard times in the aftermath of Katrina. As it had turned out, Octavia was not as helpless as she had appeared. Eric gestured, indicating they should all sit down, "I never heard the full story of how you ended up under my wife’s roof," he said, hoping a story that linked them would break the ice.

"You know Amelia was a member of my coven?" Octavia began. When Eric nodded, the witch nodded too and settled back. "She was one of the most talented witches I had ever seen. Natural talent and magic that just seemed to tumble from her. It was exhilarating and terrifying to watch. I thought that she had the potential to develop into someone of greatness, a leader among us.” Octavia exhaled and shook her head, "I was wrong. I placed myself in her way, knowing she’d find me after Katrina. It was perfect, even if it was a little inconvenient for Sookie," and Octavia chuckled. "Your Sookie? She’s good people. Wrong-headed. Hard-headed, but good people."

Eric nodded. He noticed Devrah glancing at the witch, "How do you two know each other?"

"We’re cousins,” Devrah answered. "It’s a bit distant, but we’ve always known each other. Of course, New Orleans is a small town and we talk relations here like some folks read books."

"I want you to know that we were just about to move on Amelia,” Octavia told him, her back poker-straight. "We were all set to go to her shop the night after you did, to shut her down. I had several talks with Amelia. I told her what she was doing was wrong, that it created a danger for all of us.” Octavia didn’t show any sign of regret or sorrow when she said, "If you hadn’t ended her, I would have.”

"Fine words coming now, after the fact,” Emil didn’t look like he was buying any of it. "And if you were so anxious to end the problem, why didn’t you offer help before? Why let this get so bad? Are you going to say you didn’t know about any of it until it was too late?"

"Amelia, for all she had become a problem for her coven, was not unconnected,” Octavia replied. "She was still technically married. Her husband is a witch with influence, and their daughter needed to be considered. It is no small thing to be married to a woman whose own coven had to end her. Their child would carry the stigma for the rest of her life. I hoped that her child would mean enough to Amelia to make her stop, but, in the end, the only one who mattered to Amelia was herself.” Octavia leaned forward, "And you should know something, Majesty, she hated you. She hated your wife, too. She thought that Sookie owed her something. She said she’d tried to call her and Sookie didn’t call back. She felt snubbed, but it was you she really hated.”

"I never did anything to her,” Eric shook his head.
"She blamed you for Tray’s death," Emil volunteered.

"Tray Dawson?" The Were had been poisoned. He was killed during a battle with Fae involving Sookie. Eric’s eyes narrowed, "And how did you come by this information?" he asked the Packmaster.

"It is old information," the Packmaster shrugged. "The death happened long ago, but the witch was a resident here for years. She wasn’t shy about recounting her grievances against vampires, and you in particular. She was not a happy woman."

Octavia nodded, "It’s true. She would spill her venom for the price of a cup of tea. I should have done something about her years ago, but I told myself that she was just a bitter young person who would grow into a bitter old person. Folks were already learning to steer clear of her. If it hadn’t been for her talent, she might have just faded away."

"Do you know how she developed the charm?" Maxwell asked.

The witch shook her head, "No, it’s one of the things that intrigued me about her. The magic in her ran so strong, but it was erratic. She could go for long periods with just common magic, nothing special, and then, all of a sudden, this surge would come from out of nowhere and she’d do something extraordinary. I thought she could be trained to channel it, but Amelia lacked the discipline, the will, needed." Octavia looked toward Devrah, "And probably, just as well."

"You’ve come here for a reason," Eric opened for her. "Why don’t you tell me what you are proposing?"

"I’ve heard you’re traveling to a special meeting with the heads of the vampire kingdoms," Octavia folded her hands on her lap. "I’d like to come with you. I am proposing an alliance between witches and vampires to clean up this mess."

"What do you think you can do?" Emil snarled. "I would think that you and your kind have already done enough!"

"Which is why I am asking Eric, the King of my area, and not you, Packmaster!” Octavia snapped. "Your kind would have us hunted to extinction!" The witch turned to the Viking, "You know what it is to be hunted and feared. Witches have shared those experiences with your kind. Whether by religious zealots or small-minded bigots, we have been burned and hung, drowned and stoned. You think I don’t know what something like this could mean? Vampires have been among the few that have hired us, valued us. To make you our enemies, too? Madness."

Eric nodded, "I agree," he said quietly.

Octavia nodded once, and for the first time Eric saw the woman had been afraid. It made him like her more. "Thank you," she replied, and then she gave the Viking a direct look. "There is something else I need to tell you, something that is for you alone."

It was hard not to see this as some plot to get him alone and use magic on him, and Eric’s face must have shown as much.

Octavia glanced over at Karin, "She’s your progeny, right?" she asked, and without waiting for an answer, she said, "She can stay, because if you decide you need to, you can order her to keep quiet."

Now Eric was intrigued, and he signaled for the others to leave the room. When the door closed, Octavia said, "I locked down the shop. No one will be able to see what happened there, by magic or any other means, but to do it, I needed to perform a reconstruction. I saw everything." She waited
then and Eric knew she was wondering if he would kill her. When he made no move other than to nod, she took a deep breath and continued, "I know who that other woman was. She spent a fair amount of time with Amelia. Might say they found common ground in that sack of anger they hauled around." Eric remembered Meg's face as she had appeared on the television stations, her mouth down-turned, her voice strident. "There was a rumor that she had something she was getting ready to hand over to the police, something that would put you in jail or worse."

Karin moved, but Eric held up her hand. "What do the rumors say this thing was?" he asked.

"I don't know," Octavia shook her head, "and now this woman is dead. I know where she lived. The police have declared her a missing person. We would have to break in, but it's possible an ectoplasmic reconstruction there might reveal something."

"It's been weeks," Karin said. "No news is good news. Maybe this thing died with her."

"Perhaps," Eric nodded, "but I have learned from experience that just because you don't hear from police, it doesn't mean they are not working, gathering their bits of information, piecing together their puzzles."

"If you can arrange it, I can have members of my coven, members I trust, go with someone you trust. They can perform the reconstruction any time you ask, but as more time passes, the images will fade," and Octavia sat back.

"Karin," Eric looked at his daughter, "I would ask that you do this. Work with these people and report to me." Karin nodded and the Viking turned back to Octavia. "Thank you," he said. "I had hoped there was another option to this problem. You have given that to me, and I am in your debt."

"I knew I was right coming to you," Octavia smiled briefly. "You have always given other species a chance. I hoped getting a crown and a title hadn't changed you. Devrah told me it hadn't." She glanced away before saying, "This magic Amelia made, this ability to remove glamour, is dangerous, too dangerous to continue. I have already issued a statement declaring it unsanctioned. It will help us weed out those who purchased the charm out of curiosity and those who had ill intent."

"I leave for Boston tomorrow on a private flight," Eric told her.

"Well, good thing I already packed my bags," Octavia replied.

Boston

'There are so few of us,' Nabila thought, looking around the room, 'and none are my allies.' It was a lonely thought. Of all the monarchs in Moshup Clan, Nabila had gotten on best with Tranh and Charles. Now, Tranh was gone and Charles had his representative decline this meeting, saying he didn't have the proper authority to represent his kingdom at this level. Luis of Florida would not meet her eye. He was not her enemy, but neither was he willing to extend himself for her. Grace would go wherever the prevailing winds blew and Judith? Judith hadn't taken her eyes off Mikhail since the meeting started. "I have no friends left," the Carolinas Queen realized, and with that, she bowed to the inevitable.

"I have worries that I do not wish to inflict on any of you," she said with as much dignity as she could. "As you have probably heard, I am under investigation. There are allegations of bribery and fraud that are being prepared against me. These are not true, and I believe that in time, I will be able to clear up this confusion. However, it would be wrong of me to insist on retaining my title of Clan Chief when I will be distracted by what must come. I resign this honor, and ask that you decide who among you is best to take over the leadership of our illustrious Clan." With that, Nabila bowed and
"Well, I don’t think there’s really any question, do you?" Judith piped up. Luis looked at the rabbity Pennsylvania Queen and rolled his eyes. It was a foregone conclusion and they all knew it. As each monarch turned to him, Misha uncoiled from his chair. Taking the few steps, he leaned over and picked up the badge.

"I am honored, of course," he said, a sly smile playing across his lips. He stood still and Nabila wondered if he would insist on killing her anyway. When the silence became almost painful, he looked around at each of his fellow monarchs, smirked, and said, "I will arrange a reception, of course. Something to commemorate the occasion." Draping the medallion over his head, he sat, toyed with it briefly, then said to Nabila, "A wise choice. I would imagine you will want to hurry home now. So much to attend to, so many questions to answer," and his smile broadened.

"Of course," Nabila bowed, realizing he had just dismissed her, even though they were all sitting in her hotel suite. She felt the heart she didn’t have clench in her chest just a bit, the humiliation of it stinging as she knew it was meant to. "If you will excuse me, I will meet with my second and make arrangements." She almost tripped leaving, but managed to hold her head high as she walked down the hallway.

She decided to take the stairs down one floor. Her second was on the same floor as the visiting kings. Nabila raised her hand to knock on the door when another opened and Thierry stepped out. "My Queen!" he smiled. She couldn’t maintain her façade and a single blood tear slipped from her eye. She scrubbed it quickly and bit the inside of her cheek, willing her emotions to settle. "Nabila?" and he stepped closer. It was at that moment the elevator doors opened and Misha exited, followed by Carlo.

"Oh, you’re still here?” he asked, his voice level, looking past her as if the Queen was so much dirt under his shoe. His sneer turned to a smile though as he recognized her companion. "Thierry! What a pleasure! I was just on my way to introduce myself to your King! What a fortunate circumstance."

"My King has already gone to the meeting rooms. I believe King Davis is with him," Thierry bowed. There was an awkward moment. Misha didn’t move. Carlo didn’t move. Thierry glanced up and then straightened. "Of course, I would be happy to keep you company until the Clan Chief gathering has concluded," Thierry said carefully.

"Oh, you haven’t heard," Misha purred, "I am the new Clan Chief now." He glanced at Nabila who was standing so still Thierry wondered if she’d gone into downtime. "Our former Clan Chief is preparing to leave for home. Isn’t that right, Nabila?"

Her eyes flicked to Thierry’s and he saw, just for a moment, the pain they held. Nabila was a proud woman. To have him witness this was torture to her. "It is as you say," her voice was steady, "If you will excuse me." She turned and knocked on the door, but there was no answer.

"Majesty," Thierry couldn’t help himself. Every part of him was crying out for her, "Allow me to summon your second for you. It is the least..."

"But I have need of you," Misha interrupted. "I wish you to accompany me now." Thierry saw it then, the cold calculating stare, the look that said, ‘Who is this woman to you? Do you value her?’ Thierry knew what Misha did to those things Thierry valued more than he valued Misha. He cut their throats and drained them. He ripped their heads from them while he forced Thierry to watch.

"Of course, I value your time, Majesty," Thierry made his lips curve up. "If it pleases you, we should go," and the French Sheriff managed to shrug and laugh. He couldn’t look at her face. He couldn’t
see how his words; his gestures would appear to her. What was important was the killer standing next to her was appeased, that he stepped away and Nabila continued for another night.

When Misha stepped past him, Thierry fell in beside Carlo. He never looked back.
Nosing into the Wind

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nautical Note: When you are jockeying for position in a sailing race, it is sometimes that boat that can keep its sail at the most acute angle that manages to pull ahead. You crank and tweak and shift weight, allowing your boat to more efficiently nose into the wind.

‘We’re all male now,’ Eric noticed as he glanced around the room at his fellow Chiefs. Misha had made his announcement and with a self-satisfied smile, proceeded to speak with first Stan and then Felipe. It had been some time since Eric had seen Nabila, really not since the Summit when he turned down her offer of a royal marriage, but he hadn’t anticipated any difficulties. She had shown no signs of bitterness or regret following his refusal. Instead, she had sent a lovely frame that Sookie had used for their Pledging portrait. Eric was aware that his Sheriff, Thierry, and Nabila were closer than friends. Eric was confident that there weren’t any lingering resentments on the part of the Queen, he would have heard of any through his Sheriff’s connection. There had been nothing and it confirmed Eric’s impression that Nabila was a practical woman.

What he did remember was that the Carolinas Queen’s reason for wanting their alliance was to protect her from the ambitions of the barrel-chested man who was just now turning to be formally introduced.

“Of course, you have heard of the North Man,” Felipe was turning on the charm. “But I must confess, I have not heard that you have met before.”

“No, we have not, and it is difficult to believe,” Misha’s eyes crinkled and his cheekbones rose, all pleasure and politeness. Eric schooled his own face into a mask of pleasant neutrality as the Kings exchanged bows. “And yet, we have so much in common,” and Misha glanced to Eric’s right where the Viking knew Thierry stood.

“I am grateful for the skills my Sheriffs bring me,” Eric said smoothly, picking up on the cue. “Thierry speaks well of the training he received in your Court. Thomas has also proven himself most adept.” Eric gestured to the couches but Misha ignored him. “It does seem unusual that in our small world we haven’t had the opportunity to meet face to face before now.”

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“Perhaps it is fate,” and the New York monarch rocked back on his heels. He managed to look in Eric’s face without trying to make himself appear taller. It was a common gesture among shorter men Eric found, but somehow the way Misha stood made you forget his height. “We have so many threads that join us, perhaps more than you know,” Misha was speaking in a tone tailored to make the hearer lean in. Eric stood taller. He noticed the slight frown when Misha sighed, “I was saddened to hear of the loss of your Maker. I don’t know if he ever mentioned me, but I did meet him. Appius Livius Ocella was a great vampire.”
Eric involuntarily stiffened and then cursed himself silently when he saw Misha’s recognition. It had been many years since he had heard his Maker’s name. He found as the years passed, he tried to think less and less of him. He knew that the life he now lived would have earned him death at Appius’ hands. The old Roman would not have sanctioned his unorthodox marriage nor his approach to rule. While his Sire might have approved of the alliance with the Fae, he never would have allowed Sookie to stand beside him as his Queen. Misha was waiting, so Eric said, “My Maker was a colossus among us, truly one of the ancients. I regret he never mentioned you, but I was freed from him for over five hundred years. We rarely saw each other.”

Misha nodded, “He was not my Maker, but I do consider him to be the most important influence in my existence. He taught me valuable lessons. You were fortunate to have known him as you did.”

“Yes, fortunate,” Eric agreed, but in that moment, he couldn’t recall a circumstance when the words ‘fortunate’ and ‘Appius’ ever belonged together.

They remained looking at each other until Felipe interrupted, “And now there is yet another thread that dances between you, your shared admiration for a Maker, and now your shared admiration for Pamela. I am surprised Pam did not come this evening.”

“She felt she would not be welcome,” Misha purred, his eyes never leaving Eric’s.

“My progeny is a bright and capable woman with strong opinions. Unlike my Sire, I do not require my children to agree with me in all things. Pam and I will come to an understanding in time. Had she asked, I would have told her I would welcome seeing her here. I chose wisely in making Pam.” Eric let the words hang between them. ‘So,’ he thought, ‘this is the person Pam has met?’ and he decided contacting his progeny through Maude was a risk worth taking. Eric did trust Pam, but he recalled all too well the sound advice others gave him about Sookie. In some ways, had he taken it, his life would have been far less complicated but he was stubborn. Pam was stubborn in her ways as well, and Eric found himself hoping that his instincts about Misha were wrong.

“I am happy to hear Pamela was mistaken,” Misha was watching Eric carefully. “She is different than most female vampires.” He tilted his head, “She is quality.”

“She is more,” Eric replied with a nod. It was hard to decide if the feelings he was experiencing were spurred by the obvious danger this vampire represented, or if jealousy was playing a part. Eric had never before found his affections for Pam challenged by another vampire. It was unsettling.

“I hear you have a solution to our witch problem,” Stan interrupted.

Eric glanced at Felipe. He could see the Narayana Chief would have been happy to watch him spar with Misha longer, ‘So you can find the weakness and exploit it later, Snake!’ Eric thought venomously. “I have much news, and I have brought a guest. She is the head of the covens in New Orleans and is known by witches everywhere. If you agree to meet with her, Thierry will bring her here.”

“Why should we trust a witch?” Felipe snarled. “Why risk having some sorcerer place us under a spell? We are capable of cleaning up this problem without being forced into some compromise.”

“I got to tell you,” Stan shrugged, “Folks in my kingdoms have been busy, too. You bring some witch here now and she probably won’t like what I have to say.”

“I’ve been doing the same thing,” Eric nodded, “as have the monarchs in Amun. She knows, but there is also a compelling argument for our not stacking up the body count any higher.”
“A forgive and forget witch?” Stan didn’t bother trying to hide his skepticism.

“A practical witch with a practical solution. Think! We all use their services. How will you ward your properties if we are at war with them? Think of the ways we benefit by buying their services. Like us, they have few friends. Octavia acknowledges they started it. That alone is worth concessions. She tells me she can negotiate for them. I believe her.”

“I have always found witches useful,” Misha nodded. “I would be willing to support this conversation, Viking,” and he tipped his glass in Eric’s direction.

“I lose nothing by listening to a proposition,” Felipe agreed, “and perhaps I gain a hostage who may prove valuable.”

“I have pledged her safe passage,” Eric replied.

Felipe’s eyes narrowed as Stan said, “Fine! Let’s see what your ‘friend’ has to say.”

Eric flicked his eyes at Thierry who moved to the door. Carlo left with the Sheriff, leaving the four Chiefs alone together. “Is Nabila still among us?” Stan asked Misha. Felipe hissed, and Stan shrugged, “You were all wondering, I just said it out loud.”

“Why would I end a talented vassal?” Misha gave the impression the question was beneath him.

“Just wondering,” Stan smirked. “You have a reputation for not suffering rivals well.”

“If you are referring to Tranh, that woman was never my rival. She was not worthy of the high honor that was hers.” He flicked his eyes toward Eric, “She wasn’t able to safeguard the Lady of Sanctum. She was a failure in many ways.”

“Lydia took her own life,” Eric replied, the Viking’s eyes sliding to Felipe. There was no proof, in fact, the evidence pointed elsewhere, but Eric’s instincts told him Felipe was involved in that tragedy. For his part, Felipe didn’t appear to notice and before there could be further conversation, the door opened and Octavia Fant entered.

The witch glanced around her before sitting in the chair Eric held for her. The Viking had to give her credit. Octavia looked remarkably calm for a human being asked to place herself in the midst of vampires. When she settled, Eric made the introductions and then sat himself. There was no offer of refreshment and Eric found he noticed, ‘Sookie!’ he thought irritably. His wife had rubbed off on him in ways that were unexpected.

“I am here to offer our help in dealing with the disaster one of my own has created,” Octavia stated. Her back was straight and she held her head high. “I thank King Northman for allowing me to bring my request to you myself. In such times, it is best that you see me so there can be no misunderstanding as to what I offer.

“For centuries, your kind and mine have made our ways. We sell you skills you value. You honor us with your patronage. It’s a situation that’s worked out well for all of us. This isn’t the first time one of us, or one of you, has decided to use the other. I’m sure any one of us can point to a time there were offenses committed by either my side or yours. But each time, we managed to address it without causing a wholesale split between us. This is different.”

Octavia looked from face to face. Felipe’s fangs were showing and Eric fixed him with a stare. The Narayana Chief seemed to catch himself and with a flourish, sat down on a couch. The witch nodded before saying, “I’m sure each of you has one or more of my kind in some deep, dark hole right about now. Could be some of those are deserved. For many of us, the magic we possess is wild and erratic.
When one of our own makes a charm that promises a way to get rich quick, it can bring out the worst in any person, but especially one whose magic has not run strong.”

“You would have us give you back those we have?” Misha asked.

“I would ask that we use the names of those who bought the charms to determine how each person used the charm. Glamour is a tricky thing. For most, it never gives the human involved a moment’s trouble, but for some, it’s a lifetime of nightmares. You know there are documented cases of humans being declared insane. Many witches use their magic as healers. Like Tarot or scrying, they don’t tell what is bad. Instead they use what they find to frame things to help. When we saw the advertisements, there were many in my own coven who talked about using these charms to help humans shut the door on nightmares.”

“You speak as if removing glamour could be done in some surgical way,” Misha was watching Octavia closely. Eric could see the cold in the New York King’s eyes and he recognized the look.

“It is an interesting idea,” Eric added, pulling the attention his way.

“It is possible to only remove some part of it, and leave the rest intact,” Octavia confirmed.

“And how do you know?” Stan asked.

“Because I have one of the charms and I used it,” Octavia replied. Eric had to give her credit. The room became quiet in the way only vampires can, but she held her ground. “I couldn’t bring you a plan if I couldn’t prove it could work,” she added. “The charms were not evenly made. Some work well, in fact, most that I found, but the magic seems to weaken with each use. Others don’t work at all.”

“And you can tell by…” and Felipe allowed the words to float.

“It’s the feel of the charm,” Octavia nodded. “I can feel the draw of its magic and I can feel the potency of the magic it carries.”

“And what would you propose to do with these charms?” Felipe asked, “Perhaps keep them for yourself?”

“No,” Octavia replied, “They must be destroyed. They are unsanctioned magic, irresponsible magic. They must all be accounted for and ground to dust.”

“And what prevents another witch from making more?” Felipe rose now, his eyes narrowed. Eric suspected Felipe de Castro had the least congress with the magic witches offered, which in view of the Nevada King’s investments in casinos seemed oddly ethical of him.

“Our ability to create magic is limited by each individual. You might say that each of us has our own unique stamp. I may be able to create a protection spell, but no other witch will be able to duplicate it. They may be able to create one just as strong, but it won’t be the same. It’s why we collaborate on some spells. It is the combination of our individual magic that can create a larger whole that is better than any one of us is capable of creating individually. Amelia Broadway’s gift was prodigious, but it was hers alone. It died with her.”

“And you killed her?” Misha smiled up at the Viking.

“If he hadn’t, I would have,” Octavia’s voice carried. Misha’s smirk died and all eyes turned back to Octavia. “I have contacts in most major cities. I have examined the list and while it will take some time to track each witch who purchased one of these charms, it can be done within the month. I have
already sent out the edict on the charms. Witches have been asked to turn them in to the leader of their local coven. They are ordered to include a recounting of any time they were put to use.”

“And you believe these witches will be honest?” Stan was shaking his head. “Now, I have some that I do trust. Call on them from time to time and I’ve always known them to be good people, but that didn’t stop some others from shaking down vampires in my Areas.”

“Those that show up will be questioned by their coven leaders,” Octavia told them.

“And what if a coven leader is involved?” Felipe hissed.

“We have a list of every charm that was sold and who bought it,” Octavia reminded him. “We will account for every one of them. That is my pledge to all of you. It is the business of vampires that puts food on our tables and clothes our children. We have no interest in a war that will leave us broken.”

“I, for one, appreciate the services that can only come from witches,” Stan stood now. “I’d rather do it this way. I don’t need to be worrying about hiding more bodies. I have humans that were killed over this.” He gave Octavia a direct look, “Witches too.”

Octavia glanced down now, “I am not surprised. If we move now, we can stop any further bloodshed. Where money was paid, we will order it returned. Where humans were left with damaging secrets, I can offer you the knowledge that re-glouring them will end the crisis. There will be none left who can expose you in this way again.”

Eric glanced at Octavia. He had told the witch about Meg, that she had been immune to glamour. “It must have been something unique to Amelia,” Octavia assured him. They hadn’t decided what would happen if more like Meg were found, but they both agreed there was no need to fuel suspicions with the other Clan Chiefs further.

“What if there is a witch who refuses to give up her charm?” Felipe asked. “What if she or he has decided to keep using this magic to expose us?”

“I would ask that you allow us to handle it,” Octavia told him. When Felipe sneered, Octavia added, “It is better that a witch kills a witch. We will already have our hands full ending any blood feuds or calls for revenge. It is inevitable that there were innocents who were caught in the nets,” and Octavia looked at each face, daring them to challenge her statement.

“You would kill your own?” Misha asked, and Eric could see the new respect on the monarch’s face.

“If you had vampires endangering your kingdom, wouldn’t you?” Octavia challenged him back.

Eric spoke now, “Octavia came to me last night. I have not had the opportunity to contact the rulers of my Clan, but I intend to now. I wished all of us to have the same information at the same time. I hope you consider this offer. With the scrutiny we live under, Witnesses and a public that chases us with their cameras, this was one worry too many.” Eric nodded at Octavia, “I pledge that I will put an end to the killing of witches in my Clan. I will distribute the list and ask that my rulers and their Sheriffs get in touch with their local covens. I will ask that the names of those witches already in custody or dead be provided and we will work out an arrangement that will suit all.”

“And if the witches demand money for survivors?” Stan asked.

“If the death was justified, if the witch was blackmailing our own, then there will be no money,” Eric looked at Octavia. “It was a matter that should have been addressed by the local coven, and it will fall to the coven to care for survivors. However, if the witch was innocent, and just caught up
because of what she or he was? Then I will be willing to provide money to help the family. I will
decide it on a case by case basis.” Eric knew it was a generous offer, but it seemed best to lead in this
case.

“I don’t see any downside to giving it a try,” Stan shrugged. “Count me in.”

“I don’t believe we have the same degree of involvement in my territories the others Clans do, but I
will pass instructions to Angie,” Felipe agreed.

It was a ballsy statement, and was Felipe’s way of saying that witches in his territories were less
likely to betray him, but Eric remembered all the California addresses on the list Karin retrieved. ‘Still
missing the big picture,’ the Viking thought, ‘still looking at your kingdom and Clan as being only
those things that affect you personally.’ In that moment, Eric knew that Felipe de Castro would find
his end one day soon. The Nevada King simply didn’t have the mental bandwidth to survive as a
Clan Chief.

“Well, I suppose it is worth a try,” and Misha smiled thinly. “It was clever of you, Northman, to have
found this solution.”

Eric bowed slightly before saying, “It was fortunate the solution found me. I am grateful for
Octavia’s offer.” He physically turned back toward the witch, drawing attention away from him.
Octavia nodded her head, but remained silent. He suspected she was shaking inside. Rising, Eric
said, “I thank you again, Ms Fant. I will instruct my second to send out the message. I understand
you will be sending copies of the list to your contacts, and we will furnish identical lists to our own. I
consider this a good day in furthering our relationship with the witches.”

Octavia rose and, after inclining her head to each of the vampires in turn, said, “I thank you for
listening, and I will notify my people.” Eric walked her to the door where Thierry was waiting for
her in the hall.

“I believe Ms Fant has a flight waiting for her,” he said, pitching his voice so he could be heard,
“Please have her car summoned,” and he turned back into the room.

As soon as the door closed, Felipe spoke. He was angry and didn’t bother to hide it. “So, you don’t
trust her here with us?”

“Why delay?” Eric asked. He didn’t need to say it. None of them trusted each other. It would have
been tempting to kidnap the witch and this move prevented the possibility.

“Not like you really need their services anyway, right Partner?” Stan laughed. “You get your magic
straight from the source. Nothing beats the Fae!”

“Your lovely wife grows in powers, does she not?” Felipe lisped, his tone just this side of oily. “I
will long remember the look of her, glowing in that way fairies do on the night you were pledged.
It’s not often we vampires get the opportunity to see them up close, and to see the King of them all,
spilling blood and pledging you his support? You are indeed most fortunate.”

Eric could feel the New York monarch’s eyes on him, but he refused to turn that way, “Sookie has
grown into her place, both in the vampire world and with those Fae that remain here. She stands
beside me in all things.”

“I heard she gave quite the show at your last Assizes,” Stan laughed and then turned back toward
Felipe, “It was a regular World of Warcraft moment, long talons and everything!”

“It is hard to think of Sookie Stackhouse in that way,” Felipe scowled, but then he shrugged and he
smiled in a cruel way, “Of course, I do recall her being rather talented in her ability to kill vampires. She had quite the body count by the time I met her.”

“And don’t forget the Fae and Weres,” Stan smirked. He laughed again, “Leave it to you, Northman. Married yourself to a real killer. Wonder what they’d call her if they made her into a Barbie doll? Malibu Maniac? Sookie Slaughter?” Stan was clearly enjoying himself, “Nope, can’t call her that, can we? You already have one of those!” Stan was laughing and Felipe started laughing, too. Eric ground his teeth but stood his ground.

The Nevada king wiped a blood tear from his eye before asking, “What is it with you, anyway, Eric? You have surrounded yourself with these little, blond killing machines. It shows an alarming lack of imagination!”

“I prefer to think it shows a discerning eye,” Eric tried to not sound defensive. “Each of my progeny is talented in her own right. They make me proud in all things. And as for my wife…” and he found his fangs descending, “I don’t find her to be a laughing matter. She is my partner by contract for the next one hundred and ninety-eight years. It is a contract I honor, along with the alliances she brings.”

“Quite right,” although Misha also sounded angry. “I do not approve of this kind of teasing. It can be interpreted as a lack of respect; I am sure that was not the purpose.” Stan sobered and Felipe bowed to Misha. “We are in your debt, North Man,” Misha continued. “You have brought us a workable solution to an unhappy situation. Perhaps King Davis is right, the luck of the Fae truly does shine on you.” Misha rose and while he bowed to Felipe, he ignored Stan.

Once he was out of the room, Stan asked, “What did I say? Figured you were up for some teasing, Northman. You didn’t take it personal, did you?”

Eric found it hard not to place his hands on Stan, but he managed a smile, “You have a reputation for lacking social graces, Stan. I took it in the way you meant it.”

“Yeah, just joking!” Stan chuckled, but neither of them really believed it.

“You may want to restrict teasing about our friend’s progeny when Misha’s around,” Felipe poured himself a blood. “I think our new friend may prove sensitive on that front.”

“Something going on?” Stan flicked his eyes to Eric, “You getting yourself another alliance?” Although Stan’s mouth was laughing, his eyes were not.

“I have heard that my Pam has been seen with Misha,” Eric shrugged. “Pam is free. Her personal relationships do not have any bearing on me.”

“Sure, if you say so,” Stan replied, showing he was willing to drop it, “So, tell me what Bubba’s been up to,” and the conversation moved to more social matters. As they traded gossip, Eric considered the pool he had stepped into in accepting Clan Chief, and how fewer faces didn’t translate to fewer troubles. In fact, it seemed the opposite.

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Eric watched his Sheriff closely. He made a point of seating himself, but leaving the Sheriff standing. Thalia had provided more details about the long-standing relationship between Thierry and Nabila. Thierry had done nothing to hide it, but neither had he been open. Now, that was a problem.

Eric had been surprised to see Misha walk into their meeting, announcing he was now the Moshup Clan Chief. While Eric appreciated many kinds of surprises, being caught unaware of the direction politics were taking was not one of them. Thierry was close to Nabila. Nabila was the former
Moshup Clan Chief. Thierry had been here, at the Summit days in advance, and still Eric had received no advance warning of this change. Thierry had failed him, and now there was explaining to be done.

When Eric finished sipping his blood, he turned his attention to Thierry. If the French Sheriff was feeling the tension, he gave no sign. Eric remembered the cold gaze of the New York monarch and considered for a moment the hard training Thierry had received. “Do you enjoy your position with me?” Eric set the goblet on the table.

“Yes, Majesty,” and Thierry kept his eyes on the floor.

“Do you understand why I ask this question?” Eric remembered hearing Appius ask him this same question. It usually preceded a display that involved inflicting pain, and Eric realized he would do the same.

“I have failed you, Majesty,” Thierry replied. His tone was perfect, his stance perfect, and that served to make it all the more important to Eric that the lesson be taught.

In a blur, the Sheriff was against the wall, Eric’s hand at his throat, his feet dangling. Eric’s fangs descended and he pressed his anger against Thierry, knowing on some level, the Sheriff would register it. “Yes,” he hissed, “You have failed me! You, you have grown your own reputation eating the scraps from my table, building your own fortune! You have had every benefit I could offer and this is how I am repaid. Now, it is a matter of whether failure is your only sin. I must decide whether you have betrayed me as well,” and Eric leaned in further, searching the Sheriff’s eyes until he finally saw the fear he sought. He threw Thierry across the room, purposely aiming for the breakfront. The glass shattered as he knew it would, cutting the Sheriff and causing him to bleed.

Eric resumed his seat. It would be telling, the Sheriff’s next move. Thierry was stunned. The impact might have caused another vampire to lose consciousness, but Eric could see when the Sheriff recovered himself. Thierry didn’t try to stand, instead he remained on his knees. He raised his face and said, with complete sincerity, “My existence is yours, Majesty. If you feel I have betrayed you, then it is your right to end me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Nabila?” Eric made sure his displeasure was clear.

“I should have, Majesty. It…” and there was a moment Eric was sure he saw the real vampire under the pleasant veneer he maintained. The face Eric saw held sorrow and Eric found himself feeling sympathetic, but he refused to allow any external sign of it. The Sheriff clasped his hands and then continued, “I told myself it was a convenience, this thing that was between us. She is talented…” and his head dipped further. “She is a woman of great… she is more than I anticipated,” and Thierry stopped talking again.

“So, she is your bedmate. It is common gossip,” Eric sneered. “It doesn’t explain why you failed to keep your King informed.”

“I knew coming here she was in trouble.” The Sheriff glanced up, “She told me, texted me. She told me she thought Misha was behind her troubles at home.”

“What proof did she have?” Eric asked.

“None, Majesty. I didn’t help. I was happy she had no proof,” and Thierry hung his head again.

Eric stood and walked toward the Sheriff. On the surface, the Frenchman had just confessed to being Misha’s first. It was a damning statement, and Eric found himself regretting what he was sure would
be the outcome of this conversation. “So, you chose between your loyalties and the beautiful Queen lost?” he said carefully. “But why? There is a mystery here that I have overlooked too long. I think it is past time you tell me your tale, Thierry. You should know that Thalia has told me some part of it, enough that I have verified some parts of it myself, so I will know if you lie.”

Eric resumed his seat and sipped blood. His Sheriff’s cuts healed, bits of glass pressing from him, and falling to the carpet around him. The story spilled out, words tumbling over words. Eric found himself admiring the single-minded determination that steered Thierry’s actions, while at the same time appreciating the danger that determination represented to anyone who found themselves in the way. When Thierry confirmed he had chosen to keep his background from Eric for no better reason than his belief that Eric’s not knowing was safer, Eric moved with the speed only the oldest of vampires had and stepped on the Sheriff’s leg, breaking it with a snap. As the Sheriff fell over in agony, Eric said, “That is for assuming you know better than your King.”

“Yes, Majesty,” Thierry groaned. In a minute, the bone started knitting. Eric was well aware of the pain involved. It was expected, and to do less might give the Sheriff the idea that his transgressions were not serious.

When the Sheriff regained his balance, Eric said, “Resume,” as if nothing had happened.

Thierry continued, telling of his coming here. He told Eric of Misha and what he overheard when Misha saw Bartlett Crowe and Russell Edgington on television. He told Eric about Misha’s ritual. Thierry was staring at the floor and missed the shadow that passed over Eric’s face. The Viking recalled Misha telling him that Appius had created the vampire Misha had become, and in this moment, Eric understood what he had been told. When Thierry finished, Eric gestured that Thierry should approach him. When Thierry started to stand, Eric shook his head, “On your knees, Frenchman.”

Eric could see it, the defeat on Thierry’s face. He was sure he was about to meet his final death, and Eric admired his courage. When he got close, Eric struck him sharply, breaking his shoulder blade. “You are not as smart as you think you are,” he hissed, and then he sat back. “Get yourself in that room,” and he gestured to the second bedroom in his suite, “I will send you some donors. Get yourself cleaned up and then we will talk.”

“You aren’t going to end me?”

Eric watched the emotions play across his Sheriff’s face. First there was skepticism, followed by hope. When the Viking didn’t move, Thierry managed the small smile that spoke of wonder and gratitude. ‘This is when Appius would have ended you, just when you began to believe,’ Eric thought, ‘but I am not him.’ Instead, Eric said out loud, “No, I am not ending you, Frenchman, but know this! You will not be given another chance.”

When calls had been placed and Thierry was busy replenishing himself, Eric texted Thalia. The answer that came back confirmed he had made the right choice. Thalia wasn’t convinced Thierry was worth his blood, much less capable of the ambitions that drove him, but she didn’t believe him a traitor. It was enough.

When the donors emerged, Thierry was behind them. He paid them from his own funds and closed the door behind them. He turned back to where Eric sat and approached. When he was within five feet, he fell back to his knees and approached the remaining distance in that way.

“I will recall Pam,” Eric said, “I would not have her within his sphere.”

“If you do so, Misha will find a way to punish you.” Thierry kept his head bowed, his voice
“In what way?” Eric asked.

“It will not be directly,” Thierry told Eric. “He will find someone or something of value to you and he will punish you through them.”

“As he did with you?” Eric confirmed. When Thierry nodded, Eric said half to himself, “Another lesson he learned from my Sire, it would appear.” Eric gave Thierry a long look, “I do not expect to find ourselves in this place again.”

“No, Majesty.” Thierry bowed low and offered his arm, “And I offer you my blood that you may never doubt me again.” It was a strong move and Eric did not hesitate to take the arm offered and sink in his fangs.

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“So, we are going to let the witches go?” Carlo asked. He poured Misha another warmed blood. The King was running his fingers over the piano keys. They had returned to the townhouse on Beacon Hill. Carlo didn’t need to be told the Ravenscroft woman was gone. It was in his King’s expression. In all his years as Misha’s second, and before that, he had never seen the King so attached to another creature. It sparked his jealousy, but it also gave him hope that this King might develop a weakness that could be exploited later.

“Once we have everything we need,” Misha said absently, then he looked up. “So, your spies saw the author, Compton, leave the apartment of that woman?”

“Sonder? Yes, it appears he used her well because she didn’t appear at work until two days later. She was as before, heavily glamoured. Compton is an animal. I’m surprised he hasn’t been caught out.”

“So, explain why this of interest to me?” Misha sighed.

“Because, Majesty, Sonder came here by way of a publicist who was an employee of Eric Northman.” Carlo was aware the publicist had also been Pam’s employee and lover, but that information might be more useful to him personally. “It’s likely Compton knew her while she was in Northman’s palace. They were together again at the Summit where Northman pledged. If she has been his fuck and feed all that time, there is no telling what little stories he has shared while he used her.”

Misha sniffed and, after a moment, nodded. “Pick her up. Get one of the witches to remove the glamour. Let’s see what we have.”

“As you wish, Lord,” Carlo smiled as he left.

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Sookie moved her hand back to cover her abdomen. It was way too early to know whether or not she was pregnant, but she had a strong feeling, one that seemed to grow with each hour. Michele had come over with the boys earlier that afternoon and stayed. Tara and her children were here, too. It was coming to evening and they all sat on the porch watching the boys and Sara chasing each other across the lawn. Michael Eric was in his fussy time, and he was being handed from lap to lap. Michele’s stated purpose in coming to visit was to cook meals and divide them into individual portions, stacking piles of see-through plastic ware in the large freezer. “If you are, you’ll be tired
before you know,” Michele had laughed. “Gets me out of the house and it’s little enough in exchange for babysitting!”

It had been a welcome distraction. From the minute Sookie rose this morning, she’d found herself thinking of Eric. There was a text waiting for her, letting her know he was traveling with Octavia Fant. Soon he would be rising, one hour behind her, and doing his best to convince his fellow Clan Chiefs to forego a war. There was a sharp sound from the yard and a shriek, but it was laughter, and Sookie settled back again.

“You should have seen the way you jumped!” Tara teased her. “It’s just the children!”

Sookie smiled, but she thought of their conversation last night, the one where she suggested they find another house. This was the life she had always told herself was her dream. Sitting on the porch surrounded by friends, children around them. This was the dream she told Eric she wanted. She thought of what Michele or Tara would say if they saw her at Assizes. She thought about how her Bon Temps friends would feel about Nebraska and the Fae center there.

As the sun set, Bubba appeared on the edge of the woods. With almost no effort, Sookie cloaked her smell and transformed her friend into a facsimile of Dougal, the crusty uncle from the Outlander television show she had been watching.

Bubba walked closer and Sookie could ‘hear’ Michele’s surprise, “You look just like…”

“I get that a lot!” Bubba laughed, interrupting her. It was the standard phrase he used now for all the different faces Sookie gave him. Tonight, Bubba was sounding like Bubba, but it was amazing how different someone could sound when you didn’t see their rightful face anymore. Even Sookie didn’t think he sounded like his more famous self.

“I wonder who that is?” Tara asked, and they all looked from their chairs at the headlights approaching down the road. This time of year you could see traffic coming from some ways away. With the Compton place empty, there was only one reason for headlights, and it was to come visiting here.

“I think it’s Portia Vicks and Halleigh Bellefleur,” Sookie said absently, pulling the phone from her pocket. “They said they were planning on visiting this afternoon.” Almost as if she knew, the phone buzzed. It was a text from Eric.

“Welcome them for me?” she asked Michele, “I’ll be right back.” As she walked into her house, she said out loud, “Gran would skin me alive for being so rude,” but it didn’t stop her. She headed up the stairs so she could call Eric back, just so she could hear his voice.

When she returned, it was to find everyone still on the porch. More chairs had been brought out, and there was tea and brownies set out on plates. Halleigh saw her and rose. Sookie turned to see Portia sitting in the chair closest to the door, her shirt belled out over her belly. “Don’t get up!” Sookie exclaimed, hugging and greeting. As Sookie took a step toward Halleigh, she realized Bubba/Dougal was scowling, his arms crossed. He was looking at the person sitting behind Halleigh and when that person rose, Sookie wasn’t surprised.

“Hello, Bill,” Sookie made her voice sound pleasant.

“Sookie,” he said in that way that was just his own. He bowed slightly, a smile playing at the edges of his mouth, “I hope you don’t mind my coming over. I was visiting Portia and my grandchildren,” and Bill winked at Portia. It made his face look piggy, but Portia seemed to think it was cute, “when Halleigh called. She was having some car trouble so I offered to drive my girls.”
“It was the nicest thing,” Halleigh was all smiles, too. “I don’t know what happened. The car ran fine this morning, but it just wouldn’t start tonight. Anyway, I didn’t want to miss our visit. I am so sorry we’re late!”

“You shouldn’t be here, Mr. Bill,” Bubba/Dougal said, “Mr. Eric told me you aren’t allowed in Bon Temps.”

Every female face turned first to Bubba/Dougal, then Bill, and then Sookie. Sookie felt her face flush a little. If this was true and Bill was violating an edict, this was a serious offense. Sookie’s first instinct was to confront him, holding nothing back. She would have Bubba take hold of him and she would find a way to force the truth from him, preferably at the edge of a silver knife, but that couldn’t happen here, not in front of all these women. Every non-Supe face, women and children alike, saw her as one thing and it wasn’t a Fae Queen. So, instead Sookie asked, “What about it, Bill? You breaking Supe law by being here?”

Sookie saw the way Bill’s face twisted when he realized there was nothing she could do. It was only a moment, but it was telling. Instead he said, “Of course not, Sookie! I have my traveling papers from Maxwell Lee himself! It was all a misunderstanding. Eric knows how much I mean to my family here. Why, I’d do anything for them,” and he gave her what she figured was his ‘meaningful’ look.

“Well, then we’ll be taking your word for it,” Sookie smiled brightly, but it confirmed her intention not to invite him into her house. She glanced out at the children who were starting to chase fireflies. Portia and Halleigh’s daughters had joined them, “Sure is a beautiful night for sitting outside,” and as she said it, she smiled directly at Bill, knowing he got the message.

“Yes is,” Bubba/Dougal said in confirmation. “No need to be moving inside on a beautiful night like tonight.”

“It is a beautiful night,” Michele repeated. Her eyes moved from Bubba/Dougal to Bill. Sookie could ‘hear’ she was getting worried, so Sookie changed the subject. She took the seat beside Portia and asked how the woman was feeling. Within seconds, the conversation shifted to swollen ankles and how often the new baby played jump rope on Portia’s bladder. They talked about how her daughter, Andrea, and Halleigh’s daughter, Caroline, were taking to the idea of another little girl in their circle. Halleigh pulled out a crocheted blanket she made for her new niece and everyone complimented it. Halleigh explained how her mother-in-law, Miss Caroline, had taught her the stitches before she passed, and then Halleigh said, “And when it’s your turn, Sookie, I’m making your baby one, too!” Everyone sighed, and Portia patted Sookie’s knee. Sookie refused to look at Bill, even though she could feel his eyes boring into her.

There was a commotion on the lawn and Michele got up, “Those boys!” she huffed. She handed Michael Eric to Tara and stalked down the porch stairs.

“This is how I always hoped it would be,” Tara said to no one in particular, “All of us grown up, surrounded by our babies, and all together.” Sookie smiled along with everyone else. She had said the same thing herself often enough, and believed it, but something had changed.

‘I will want this,’ Sookie thought to herself, ‘but it will not be my life.’ She felt a great calm come over her which was just as well because Michele walked back on the porch dragging her second son, Bit, by the hand.

“If you can’t play nice with the other children, you can just sit up here with the grownups,” Michele was saying. Bit’s lip was sticking out and when they got to the top stair, Michele dropped his hand
and gestured toward the far end of the porch, “Just go sit yourself down over there until you can learn how to play nice!” Her son, who of all of them looked most like Jason, gave her that small child poisonous look and stalked to the opposite end that was the one his mother had indicated, and then collapsed, cross legged and arms crossed. “He is not adjusting to Michael Eric,” Michele sighed. “He was the baby and now he’s that classic middle child!”

Sookie glanced over to see Bubba/Dougal and Bit already making eye contact. “That won’t be good,’ she thought.

“Mind if I take the girls on a tour?” Tara asked.

“Suit yourself!” Sookie waved her hand. She glanced at Bill and smiled. If he thought it was a kind smile, he could just go on fooling himself.

When the women headed inside, Bill stood up. He made sure Bubba/Dougal was watching him, and then walked carefully toward Sookie, seating himself in the chair next to hers. He sat back, his eyes remaining on the guard, and rested his hands in his lap. Bit chose that moment to tug on the guard’s pants and Bill used the distraction to lean a little closer, “Are you truly well, Sookie? You look pale.”

“I’m fine, Bill,” Sookie replied, her Crazy Sookie smile in place. “I hope you’re not lying about having a pass. As a standing judge in the Assizes Court, I really should be putting you in detention until it’s sorted out.”

“You can text Maxwell Lee,” Bill didn’t sound pleased to be called out, and he looked even less pleased when Sookie pulled out her phone and did just that. Sookie could tell he was sniffing the air, and when she looked back at him, he said, “I don’t mean to be rude, but are you sure you’re okay? You don’t seem yourself.”

“You mean I smell,” Sookie said, matter of fact, “You can say it! I know I smell. It’s medicine I’m taking, but it doesn’t have anything to do with being sick, so you can stop looking so mournful. I’ll be finished with it in a few more days and I’ll go back to smelling like normal.” Bubba/Dougal was play-fighting with Bit, but his eyes rarely left her end of the porch and Sookie felt grateful.

“That guard isn’t who he looks like, is he?” Bill asked.

“Could be,” Sookie shrugged.

“I can see you are more comfortable with your Fae roots now,” Bill was looking pleasant, but Sookie could tell it was becoming more of a chore for him. “I think it’s wonderful that you are exploring who you are, your heritage.” He was giving her his friendly look now, “Heritage is important for me too, family. It’s something else we have in common.”

“I guess,” Sookie smiled, then looked out in the yard, wishing the house wasn’t so large and the others were back already.

“I wish it were possible for you, well for any of us, to truly have this life,” Bill turned his face so he was watching the children play as well. “It’s a shame, really. You would make a wonderful mother, Sookie. I’ll talk with Halleigh, Sweetheart. You shouldn’t have to be reminded of things you can’t have.”

“Well, that’s okay, Bill,” Sookie smiled. “You might as well know. Eric and I are trying in vitro. That’s why I smell funny. Fact is, I might be pregnant right now, so, you see? Everything is possible.” It was Eric’s phrase, and just saying it made Sookie feel as if her Viking were here with her.
Bill’s face froze. The smile didn’t move one iota. What did change was his eyes. They went from soft to flat and Sookie was glad she couldn’t hear what was happening in his head because she didn’t think she’d like it. “Can I get you something, Miss Sookie?” Bubba/Dougal was asking. He had Bit under his arm and the small boy was grinning ear to ear.

“‘Nope, I think we’re all good here,’” Sookie shrugged and then she turned to Bill. “‘We’re all good, right, Bill?’”

“Of course,” Bill said. Sookie noticed he’d dropped the ‘Sweetheart’ and it made her happy.

The women walked back out of the house, laughing. “Well, hate to come and run,” Michele walked over, hugging Sookie, “but it’s dinner time and Jason will be wondering where we ran off to.”

“Us, too,” Halleigh hugged her, “‘You have a beautiful house. Bill? You ready?’ Portia waited for Sookie to stand up before leaning over to hug her. Tara and Michele were in the yard, rounding up children. Bill stood, not moving and Bubba/Dougal was standing still in that creepy vampire way, staring at him.

The porch door opened again and Mr. Cataliades walked out. “Good evening, Mrs. Northman,” he bowed, but his eyes were on Bill Compton, too.

“Desmond,” Sookie sighed, “Michele made dinner for us both. I’ll just be a minute. You have the papers for that land purchase? Eric asked me to handle it.”

“I’ll make sure that is the first thing on the agenda,” the demon attorney was pleasant, but the tension on the porch was palpable.

“Bill, I am sorry to cut things short,” Portia was smiling, oblivious to the drama around her, “I know how much you were looking forward to spending some time, but I really do need to get home. My ankles are killing me and I have the oddest pain.”

“Good grief!” Halleigh giggled, “Last time you had an odd pain we got Andrea.” Halleigh looped her arm through Bill’s and just about pulled him off the porch. There were waves and calls for a good evening as kids settled into car seats and cars pulled down the driveway, one by one.

“You need to stay far away from him,” Mr. Cataliades said, his eyes following the cars.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Sookie replied.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: I am headed on vacation as of this week and will be returning May 17th, provided I don’t get lost on my backpacking trip. My solo trip this year is to the Dingle Peninsula in Ireland, so anticipate a story coming out of it. Have a great couple weeks and I’ll resume posting Thursdays and Sundays on my return.
Chapter 18 - Red Sky

Author’s Note: And so I return from vacation. My walking time in Ireland was both relaxing and productive. I have completed the extended outline for both this story and a new, all human story set in Ireland. I’m happy to be back, and happy to be posting chapters again. Thank you for reading!

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Shreveport

Bill checked over his list one more time. It wasn’t necessary. He was a vampire so he forgot nothing, but there was something about the counting and folding, and then making the check on the paper with his mechanical pencil that calmed him. In a few hours, he would be on the airplane headed for another promotional junket for THE MOVIE. It was how he thought of it. THE MOVIE was all most people wanted to talk to him about. He was flying all over the world, standing in bookstores, and talking with vapid commentators for shows that would be televised. He was asked to repeat the same story over and over, answer the same questions, and each time he gave the wrong answers. Bill Compton would lock his tight smile in place and recount a version where a Viking vampire won and a smart, charming vampire lost.

It was bad, but there was worse. He received his call last night. He was headed for London. The European release of the movie would precede the United States release by two weeks. There were already so many demands on his time, and now there would be one more. Bill knew there would be a photograph delivered to his hotel. While he was in London, between the press and the parties, he would need to find the time to locate the person in the photograph and kill them.

Bill had been many things over his life and his longer unlife. If he was brutally honest with himself, ‘killer’ was on that list of things, so were writer, procurer, computer programmer, and entrepreneur. Assassin was not, though. An assassin stalked someone for no personal purpose. They didn’t kill from passion or desire. They killed for payment. ‘You don’t even get money for this!’ Bill thought, his bitterness almost overwhelming him. ‘You do this because that bastard has you by the balls!’

Almost a month to the day after the Moshup Summit concluded, Bill Compton received a phone call requesting a meeting. He thought it odd, but he agreed. He was living in a set of apartments in Shreveport. He decided not to move back to Bon Temps right away. Portia told him Eric Northman was living in Sookie’s house on a semi-permanent basis, and the likelihood of running into the Viking was too great. It wasn’t that Eric had rescinded Bill’s pass to his territory, but Bill was clear he was on thin ice. The first hint the Viking had of Bill making trouble, the pass would be revoked, and there would likely be some physical punishment to reinforce Bill’s appreciation for his own failure.

For Bill, the likelihood that he would mess up loomed large. Ever since his visit with Sookie he had felt his anger on low simmer. She was trying to become pregnant. She was trying with Eric
Northman. His Sookie had chosen it. There were nights those facts managed to find a way into the back of Bill’s brain, barely making a peep, but there were other nights that Bill would find himself randomly breaking things apart just to relieve the pressure those facts built within him. His family noticed. Andy Bellefleur questioned him about it and Bill realized his anger was beginning to get the better of him. Bill could have moved away and probably should have. He could have moved back to live with Russell and Bartlett in Jackson, but then he would never have the chance to see Sookie, and that was not acceptable. It was other things that allowed him to see that all might not be lost.

Portia had her baby, another girl the night he had visited Sookie at her home. His newest great-great-granddaughter was named Susan because Bill told Portia it was another family name. The Bellefleurs and the Vicks made sure Bill was invited to the party to celebrate their newest arrival, and Sookie had come, too. Bill’s descendants noted the absence of Eric Northman. Of course the Viking had been invited, but the general consensus was that Sookie’s husband was a little too good to consort with most humans. He only attended the events hosted by Jason Stackhouse, his human brother-in-law. The people of Bon Temps talked amongst themselves about how the rest of them were not worth the notice of the high and mighty Eric Northman, and folks resented it.

It was the first conversation that gave Bill the idea that there might be another way to look at Sookie’s situation. He knew how important family was to her. An idea started to form that Sookie was proving what Bill had believed all along. Sookie wanted all the things other humans had. She wanted a normal, human life and finding a way to have a baby was part of that. Of course, she had to visit the in vitro clinic with the vampire she was married to, but her neighbors could see that Eric Northman wasn’t trying to be human. He didn’t want to fit in.

Bill encouraged the talk about Northman, making a point to look around at any family gathering and ask if the Viking was coming. It was so easy! There would be a sideways look followed by a series of downturned mouths. He was sure to hear the conversation sometime during the evening about how it didn’t matter where you chose to live, some folks were just too good to be around their neighbors. Bill knew in a town this small, Sookie was bound to hear it, even if only in her head, and she would be reminded how poor a fit the Viking was for her and the life she deserved.

For his part, Bill made a point of attending everything. He ‘ate’ at Maxine’s at least one night a week. He attended every meeting of the Descendants of the Glorious Dead and was a featured speaker, fact checking and making a great fuss about carrying things for the older ladies. He attended the evening tent revivals at the Church and was on a first name basis with Reverend Collins and his wife. Everywhere he went, the good people of Bon Temps would wave and call out to ‘Vampire Bill.’ He would smile and wave back, an accepted part of their town. It was only a matter of time before Sookie realized that she needed someone who really fit in, and her tall, uncomfortable oaf of a husband was not it.

When the call had come, Bill assumed it was a complaint from one of Northman’s flunkies. Heidi, the tracker who guarded the Hummingbird Lane house, had spotted him in town near where Sookie was shopping. She’d questioned him and he pointed out he was helping Halleigh Bellefleur with groceries for Portia. Bill had heard through the town grapevine that Sookie was indeed pregnant so having the guards become hyper-vigilant wasn’t surprising.

There was a great deal of speculation about how having a baby would work out for the Northmans. Some of the gossip was kind, but there was a growing talk track that whispered about what a bad idea it was. There was a revival to the stories of how odd Sookie was as a girl. Many had thought she wasn’t smart or was actually touched in some way. “It explains why any person would think having a child with a vampire is a good idea,” those people would say. Those conversations made Bill angry and he would find ways to gently defend his future wife.
Then there were conversations about the lack of judgement any doctor or god-fearing woman showed in wanting to bring a child into a family where the husband had so little respect for humans. Most folks were sure that any baby Sookie might have would be human and what kindness would that be, to raise a child in a home where it could never quite measure up to its own father?

These were all conversations Bill participated in, willingly fanning the flames. He knew it wouldn’t go unchallenged, which was why he assumed the call was from Northman’s camp. The insistent demand from the vampire on the other end that they meet in person did feel different. In the end, they agreed to meet at a crowded restaurant in Shreveport that catered to Supernaturals, where Bill felt he had a better chance of surviving.

Bill did not expect to find the King of New York’s second, Carlo, waiting for him at the table. Carlo wasted no time in pleasantries. He informed Bill that Sonder, Twy’s former assistant, was Misha’s permanent house guest. Carlo took his time describing for Bill how she had been picked up shortly after Bill left Boston. The King had been interrogating a local witch. The witch was involved in the glamour scandal and with a little ‘persuasion,’ the bitch used her contraband charm to remove Sonder’s glamour. Carlo crowed as he recounted the King’s surprise at the tale Sonder had to tell. “She’s not anything special, Bill,” Carlo crooned, low and soothing. “I don’t know why you decided to confide in her. Was it a confession, Bill? Did you think that telling that blood sack your secrets would be good for your soul?”

If he had a heartbeat, Bill was pretty certain his would have stopped in that moment. His mind raced. There were cases of glamour being removed, but he had never heard of it being removed altogether. It was possible Sonder hadn’t remembered everything, but what parts did she tell Misha?

Over the time he knew her, Bill had told Sonder so many things. He would use her, and when her screams turned to breathy whimpers, he would gather her in his arms, pretending her dark hair was blond, and he would whisper in her ear. He told her of his many killing sprees over the years and how the joy he felt in the carnage reminded him of Lorena. He told her that he wondered sometimes if he inherited his Maker’s madness through the blood and how he hated being vampire. He told her about Matthias and what the Illinois vampire told him about other vampires who killed as Bill did, wildly and recklessly, making sure their actions were off the grid.

Bill told Sonder other things, more personal things. He told her of his special hatred for Eric Northman. He told her of his plots and plans to destroy the Viking. Worst of all, Bill told Sonder of his undying love for Sookie Stackhouse. He described his devotion to her and how she had captured his soul. He described the special room he created in his home in Bon Temps, a shrine he lovingly decorated to commemorate their love. He told Sonder that he had used those in the palace, especially Meg who had her own secrets, to secure pictures of Sookie and send them to him to be added to his collection.

When Sonder whimpered about her friend, protesting that Meg would never spy on Sookie for Bill, he delighted in destroying Sonder’s illusions. He told her how Meg had been in thrall to a vampire once before. It was a former guard who rose under Victor’s brief reign. “She sold secrets for money then, and she was happy to do it again,” he’d hissed. In reality, the servant had been reluctant, but a touch of glamour and a few suggestions had turned her against her employers quite nicely.

Bill shared with Sonder his dream of building a special place where he and Sookie could be together, just the two of them. No one would find them and Sookie would be happy. All his sacrifices and efforts would pay off and Sookie would willingly give herself to him. As he described the happy future he saw, he also found himself telling Sonder how, when he finally tired of being a vampire, he would arrange it so he and Sookie could meet their final deaths together. It would be a beautiful
ceremony that would unite them for all the ages.

Bill hadn’t shared these things with Sonder all at once. He had shared these things over a handful of meetings. He wasn’t sure why he chose her. Maybe it was the quality of the panic she manifested, the pitch of her pleading, but she satisfied some part of him enough so that he didn’t wish to end her. It felt like kismet when he found himself running into her a second time. It was as though he was meant to find Sonder, and then it happened again.

Each time he would enthrall her, taking her someplace with thick walls or neighbors who wouldn’t tell. He would use her and then tell her some secret. When it was time to leave, he would be careful to leave some small physical trace of their encounter and a vague sense of comfort from being near him. The rest he would cover up with a thick layer of glamour and vampire blood.

Sonder was his vault into which he had placed his secrets, and now he found that his vault had been opened.

Bill couldn’t wrap his head around it. It was part of the perfection of Sonder. This was a woman who had no real ties to him. There was no history, no mutual friends. She just turned up at convenient times in unexpected ways. Sonder was his needle in a haystack of humanity. She was his random convenience, a person no one would connect to him, and yet, against all odds an enemy had found her.

Carlo gloated as he handed Bill the envelope that contained a photograph, a name, and an address. “I understand you have an appearance scheduled in this city. While you are there, the King has an extra job he would like you to handle for him.”

“What are you asking me to do?” Bill looked at the picture of the young human. He was no one Bill recognized. He had a tough look around his mouth and eyes.

“Why, kill him, Bill. It is what you do, yes?” Carlo sat back then and laughed, as if this was all some fine joke.

“But that kind of thing requires time and planning,” Bill flailed.

“Now Bill, you and I both know that the only part that really requires thought is the aftermath. The killing is easy if you know where to find your mark, and we have taken care of that for you. If you doubt your ability to cover it up, you can call cleaners. Misha doesn’t care how you handle that, as long as you do the killing yourself. But, with the way you have managed your little predilection so far, you shouldn’t sell yourself short,” Carlo’s tone was all reasonableness.

“You are telling me the King…”

“I am telling you that the King of New York owns you, Bill Compton!” Carlo came close, his fangs descended, and his face resembling a shark as he lowered his voice to a hiss. “You will do what you’re told!” He stabbed the picture with his index finger, “That piece of shit thought to cheat my King. He thought he’d save just a little off the top of every shipment he sent. He thought he was smarter than Misha!” Carlo waited until Bill looked him full in the eyes, “He needs to become an example to others, Bill. You know the kind of thing that’s needed. His death should make a statement. Maybe you should consider paying some cleaners to help position him this first time. Of course, you understand if you do choose to use their services, their payment comes out of your pocket!”

Bill sat back, ‘But, but…”
"But what, Bill? Do I need to turn the lovely Sonder over to the Louisiana police? I understand you have created quite the pet cemetery in the woods surrounding your family home in Bon Temps. I wonder what your human family will say when they find out their Pepaw is a mass murderer. I don’t remember much about my human days, but I remember enough to know that’s the kind of story that haunts a family. It affects marriages and businesses. It follows children like a bad smell. Small town people wonder if that kind of thing is contagious, if it runs in the family.” If Bill had been able, he would have become even pastier. “I can see you agree,” Carlo smiled and sat back.

Bill opened his mouth a few times, but no sound came out. “So, Bill, I can tell my King that this little trouble is taken care of?” Carlo wasn’t smiling his shark smile anymore and Bill realized he would have to give an answer.

“I’ll manage it,” Bill choked. After a minute, he asked, “Does this mean we’re even?”

Carlo smiled, “Oh, Bill, I don’t think you know what it means to be owned, do you?” When Bill didn’t answer, Carlo reached over and squeezed his upper arm, as if they were the best of friends, “Well, don’t worry, you will, Mr. Compton!”

“How did you know I would be in that city?” Bill asked. He couldn’t think of any better thing to say, but he felt he needed to talk, if only to prove that he still existed.

“Why, from your very helpful author’s website, of course!” Carlo exclaimed. “You are famous, Mr. Bill Compton! Your schedule, including all your future public appearances are listed so your fans can find you. Don’t worry. The King has gifts to deliver all over the world. You will be busy building a different kind of story, but one that you have created before. Who knows? Maybe you can turn it into a movie sometime,” and with a quick salute, Carlo left. A minute later the waiter appeared, giving Bill a check for several Royalties.

It was dicey and Bill was nervous. His agitation was increased by the texts he received from Carlo. Once he located the man, Bill found his rage made the actual killing almost enjoyable. Bill decided to hire cleaners and he paid extra to have them position the body in a park. He felt an absurd pride when the local newspaper labeled the murder as the latest example of gang violence. It was different, killing in a way so as not to be traced back to a vampire. Bill couldn’t rip with fang or fingers, his preferred method. Instead he had to rely on using tools. It felt crude at first, but by the time the man finished screaming and bleeding, it felt almost lyrical.

Bill’s next scheduled appearance was within days of this first killing. Bill had an interview with a national magazine scheduled to take place in Detroit. Somehow he wasn’t surprised when the flowers arrived in his hotel room with the envelope tucked into the paper. This time the photograph was of a couple. They looked pleasant, almost conservative. The instructions were for the execution to be video-taped. ‘Embezzlers,’ the card read.

Unfortunately for Bill, Rasul was the King of Michigan and his palace was located in Detroit. Bill would have only forty-eight hours in the Diesel City, which left little time to complete both his official and unofficial assignments, and he knew he was in trouble when his hotel door opened to Rasul himself.

“Bill!” the vampire King seemed genuinely pleased to see him. “Your advance people let me know you were coming. I am disappointed you didn’t call yourself, but all’s well.” Rasul gestured and the people Twy had arranged for this junket walked into the room. It seemed they had worked closely with the King and now Bill’s schedule was enhanced. Almost every animate hour was crammed with some venue or another, media arranged to cover the vampires enjoying the Detroit nightlife. “I’ve missed you!” Rasul smirked. “Just seeing you brings back good times!”
Bill found himself captured in a nightmare of reliving moments from Sophie-Anne LeClerq’s Court in New Orleans. Bill had been a royal procurer then, and Rasul a guard. Bill knew that they had not been especially close during that time, but Rasul seemed to remember it differently. It wasn’t until several hours into the evening when Bill found himself standing under a spotlight, the butt of a comedian’s jokes, when he began to suspect Rasul of not acting so much from a sense of friendship as pay back. Bill realized that since the former guard was now the King in this territory, Bill was in no position to decline any reasonable request for company. They were together for the entire evening and when Bill rose, Rasul was already in the limousine that took him to the magazine interview. Bill started his standard pattern, answering the questions he knew so well, but Rasul was having none of it. When the questions turned to the model for the Viking of “Viking’s Bond,” Rasul piped up from his seat, “Oh, you mean Eric Northman!”

From there, the interview rapidly got out of control. The interviewer asked specific questions about the famous Eric Northman, and Rasul provided a number of amusing anecdotes. It turned out that Northman had been in Detroit not so long ago, and Rasul had a video on his phone of the Viking, Rasul, and another vampire singing karaoke in a local club. When the interview ended, the reporter insisted on taking a picture of Bill standing next to the Michigan King. It was everything Bill had to make his face turn up in a smile and pretend that everything was alright.

It took almost all his writer’s ingenuity to form a plausible excuse. Bill had mere hours to locate the couple. They were in their quiet apartment, sleeping together. The job was done, but it was rushed and Bill didn’t film it. He barely had time to return to his hotel room when his day death claimed him.

Bill emerged from his travel coffin in Shreveport to find Carlo sitting in a chair in his resting chamber, awaiting him. Bill thought the New York King’s second was older than him, and this confirmed it. Older vampires reanimated sooner.

“How did you get into my apartment?” Bill asked to cover his fear.

“Why Bill, this is a public building,” Carlo answered reasonably. “The only challenge was in locating the actual owner of the building to get permission to enter the apartments. But I had a good idea that this little visit would be needed eventually, so I took care of making these arrangements over a week ago.”

Carlo didn’t mince words. “I doubt your resolve, Mr. Compton. I don’t think you’re sincere in your desire to protect your human family.” Carlo reached into his breast pocket and retrieved his phone. With a few flicks of his fingers, he was showing Bill a film that had been sent in a text. It featured Portia Vicks wheeling a baby carriage. She was talking with someone beside her, and then her young daughter, Andrea, came into the frame. The person filming had been very close to them. The movie was filmed while it was light outside and Bill understood that Carlo was telling him the King could get to his family at any time. He could reach them in daylight and there was nothing Bill could do to stop it.

“I’ll do better,” Bill said abjectly. Carlo pocketed his phone and before Bill could register it, he was out of his coffin and against the wall.

“You will, Bill, because the next time you fail your assignment in any particular, the King has promised me one of the children. I won’t turn them. That would be monstrous. But you and I both know how delicate the taste of blood is at that young age. She will simply disappear and only you and I will know what happened. You will have to face your Portia or the other one, Halleigh. You will smell their tears and taste their grief, and you will know you were the cause of their misery.”

“I understand,” Bill whimpered, and he did. He considered begging the publicist to cancel all his
future appearances. He thought about pleading illness or feigning an accident, but he knew there was no escape. With each trip there was a new assignment. Bill was certain that in some place not so far away, a clock was ticking. It was only a matter of time before he tripped and was found out and when he was, he knew with a certainty that all the ugliness would spill out around him.

Bill found he started to hate the night. He hated opening his eyes to find life within his limbs again. He started to truly hate what he was, and all those who were like him. He thought about the life he had dreamed about, the one where he and Sookie lived happy, solitary lives in the little house he built for her and how they met their deaths together, holding hands, peaceful.

New York

Several months had passed before Misha asked how Compton was handling things. “I don’t think he’ll be able to continue much longer,” Carlo shrugged. “He’s starting to talk to himself. His hands shake when he thinks no one is watching him.”

Misha grinned, “Well, I suppose the kind thing would be to allow him to meet his final death. After all, it’s not as though the woman still exists.” It wasn’t clear why Sonder had died. Perhaps it was the conditions in the basement. Perhaps her heart finally gave out. These humans were fragile at the end of the day, and it wasn’t worth spending time or money to worry about such things.

“She served her purpose,” Carlo shrugged. Aside from the leash she provided for Bill Compton, Sonder had provided other useful information. A search of her apartment revealed information about her former boss, a woman who was now orchestrating the ‘Great Whitewash’ for Bartlett Crowe. You couldn’t turn on the television or open a magazine without seeing the vampire, dressed in pastels, mimicking human behavior, and calling for an end to hatred between their species. If the campaign wasn’t so effective, it would have been laughable.

Misha was still angry about it. That place standing in front of vampire and human alike, smiling, confident, offering answers, was his plan. Misha was supposed to be that hero, and somehow his enemy had stolen his plan from under him. Misha still believed there was a spy somewhere and he staged games among those he thought might be candidates to ferret out their secrets. One thing that wasn’t clear yet was whether or not the information might prove useful, but Carlo suspected it would.

Then, there were the envelopes from Sonder’s piles of mail. The woman seemed to have an aversion to things that came from Louisiana and New Orleans in particular. She stacked it just so in a corner of her kitchen, unopened. There were letters there from another member of the Silent Witnesses, a woman who appeared to have been Sonder’s friend. In several of the envelopes Carlo found pages detailing names and biographies. There were photographs as well. It appeared someone had written out a history of the donors that lived in the New Orleans palace of Eric Northman. Carlo was pretty sure those donors would be found to be dead. It was the way the records were assembled and the notes that had been written in the margins that were the clue. Normally this kind of information was something you would sell back to a fellow King, but there were circumstances.

“Pamela will be in New York in a week’s time,” Misha was touching the petals of the rose on the table next to him. The King had become obsessive about yellow roses. Carlo found them offensive as he did all cut flowers. Once the stem was severed, it didn’t matter how quickly you placed it in water, the scent of decay started immediately.

“She has found time to separate herself from her Maker, then?” The reconciliation between Pam and Eric Northman had happened shortly after the Moshup Summit. Pam canceled plans she made to visit with the King in New York, explaining that she wished to spend time in Louisiana. She was pleasant about it, even happy, but it reminded Misha that his Zolotse was not her own woman after
Misha sent her flowers. He sent her small gifts. His Pamela responded, but there was something about it that had changed. The King couldn’t put his finger on it, but the genuine joy in her voice, the immediate feel that flattery created seemed missing. It was hard to tell without seeing her, but Misha felt that his lover was drifting from him, and it started when Eric Northman called her back.

“Make sure my calendar is cleared,” Misha instructed Carlo, “I have accepted all the invitations for Fashion Week and I wish Miss Ravenscroft to have the luxury of indulging in every second of the spectacle.” Misha had spent his own time arranging things for this visit. He secured entrée to every major party and on a whim arranged his own special reception in his town house, inviting a carefully selected guest list of artists, musicians, and intelligentsia. He would create a setting and his Pam would be the gem that made the evening complete.

“You don’t think it’s possible she will decline?” Carlo tried to ask the question in a way that sounded as though he doubted it himself, but it didn’t help.

Misha snarled in his direction, “She would not!” he hissed. “She has given her word and I trust her.”

“Majesty!” Carlo backpedaled, “I mean no disrespect to her. It is just that she is still tethered. She comes from a family known for its long attachments. The venerable Appius Livius Ocella understood the duty of his progeny, and wasn’t above reminding them, regardless of the years that stretched between them. You told me yourself that the North Man reminded you of his Sire in many ways. If your Pamela cannot come, it will be because she can’t, not because she does not wish it,” and Carlo bowed. Carlo was worried. When it came to the Ravenscroft woman, Misha acted more erratically than usual. If his King were someone else, Carlo would have accused him of having feelings for her, but that would never be Misha. Of course, attachments were expected, but only weak vampires had feelings. Still, if Pam failed to come this time, Carlo worried for his King. Better that Misha understand there was someone who would be to blame, that his anger have a clear target.

“She’ll come,” the King looked back at the roses.

Bon Temps

When Eric returned from Boston, he contacted Pamela. “Are you asking me to return for a purpose?” she asked.

“Do you wish to have a purpose?” Eric asked in return.

“I’m not interested in being your Regent,” Pam told him. “I like what I’m doing. I run my own affairs. I have interesting people who suck up to me everywhere I go. Between Max’s money sense and my nose for a deal, I am making more money than I ever thought possible and I find I like that flavor of the chase.” Eric couldn’t help smiling. Although she was half a country away in Minnesota, he could still feel her satisfaction. There was a time Pam would have chosen to serve him, and Eric knew if he asked, she would again. This Pam who spoke with him now was a more comfortable, confident version of Pamela. This was a woman in her own right, and Eric found he could ask for nothing more.

“It will be as you say. Come and visit us because your presence brings us joy, min dotter,” he told her. Two nights later, Pam and Karin walked out of the woods toward the Hummingbird Lane house and Sookie found herself flashing back to a night that seemed a lifetime ago. On that night, these same two women had walked through that same space between the trees. Pam had just been named Sheriff of Area 5 and Karin was starting her year of watching over Sookie. Eric was in Oklahoma, married, and lost. Sookie had told herself over and over it was all for the best. Tonight felt like déjà
vu, a do-over, where the outcome turned out right this time, and she couldn’t help sighing.

“Lover?” Eric took her hand, “What?” She could feel his concern and she brightened her smile in spite of the quick tears that were forming in the corners of her eyes.

“I don’t know how I deserve to be so happy,” Sookie whispered, wrestling with mutinous emotions.

“I can smell her leaking,” Pam smirked and without waiting, reached across to pull Sookie away from Eric. Sookie felt the minute affection turned to something else, “Oh shit! What is that?”

“It’s her,” Karin smirked, “Sookie stinks.”

“Sorry!” Sookie mentally kicked herself and pulled her illusion more firmly in place. “Emotions play hell with Fae stuff. I’ve really been making an effort to keep the biohazard smell masked,” and Sookie exerted herself. She could see when her efforts started to pay off when Pam’s face relaxed.

Not bothering to hide a last shudder, Pam turned to step into Eric’s embrace next, and as he kissed her forehead, she said, “It’s a good thing you fall dead for the day. I can’t imagine being close to that for hours. It must make fucking an interesting experience.”

Sookie knew Pam meant it as a joke, but she found herself unexpectedly hurt by Pam’s words. “I have no need for breathing,” Eric was speaking to Pam, but Sookie could feel the comfort he was sending her way, “and every need for my wife. Besides it’s only temporary. We travel to Shreveport tomorrow to see if Sookie can stop the injections that are causing it.”

“Huh!” Pam smirked, and then looping her arm through the telepath’s, she pulled them toward the house. “You know I never wished for children,” Pam said, “But I find I am most excited at the prospect of watching you do it. I get all the advantages. I’ll be able to dress it and buy it things and when it becomes tiresome, I can leave.” Sookie laughed in spite of herself and found in a second, all was forgiven. It was odd. Her hand traveled over her belly and she saw Eric register her gesture.

As they sat down in the front room, he nodded toward her hand, which had remained in place. “Do you know something, Lover?” There were so many possibilities. It seemed unlikely, but the Viking couldn’t discount his wife ‘hearing’ it or feeling this kind of change on some level.

“No,” Sookie removed her hand and waved it instead, ‘nothing except a feeling really. I can’t explain it, but I just think we’re going to get good news tomorrow.”

Karin glanced from one to the other. “I hope the best for both of you,” she said, but she didn’t look as though she was truly comfortable with this idea. Eric didn’t blame her. With almost no pause, Karin turned to Pam and said, “So, I heard you’re bumping uglies with the mythical King of New York.”

“It’s unusual to run into someone who shares so many things from my past,” Pam agreed enthusiastically. Sookie watched Pam’s face brighten and it was a look she recognized. In that moment, she was afraid for her sister. “He knows as much about Austrian art as I do, and probably
more about clothing manufacture. He can construct anagrams and he plays piano. He reminds me of things I’d forgotten.” She glanced at Eric, “He reminds me of you in many ways. He’s vibrant and fun. But…” and she glanced shyly away, “he makes you work for it. There is nothing cheap about him,” and if she could have, Sookie was sure Pam would have blushed.

Eric leaned forward and when he had Pam’s attention, he said, “I am afraid for you.” It was a simple statement, simply delivered, but it brought Pam up short. Sookie watched her sister sit up straighter and lose her dreamy look. Karin sat up and leaned in as well. Sookie wondered if there was some element of command about what Eric had done. She hadn’t felt it, but Pam’s and Karin’s reactions were odd.

“Why?” Pam asked. Although her voice was steady, her eyes were not.

“There were things I learned at Moshup Summit about him. He is now Moshup Clan Chief. Perhaps you already knew that.” Pam nodded. “He gained the title by destroying Nabila. She is under investigation and will likely step down as Queen of the Carolinas. Her assets have been frozen. She is now a vampire with a target on her back. The enemies she has made in her long life will gather to her and she will likely be no more within a short period of time.”

“What’s to say that Nabila’s troubles weren’t there already? What makes you think this was Misha’s doing?” Pam looked distressed and Sookie realized her friend was more than a little involved with this King. “I haven’t been following Carolina’s problems closely, but it doesn’t look like it’s just lies. So what? So, he’s ambitious. I get the impression…” and she dropped her eyes, “that he may have done it for me.”

“Why would you think that?” Karin asked.

“He said something about wishing to be worthy of my respect,” Pam mumbled.

“It is a dangerous game when a vampire already a King decides to disguise his ambition as something else. Make no mistake, Pamela. He may tell you he offers this as a token, but he did it for himself. He understands the benefits of power very well.” When Pam looked as though she would defend Misha further, Eric said, “I do not doubt that he has affection for you, min dotter. Who could resist you? I am happy you have found affection, but it would be better if you found it with someone else. There is more to him than he reveals. He is willing to destroy those around him to gain what he desires. What happens when you become that thing he has already achieved? Do you truly believe he will be content to rest? Vampires like that never do. It is about the next conquest, the next unachievable goal.” When Pam’s face dropped, Eric leaned forward. Sookie could feel the ripples of comfort and strength he was sending her and it made her feel warm. “I say this not to injure you, but because I wish you not to be injured. Guard your heart for a while longer. Look at him and those around him carefully. Reach out to Thalia. She is in Indiana and I believe she has information that may help you.”

It was hard for Sookie to look at her sister. Pam retreated into downtime, and Eric gave her space by turning to Karin, ”I am most anxious to hear what you found when you investigated the servant’s apartment.” He glanced toward Sookie, but she knew he meant Meg.

Karin shot a quick glance at Pam as well, then schooled her face and launched into a quick, but thorough description of her work with Octavia Fant. The witch had arranged for an ectoplasmic reconstruction at Meg’s apartment. They had watched the shade of the young woman move around her apartment re-enacting her movements in those hours before she walked into Amelia’s shop and found her death. The reconstruction had revealed nothing. They conducted a thorough search of the space and Meg’s car with the same results. ”If she had something on you, it wasn’t anywhere we could find it. It’s possible that we are just borrowing trouble by digging more,” Karin shrugged. "I'm
thinking the problem died with her.” Somehow Eric doubted it.

The next night Eric and Sookie drove to the clinic in Shreveport. Sookie’s good feeling was confirmed. Jane and Doctor Ludwig were in the room with them. It was Doctor Ludwig who pointed out the dot on the plasma screen mounted high on the wall above the bed where Sookie was lying. All Eric could see was a small circle against a larger circle but Sookie became very excited, her happiness bouncing against him. When his wife left the room to use the bathroom, Amy Ludwig poked him in the arm, “I guess the most exciting part for you is now your wife can stop those injections and you can start having sex again.” Eric couldn’t hide his look of relief and the small doctor laughed out loud.

When Sookie came back the first question she asked was, “So, it’s okay for us to have sex again?”

“Same thing your vampire wanted to know and I said yes,” Amy snapped. “Don’t you have any other questions?”

“Well, sure,” Sookie was having a hard time not looking at Eric, “How long will it take?”

“How long will what take?” Doctor Ludwig scowled at her.

Jane was making notes on her computer tablet, “Your pregnancy should track the same as any human pregnancy. Forty weeks.”

“No!” Sookie exclaimed, “How long before my smell returns to normal?”

“Wow, guess it really has been a buzz kill, huh, Deader?” Amy chortled and then she told Sookie, “It’ll take a week, maybe a little longer. Drink plenty of water and that will help flush it all out of your system.”

Jane shrugged, “Of course normal will now be that pregnant smell.”

Eric nodded. “That is a pleasing smell,” he assured his Sookie. Pregnant women did smell pleasing. He remembered other things about pregnant women as well. They could be emotional. They seemed to cry more often, which was troubling. He also remembered that the quality of sex changed. He wondered how long it would be before those changes came and he pushed a wave of lust at Sookie that had her swatting his arm.

As they drove home Sookie traced circles in the palm of his outstretched hand. She stared out the window and Eric could feel her distracted happiness. “Do you feel different now, Lover?” Eric asked.

“In every way I can think of,” she replied.

That night Eric stood Sookie at the end of their large bed and told her he intended to trace each line, each shadow of her body. He told her he wished to memorize this moment so that he could more fully appreciate the changes that would come. Her breasts felt no different in his hand. Her nipple pebbled under his thumb and her eyes warmed for him as he leaned to run his lips lightly along the column of her neck. She arched into his hand, her body always so wonderfully responsive to him. He drew a cool line with his tongue starting at the hollow behind her ear, then running along her jaw, and finally ending by capturing her mouth. When she moaned into him, he lifted her, parting her legs to wrap them around his waist. He thought about Sookie’s enthusiasm in finding herself pregnant. She was happy, triumphant. He could not understand it, not entirely, but it meant so much to her that he felt the least he could do was return her joy.

It occurred to Eric that there was something about not being able to have a thing that made wanting
more acute. He and Sookie had gone without sex before and for longer periods of time, but knowing it was forbidden left them both hungrier. Sookie’s smell still had that sharp, sourness to it, but since he had heard Jane confirm the pregnancy, it didn’t seem as offensive. It was possible Sookie was shielding it more effectively, or perhaps the pregnancy smell itself was beginning to assert itself. For some reason he could hear Thalia’s voice telling him he was lying to himself. It was puzzling.

When he placed her on the bed and then crawled up to join her, his Sookie cradled his head between both her hands, running her face against his, nipping and kissing. Her hair left scent trails and Eric refused to breath, not allowing the scent being left behind to deter him as it had before. When she reached for his pants, he pushed her hands away, “No, my Lover. Let me.”

He took his time, unbuttoning her shirt first and then her skirt. He licked the skin he uncovered and then breathed against her, raising gooseflesh. He traced his hands over her hips, running his fingertips close, but never quite touching the place where her legs joined. Her bra followed her shirt, leaving her in her panties. They were her conservative white cotton ones, the ones he teased her about. She couldn’t bring herself to wear thongs or lace to the Shreveport clinic, and he smiled as he pulled at the elastic, bringing them tight against her, and then he dipped his head and kissed and nipped her through the cotton. He could smell her arousal, taste her, but it wasn’t as astringent as before. Sookie was starting to wiggle a little and so he wrapped one arm around her to hold her in place, and then used his other hand to wrap in her hair, pulling her head back. He rose over her, admiring the way her eyes begged him, her mouth open and panting.

He kissed her then, using teeth and tongue, teasing, exploring, nipping first one lip and then the other. He demanded and then gave as good as he got. When Sookie tried to shift toward him, seeking friction, he refused to allow her much movement. When he pulled back from her he realized there was something about the way she looked, her lips swollen and open, that never grew old. “I will love you until my final death,” he whispered, and realized that each time he said it felt like a revelation. He reclaimed her mouth and allowed his other hand to drop between her legs. Still he wouldn’t allow her to remove her panties. When she started to whimper he pushed her back and used mouth and tongue against the cotton barrier, finally gripping one edge with his teeth and pulling them down her legs. He watched her watching him, her eyes heated and he dropped his fangs, allowing them to trail up one leg and then the other. He watched every movement, heard every time her breath caught in her throat. He played her with every skill he had acquired over a long lifetime of physical experiences.

He parted her lips and then kissed her pussy, using tongue and lips, pulling and demanding in the same way he had demanded of her mouth. She was dripping, her hands clutching the bedspread, and her back arched. She tried to pull his head from her, but he refused to move from his place. He could hear her begging, “Please, Eric! Please, I need your cock!”

‘There will be plenty of time for that,’ he thought to himself. He could feel her start to tremble around his tongue and he redoubled his efforts. Sookie’s back arched and she keened as she came, her voice echoing off the ceiling, the sounds spiraling as her voice went from strident to breathy.

Sookie tried to twist away from him, but he held her still, using mouth and fangs to prolong her tremors. As her body slowed, he used his fingers to stroke and play. He found that place within her that caused her breath to stutter and he twisted and tickled, over and over until she was begging again. When he felt her walls begin to tremble, he used her fluids to coat his thumb and timing his thrusts, he used the motions of fingers and thumb to counterpoint each other, fingers in pussy, thumb in ass, while he sucked and nipped at her clit. He felt the sensations roll over her and her body clamped down on him so hard he had to slow his motions so as not to hurt her. She was nearly incoherent, but still he gave no quarter. He drove her to completion and as her orgasm washed over her, he fully opened their bond, immersing himself in her. He rubbed himself against the bedspread
and as he felt himself coming close, he dipped into her head and the bliss he found there caused him
to spend himself against the bed. When they both calmed, he pulled himself up to lie beside her,
wrapping her in his long arms. She sighed and turned against him as he stroked her sweaty hair away
from her forehead.

“Wow,” she panted, “I hope you’re not looking for anything for a minute or thirty.”

Eric chuckled, “I am happy with you,” he told her. When she closed her eyes and didn’t open them
again, Eric tucked her under the covers and retreated into his office. The room was perfect now. It
had taken several visits from the technician before everything worked as he wished, but the results
were worth it. Of all the spaces he had engineered over the years, this one was his favorite. With a
push of the button, the television turned on. He did a quick search and found himself watching
Russell Edgington on a late night talk show. The King was witty. He spoke intelligently about the
situation in Indiana and the threat this posed for all species. He made his pitch for cooperative law
enforcement, and then talked about a pilot program Indianapolis was running with some success. The
King ended with a funny story about living gay and vampire. It was clean and Eric was pretty sure
someone had written it for him. The audience laughed and the host made a point of bowing before
Russell extended his hand. The camera showed the audience giving the King a standing ovation.
Eric called Russell’s number and left a message congratulating him.

Watching his friend using mainstreaming to ‘humanize’ vampires had Eric glancing out the open
door toward the bed where he could see the lump under the blanket that was his wife. He thought
about Jane’s words, that this pregnancy would be the same as any other human pregnancy. On some
level, Eric felt he should feel something more about this, but he couldn’t think what that would be.
He thought of his busy wife standing beside him, a child in her arms. For some reason Aude’s face
came to mind. She had stood beside him, as Sookie now did. He knew it meant something, but he
didn’t know what and that made him uncomfortable.

In the days that followed, Sookie shared the news with her family and those who worked at the
house every day. Jason and Michele brought their children over and threw Sookie and Eric a small,
impromptu celebration. There were other small gifts and Sookie started making noises about a
nursery. A week passed and then another. Each night was spent in the work of the kingdom. They
made appearances at Fangtasia and met with Mr. Cataliades in the evening.

“I congratulate you both,” the attorney had bowed, “I wish you joy.” Somehow Sookie had thought
the demon would have been more enthusiastic.

Tamsin treated the news as an excuse to double down on lessons. Eric would rise to find his wife
already exhausted from her time with her trainer, but as the days passed, Eric also realized Sookie
was sleeping more. As the third week passed, Eric received a message from Mustapha.

“Guess your girl is getting her ass handed to her by that fairy,” the Packmaster rumbled.

“Sookie tells me her training has become more tiring,” Eric agreed.

“We’re women get real tired in their first trimester,” Mustapha said as though he had personal
experience, which he didn’t.

“Sookie is more tired,” Eric agreed, “I’m assuming there is a point to this.”

“Your girl is too tired to be cooking for fairies every day,” Mustapha told the Viking. “My guards are
telling me she gets up and makes them a big breakfast, then they head out to the barn and your wife
drags ass back around lunch time, but she’s too tired to do anything else. She doesn’t shower until
later and she’s not eating at all. You told them to watch out for it, so I’m telling you she’s not eating.
You should think about hiring a housekeeper for that house, someone to take care of the cleaning and cooking for a while.”

Eric thanked Mustapha, agreeing he would have to discuss this with Sookie. Eric could predict the reception the idea would receive. He wasn’t sure that having someone else cook for the fairies would be acceptable, and he called Niall. The clipped voice that answered informed him the Prince was engaged elsewhere and was not expected back anytime soon. When Eric asked to speak with Dermot, he received an identically worded response and Eric wondered if he was talking with some automated system that used voice recognition and scripts.

Fortunately, they were scheduled to return to New Orleans in another day, and Eric knew Devrah would see to things.

From the moment they walked through the Palace doors, Devrah swept his wife into her arms and care. She made a fuss over Sookie, bossing her in one minute and pampering her in the next. If Sookie spent too many hours in meetings, Devrah would let her know. The housekeeper announced the Palace was going to institute high tea. It was an excuse to introduce a snack in the late afternoon, and then drape a blanket over Sookie so she could nap.

Eric worked, Sookie worked, and they spent hours either on the roof or wrapped around each other in their retreat. It was one evening about a week after they returned to the city that Eric noticed Sookie’s smell had changed. His Sookie smelled better. She smelt better than better, she smelt intoxicating. Eric could spend all night with his nose buried in various parts of her, feeling drunk with the way she smelt. And she tasted wonderful. Her blood was more Fae than before and when he buried his face between her thighs, he had no desire to leave. He realized some part of his reaction was instinctual, but another part was something else. He wasn’t sure what that was, but he found himself wishing to be by her more.

The sweet smell did not go unnoticed by others, and Sookie started hiding her scent, and then other aspects of her appearance on a regular basis. Most days it was just instinct now. Get up. Go to the bathroom. Cloak self. Get dressed. It wasn’t that her scent was overwhelming, but it was better not to call any attention to it at all. There were other lessons Sookie practiced every day. She caused things to glow. She shaped metal and practiced shaping wood. There were residual smells, ‘signatures’ on those items she created, but they didn’t cause problems.

Eric was impressed with the span of her skills, although Sookie would laugh it off, saying she couldn’t see any good use for half the stuff she had learned. One night, Sookie entertained Karin and Maxwell Lee by pulling appearances over the guards, and then each of them. His talented wife was becoming very good at forming these illusions. He almost thought Karin was Charles, his Were guard. The Viking had to ask Karin to repeat her name twice before he detected it. “That really is a handy skill,” Karin’s eyes had narrowed as Sookie released the illusion. “It has so many possibilities.”

“It gives me a whole new appreciation for why it’s so hard to spot the Fae traveling among us,” Sookie agreed. “I’ve asked Tamsin if they really keep to themselves in their enclaves, but she’s downright dodgy about answering. I’m pretty sure I saw something Fae in Shreveport last time I was there.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go looking for Fae around every bend,” Eric chuckled. “They are still rare in terms of numbers, and nothing has changed that. No young among them means every one that is killed diminishes their race further.”

“It really is no laughing matter,” Sookie scolded her husband and her hand had traveled to rest over her belly.
As they were preparing the leave for the next Assizes, the FBI came to call. They hadn’t made an appointment, but they did show up at night. They were there to ask questions about Meg and Sonder. Sookie remembered the second woman. She had been Twy’s assistant for a period of time and Sookie had met her here at the palace. Sonder had moved to Boston and, like Meg, had joined the Silent Witnesses. Both disappearances were being treated at potential homicides. At one point after the explosion in Rhodes, the FBI had put some pressure on Sookie to come and work for them. She had managed to avoid it and never regretted that decision.

As they asked Eric the same question several ways, trying to find some crack in his story to exploit, Sookie dipped in one head and then the other to find out what they knew. The agents were frustrated. Months of investigation had led to one dead end after the other. One of the agents was sure vampires were behind this and she was equally sure that Eric Northman, with his too perfect smile, was the ring leader. She was visualizing Eric in silver chains on a rooftop, and the way his skin would glow and then flame as the sun found him. Apparently it was something this woman had witnessed before and she thought it a fitting end for any vampire.

“Lover?” Eric said, and Sookie realized she must have made a noise and they were all looking at her.

“I’m sorry,” Sookie pasted her Crazy Sookie smile in place. “Just had a spell, I guess.” Eric got up from his seat and walked across to her. He sat down next to her and took her hand in his. Sookie could ‘hear’ the woman savagely dismissing the role playing she was sure she was witnessing, but her partner started thinking about the Bureau’s plan to bring in a few vampires as consultants for Supe crime cases.

Sookie told Eric about the Bureau using vampires after the agents left. “It is good we had our troubles now,” he told her. “Vampires would have understood what happened. It would have been difficult to hide.” He settled back on the chaise in their retreat, “It is a good plan, bringing vampires into law.”

“You’re saying that because it’s your plan!” Sookie pushed his chest.

“No,” Eric chuckled, “It was always a good plan. My thinking of it made it a great plan,” and he tickled her a little when Sookie rewarded him with a raspberry. When he settled her against him, he said, “When that happens, all things will change again. There will be no separation of Supe law and human law. It will become one law. It will take time, and there will be many problems. You have a saying and I believe it to be true. "Be careful what you wish for.” We may find the day comes we regret starting this course that will bring our rules together.”

The Assizes were to be held in Lafayette. Sookie realized she hadn’t seen Thierry in months. She knew he was doing well because she saw the results in the balance sheets Mr. Cataliades brought in his black briefcase every evening. Energy and reclamation was going well and there was a new venture with Felipe de Castro involving solar panels in Nevada. On paper, Thierry should have been thriving, but when they sat together in the vampire’s home, Sookie could see something was wrong with the Sheriff.

Eric must have picked up on her curiosity because he asked, “Have you heard from Nabila?” That surprised Sookie. She hadn’t realized Thierry knew the Carolinas Queen. Sookie had liked the Queen for all she had tried to get Eric to agree to a royal marriage with her.

“She no longer recognizes me,” the Sheriff replied and gave a quick laugh. “It would appear I am shunned by her, and it is no more than I deserve.”

“She has probably already stepped down,” Eric’s voice was sympathetic.
“You mean she’s not Queen anymore?” Sookie asked.

“She is now too weak to continue. It will be up to her Clan Chief to appoint a new Queen.” Eric’s eyes never left Thierry.

“But what will she do? I mean, I’ve heard of a couple of you all stepping away from this, but one of them decided to meet the sun…” and Thierry made a noise.

“I apologize,” the French Sheriff said quickly. “Please excuse me,” and he bowed and left the room.

Eric sat back for a moment and then turned to Sookie, “She was a potential rival, Älskade, but I have it in my head to invite her to our kingdom as a guest. Thomas would welcome her to Arkansas if you prefer she not be in New Orleans. There is no reason for either of us to see her, but I wish to offer her safe harbor.” When Sookie didn’t say anything right away, he continued, “I will not invite her without your consent, Lover. You are my Queen. You must agree.”

“She and Thierry, huh?” Sookie asked.

“He betrayed her, Lover. She is unlikely to ever forgive him. In fact, having her in the kingdom might cost me Thierry’s services. She would be within her rights to challenge him,” and Eric waited again.

“I think it’s a nice thing to do,” Sookie agreed, “Arkansas would be a good place for her. Who knows? If Karin feels like she has a rival up there, maybe she’ll get her head out of her ass and go do her own claiming.”

“You are an interfering woman,” Eric scolded her.

“It’s why you love me,” Sookie reminded him, and he didn’t argue with her.

It was almost exactly five weeks to the day when Eric heard something change. He left his office and walked to the bed where Sookie slept. She was on her back as she was most nights. Her breasts had become bounteous, her nipples darkening. They were most appealing, but also most sensitive, which Eric considered an interesting challenge to be met as frequently as she would allow.

Sookie moaned softly as Eric crawled up over the footboard to place himself between her legs. He had to admit he was becoming addicted to the taste of her. He would arouse her while she slept, not enough to wake her, but enough to pull a little nectar. He suspected his wife knew because she no longer went to sleep wearing underwear. “You are too kind to me,” he whispered, ghosting his lips up her legs.

As he began to play he laid his head against her gently sloping belly. The roundness was not pronounced, but it was there, hard and visible. He was stroking when he heard it. It sounded like the whirl of a bee’s wings. He lifted his head and it was gone. He looked at Sookie, and then placed his ear against her again and it was there. His fingers stilled as he focused on the sound. “Are you there?” he whispered against Sookie’s skin, and the sound changed.

Eric lifted his head from his wife’s belly. He waited and then laid his head against her again. He stroked her skin, lightly at first, but then with more pressure. The thrum of sound within her was steady, unchanging. He turned his lips against her belly and said “Bebis?” and the sound changed. Eric’s hand seemed to move on its own to cover the swell from the side. He crooned a song he remembered from his human days, singing the melody against her. The sound within his wife moved and shifted, becoming clearer as though trying to come closer.

“Cheese and rice, Eric!” Sookie grumbled, rolling over quickly, shoving his head from her. She just
about jacknifed herself to the side of the bed. “You were leaning on my bladder! What were you doing?”

“Singing to my son,” he said out loud, and the truth of it pierced him as surely as any stake.
Bon Temps

“I can’t believe you’re being so selfish about this! All I’m asking…”

“Is to remove me from my office, which took me a great deal of time and inconvenience to assemble,” Eric was more than annoyed. The first time Sookie told him she would be ‘taking’ his office at Bon Temps for a baby nursery, he quickly set her straight. He pointed at all the empty bedrooms on the floor just below them. He spelled out how inconvenient it would be for both of them to have an infant too close. He reminded her that it was a bad idea to allow a child to disrupt one’s life. Children were extensions of their parents, not the other way around.

Sookie huffed and sighed. She crossed her arms and called him “Buster” several times. She gave up, but it wasn’t the end of it. “By my count, Lover, this is the thirteenth time you have introduced this subject. Is there some new argument or fact you wish to present? Is there some reason you believe my answer would be different this time?”

“But, what if something happens?” she stomped her foot. Her arms crossed under her breasts, emphasizing their size, but Eric knew better than to reach out to cup one. She was cross, not exactly angry, but she would swat at him all the same.

“What could happen?” Eric scoffed. “Pam wants to put a surveillance system in the room. I am awake all night and can hear better than any listening device. When I am not here, Bubba or one of the others will be. Having a child in our chambers will be noisy and disruptive.”

“Don’t start with the smell thing again,” Sookie huffed.

“You understand the issue. It is better a child has quiet when it wishes to sleep. There is no reason for a child to be disturbed by the noises you make,” and Eric smirked at Sookie before turning to walk downstairs.

“If you keep this up, Buddy, there won’t be any noises coming from this room ever again!” Sookie threatened. It wasn’t the first time she’d said it, but they both knew it was a lie. If anything, Sookie’s libido was in overdrive. These spats only seemed to fuel her hunger and it annoyed the telepath no end that Eric knew it.

Still, Eric found he was not willing to let it go, and so he turned back and in a flash was very, very close to her flushed face.

“What makes you think I was talking about those noises, Lover? I was talking about your snoring,” and with a smirk he knew would piss her off, he stole a kiss and flashed down the stairs before she
could say another word. He could hear her roaring her frustration upstairs and Eric couldn’t help chuckling.

“Baiting pregnant women is either brave or suicidal,” Charles shook his head. “She’s like a dog with a bone. You’d do better finding something that will aim her somewhere else.”

Eric could hear Sookie stomping down the stairs, “What did you have in mind?” he asked, watching for his wife.

“Have the nursery room decorated while you’re both away. Have someone she likes do it, someone she won’t want to offend. Maybe have them throw her a surprise nursery party or something.”

“You are very smart,” Eric grinned.

“Three kids and I still have all my body parts,” Charles winked.

“Don’t think just because we have company that this is over, Eric Northman!” Sookie announced as she walked into the kitchen, but when she turned to Charles her smile was pleasant and Eric could feel her mood had shifted again. “It’s nice to see you, Charles. I was happy to hear you’d be going with Eric to Minnesota. As least someone is!”

That had been one of the other fights they’d had this week. Sookie was feeling fine and she saw no reason she couldn’t accompany Eric on his upcoming trip to Maude’s palace. Sure, Jane and Dr. Ludwig had both cautioned against any long distance travel for the telepath during her first trimester, but she would officially enter her second trimester in days. Still, Eric held firm. Sookie was hoping that when they visited the clinic for their ultrasound in two nights the verdict would change. For now, the telepath was hardly housebound. She continued to work with her human friends at Maxine’s, although she cut back to three times a week. Tamsin was also starting to come less frequently. The Fairy’s explanation was that she had pressing business in the land of the Fae.

Mr. Cataliades remained their constant. They settled on a schedule of every Monday evening and he would appear, always dapper, with papers and information regardless of where they were located. It was Monday, so they expected the demon shortly. Tomorrow they would travel into Shreveport for the monthly Assizes and then back to Shreveport the following night for the clinic. Eric would leave later that night for Minnesota and be gone for two nights before rejoining Sookie in New Orleans. It was a busy schedule and a third fight was over whether Sookie should have a day man. Of course, this person would not really be a day man, or even a man, but Eric was insisting that she have someone who would travel with her, organizing schedules and doing housework, including cooking, when Sookie was in a house, like Bon Temps, where there were no regular servants.

Sookie countered that she could just as easily make arrangements with Maxine’s to provide prepared food (and she had), and as for organizing calendars, she didn’t need someone up her ass telling her where she needed to be, thank you very much. “That’s pretty much your job, isn’t it?” she’d snarled at Eric.

“Well, I must be terrible at it, because you refuse to do as you’re told!” Eric had snarled back. Thinking about that fight made Eric smile. She’d struck him, he’d grabbed her, and they’d ended up embarrassing the Were guard who came to see what broke.

Sookie moved to the refrigerator and pulled out the aluminum containers. Each was labeled with the temperature and the time. Holly Fortenberry was thorough. Eric knew he probably should have helped, but it was too much fun to watch her watching him, knowing it was getting under her skin. Charles looked from one to the other and said, “I’m going to take a patrol. I’ll be back later.” When Sookie’s back was turned, he shook his head at Eric. It made Eric smile more.
When Eric sensed her annoyance crossing to anger, he rose from the stool and retrieved silverware. The demon attorney and Sookie would eat dinner while Eric sipped blood. Maxwell Lee had sent prospective on the events planning business, Fangtasia Ltd. Sookie was a part owner and there was a proposal to expand further. Their meetings usually ran several hours. Eric finished setting the table and then took the extra step of pouring Sookie a large glass of water with ice. Not drinking sweet tea was a hardship for her, but she worried about the effects of caffeine and he was pleased to see her smile at him when he handed her the glass.

The business portion of the meeting tonight ran a little longer than usual. Sookie’s holdings in trust for her Grandfather were doing well. Sookie had decided against making an investment in a pill that promised to roll back aging. Others had jumped on the idea and for a while it looked like the competition had chosen wisely, but now there were reports of people having serious side effects and at least one lawsuit had been filed. Mr. Cataliades chuckled that with Sookie’s instincts it would be a foolish attorney who ever bet against her.

“Well,” Sookie smiled, “That’s real kind of you to say. I have chocolate cake for dessert and some of that ginger tea you like. It’s a pretty night and we could sit out in the screen porch.”

“It’s a kind offer,” the attorney bowed, “But I have pressing matters.” He looked at Sookie and it was in the way he said it that stopped her, “You look beautiful. I don’t believe I have ever seen you happier.”

“Why do I get the feeling there’s something going on that folks aren’t telling me?” Sookie tilted her head, “First Tamsin and now you. When do you ever turn down cake? Is there something I should know?”

“Of course not!” the attorney laughed, “There is nothing to worry about! Forgive an old friend who is feeling nostalgic. May I?” and he stepped close, his hand extended.

Sookie glanced at Eric, and then shrugged, “Sure, guess I’ll have to get used to it. The way he’s growing, he’ll be the first thing people see for a while.”

Mr. Cataliades stepped forward and, with a slight smile, laid his hand on the swell of Sookie’s stomach. He closed his eyes for a moment and his smile dropped. “You will have your ultrasound soon?” he asked.

“In two nights,” Eric was watching the lawyer closely. He trusted Desmond, but the sight of anyone touching Sookie made his skin itch.

“That’s good,” the attorney smiled now. “Give Amy my best, but now I must be going.” He gathered his papers and, in a most uncharacteristic move, he leaned over and hugged Sookie. “Take care of yourself,” he told her and bowed to Eric.

“What do you think that’s all about?” Sookie asked Eric as the demon walked out to his waiting vehicle, but Eric had no answer.

The Assizes were the next night and this month they were being held in Fangtasia. Indira had closed the club for regular business and signs were posted. Sookie was masking her pregnancy. It was tricky, this business of only altering certain aspects of her appearance. She found it took long hours of practice to get it exactly right. It was harder still when she decided to allow her Fae features to be seen, but still hide both her scent and the body changes specific to her pregnancy. “It feels like threading a needle,” she told Eric. “I have to pay such close attention. It’s getting easier, but it still leaves me all tired out.”
Both knew there was no question of Sookie not attending. She had fought hard to earn her place next to Eric for these events. If she missed one there would be speculation. “Pace yourself,” he kissed her head. “I have asked that thrones be placed on the podium. If we are both sitting there will be no wondering.”

“You complain about humans being sensitive, but you vampires are downright twitchy!” Sookie fussed. “If I stand but you don’t, that could be disrespectful. If you stand but I don’t, I’m not taking my rightful place. If I speak before you do, I’m being rude, but if you speak and I don’t, then I’m viewed as being ineffective.”

“We are very old, Lover. What do we have to do but come up with rules and protocol?” and he sympathized when the telepath rolled her eyes.

Sookie decided that rather than try to reveal her Fae features later, she’d start the evening with them in place. It was always a jolt when she caught sight of her hand and saw the long, sharp claws that tipped each of her elongated fingers. Her skin was pale and slightly glowing. Her hair looked more white than gold and her eyes slanted over sharp cheekbones. Eric handed her into her throne before sitting on his own. He sat back, his arms draped over the arms and his legs spread, making his already impressive presence appear even larger. “Who is first?” he asked.

Karin kept things moving. There were the usual petty things; vampires poaching in each other’s territory, claims of theft. Things were going smoothly and Sookie wondered if they would have time to watch a movie together later when there was a murmur and Octavia Fant stepped forward. Sookie could feel Eric’s sudden interest. He sat up and Sookie did the same.

“Welcome, Octavia,” Eric said, not waiting for the witch to present herself. “It is always a pleasure to see you. Perhaps I can have a chair brought and you can rest until the business of my Court is concluded?” Sookie could tell that Eric was worried. It was in the way he dropped his contractions.

“I won’t say no to the chair,” the witch replied, “but I’m here on business.” The older woman looked right at Sookie and her face wrinkled, “Sookie? Is that you?”

“It’s been a long time,” Sookie said, the syllables slightly slurried as she spoke around her teeth.

Eric stood then and turning to Sookie, said, “I will speak with our friend. Join us when things are concluded,” and he stepped off the podium.

Sookie watched the Viking walk away with Octavia toward the offices in back and she couldn’t stop the quick feeling of panic. She knew he was sending her calm, but it seemed like a pea in the ocean of her emotions. Sookie turned to see Karin staring at her and so she stood up, walked with deliberate steps to Eric’s throne, sat, settled herself, and only then snarled, “Continue.”

Eric gestured toward the couch when they entered the office. He turned to the small refrigerator and opened a soft drink, pouring it into a glass. ‘Sookie has ruined me,’ he thought as he turned to find Octavia sitting in the chair across from the desk instead of on the couch.

When Eric looked surprised, the older witch smirked, “I know what goes on over there on that couch. I’m not setting any part of me on any part of that surface.” She accepted the beverage and smiled some more, “Mighty nice of you, Majesty. Must have had some nice person teach you manners because it’s not anything I’ve come to expect from vampires.”

Eric walked to sit behind the desk. “What can I do for you?” he asked.
“I’ve come to register our complaints,” Octavia nodded. “We were assured that the killing would stop. That’s happened with some of you, but not all. That bastard right to your North…”

“Isaiah?” Eric asked and when Octavia nodded, he gestured for her to continue.

“That Isaiah, for example, he just lies to our people. He tells us he’s turned over his prisoners, but then we found out that he used our asking as an excuse to hurry their executions. He denies it, but you know we have ways of knowing what happens.”

“I will speak with him. Give me the names of those he was holding. You understand he is a fellow King, but I am Clan Chief. I can bring him forward before the others for endangering our peace.”

Octavia sipped her drink and then carefully set it on the desk between them, “I believe you would. Do you know how different that is from other vampires?”

Eric smiled and shrugged, “I can’t believe that I am the only one who understands the benefits of a good deal,” he replied.

“It’s not about deals,” Octavia retorted, “It’s about treating others, witches, like equals. You respect us. I can count the vampires who do on one hand, and those are not always your rulers. Most vampires see us the way they see humans, like dirt. Of course, for us, it depends on whether or not we’re doing something for them. If we provide a service the vampire wants, then we’re almost valuable dirt. You’re different, Northman. You were before, but you are definitely different now.”

“You barely know me,” the Viking pointed out.

“You offered me a cold drink,” Octavia looked at him as though she was seeing right through him. “That tells me more than you think.” When Eric looked skeptical, Octavia said, “If there is one thing this experience has shown us, it is the importance of our coming together for protection.”

“It’s not easy, organizing,” Eric observed.

“I heard Sookie was involved with the Weres,” Octavia gave Eric a direct look. It hadn’t occurred to the Viking that witches kept track of those things and he made a mental note not to underestimate them again. “That’s the problem with Weres though, they can’t put their instincts aside long enough. They fight to become Alpha without realizing that their behavior keeps them at the bottom of the food chain,” and the witch laughed. “Witches are smarter. We’re using the Internet to connect and we’ve begun to talk about how to police our own. That’s not easy, but you probably know that.”

“You see how we do it,” Eric jerked his chin toward the door. “You’re right. It’s not easy, but there are established rules and we all understand the consequences of not following them.”

“Did you know that even vamps who don’t like you admire you, Mr. Northman?” Octavia asked, her eyes bright.

“That is pleasant to hear,” Eric shrugged, “But I suspect you have something you want, so why don’t you tell me what it is?”

“I like that about you, too,” Octavia nodded, “You don’t beat around the bush. I have witches who have lost friends to the kind of stupidity your Isaiah is committing. They are not thinking that money is enough. They want revenge. If you will give me your word you will bring those who would break the peace before a Court, like you have out there, I think I can get ahead of this before our peace is blown to pieces.”

“I can try,” Eric nodded, “at least for Amun Clan I can give you some assurances. I am not so certain
I can speak for the other Clans. I will bring it to the Chiefs.” He looked away before saying, “Normally I would refer something like this to our Ancient Pythoness. She is the oldest among us. She organized the kingdoms here and named many of us to our places.”

“I know who you’re talking about,” Octavia nodded, “But from what I hear she’s not likely to get involved.”

Eric could barely keep the surprise from his face. It was an evening of revelations. He had not expected the witch to know of Were politics and now it appeared she knew of vampire politics, too. Despite his annoyance, he smiled and said, “I would be grateful to hear what you know.”

“She is old,” Octavia told him. “She’s been in touch with the Fae and she’s been in touch with a few of my sisters. She’s seen something that bothers her. We don’t know what it is because she won’t share it. She asked my sisters to interpret parts of a dream, but it didn’t make sense. I don’t know what she plans, but she told them she’s on a spiritual pilgrimage. She said she will not venture out into the world.”

Eric nodded. He had no reason not to believe what Octavia was telling him, but it was disturbing. As long as he could remember, there had been the assurance that if things became too contentious, the Pythoness could be called as arbiter. Now it appeared this safety valve might be lost to the vampires. “I don’t know if we are ready for that,” he said out loud.

The door opened and Sookie walked in with Karin right behind her, “Ready for what?” his wife asked.

Eric jerked his chin and when the door was shut, he explained, “A world where the Pythoness no longer walks among us.”

“Don’t you think Mr. Cataliades would have said something if that was the case?” Sookie asked while at the same time she stepped forward to greet Octavia Fant.

It wasn’t until the witch hugged her that Sookie’s shielding of her pregnancy dropped. “Oh my!” the witch exclaimed and laid her hand on Sookie’s belly. “Well, there are more things here than meet the eye!”

“We’re pretty excited,” Sookie agreed. “We get our first real ultrasound tomorrow night, so it’s a big deal.”

“All went well?” Eric asked.

“Right as rain,” Sookie shrugged.

“There were some who thought they could bully her, but she handled it well,” Karin was smiling.

“Oh!” Sookie waved her hand, “Wasn’t anything! They figured with the King out of the way they should test the waters, but I think everyone understands things now.”

Octavia stood, “I must be going,” she announced before turning to Eric and saying, “I will wait for your email. Don’t delay. It would be best to have assurances I can pass along soon.”

Eric nodded, “I leave for Minnesota tomorrow night. There will be many of the Amun rulers there and we will talk of this. I will email you to let you know what is decided. You have my pledge.”

The witch hugged Sookie once more and leaning in, said, “You were always wonderful to me, even when you didn’t have to be. You never complained and I asked a lot. You should know that you can
count on me as your friend. The King knows how to get ahold of me. You call anytime you need anything. If it’s in my power, I’ll get it for you.”

When Octavia had gone, Karin turned to Eric, “So, when was someone going to tell me that Nabila was invited to move into Arkansas?”

Sookie looked at Karin and without missing a beat said, “There’s plenty of room up there. I figured Thomas wouldn’t mind the company.”

Eric could feel the quick play of emotions through his daughter, her surprise, followed by a stab of what was probably jealousy, followed by more surprise. Karin’s normally placid exterior was anything but and she seemed to have forgotten her mouth was open.

“It seemed the only Christian thing to do, under the circumstances, and we couldn’t very well have her with us. She needs someplace she can settle and collect herself,” and Sookie plastered her Crazy Sookie smile in place and sat back. When Karin didn’t say anything, Sookie glanced at her fingernails, then added, “Under the circumstances, it wouldn’t have been right to have Thierry involved and Thomas is the only other friendly face she’d know.”

That did earn Sookie a hiss and Karin stood up, hastily excused herself, and left with a bang of the door.

“Was that necessary?” Eric asked.

“Oh, come on!” Sookie smirked, “Don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy it!”

“I am pleased you are my wife,” the Viking got up and walked around the desk. “If you were not, and you teased me as you did Karin, I would be very jealous.”

Sookie smiled her Cheshire Cat smile and, her eyes darkening, sent him a feeling through the bond letting him know she had gone from zero to a hundred, “And what do jealous vampires do, Eric?” she asked him, her voice low and seductive.

“Why, they claim, Min Hustru. They claim,” and Eric brought his mouth down on hers. He ripped her shirt open, and brought both hands up to her breasts. They were not quite as sensitive as they had been a few weeks ago and he took advantage of it to lightly pull at her distended nipples. It shouldn’t have been so hot, but Eric loved the feel of them, the weight that overspilled his hand. Sookie leaned back, making access easier, and Eric took advantage of her extended neck to lick and then bite. He didn’t take much, but then again, the taste of her was so much more potent. She knew the effect she was having on him and her hands worked his pants open, pulling them down over his hips so his cock could spring free. Sookie reached around him to pull apart his tight butt cheeks, all the while flexing up and down, allowing his hardening cock to pull and catch on her clothing. “Sookie!” he hissed.

When the Viking reached for her pants, Sookie pushed his hands away, “Stop! I need these to get home! Besides, I’m not sure you’ve earned the privilege. You fight with me. You give me trouble…”

“But I am doing the claiming, Lover!” Eric used his most reasonable tone and when he reached for her pants again, Sookie smirked and stepped back. She turned to face away from him, and then lowered her pants with a wiggle of her hips. She looked over her shoulder, and smiled. “You are very good at this,” Eric hissed and then moved with all speed.

“Jesus Christ, Sweet Shepherd of Judea!” the telepath exclaimed when she found herself positioned
on the edge of the desk, her face level with Eric’s chest and her legs held open while her very interested vampire leaning over her. Her belly wasn’t large enough to get in the way yet, but Eric was careful not to place pressure there.

“I wonder if you are wet enough for me?” Eric mused, and then squatted low enough to lick her exposed sex. It was amazing, the taste of her now and he found himself getting lost in it. He came to himself when she pulled at his hair and he realized she had been crying out for some time. Her face was flushed and she was dripping onto the desk. “You are mine!” he hissed and stepping toward her, entered her in one, swift movement. Sookie’s back arched and she made the most wonderful sound. He stopped, allowing her to catch her breath, and he marveled again at the change. She was warmer now, and her walls seemed to be thicker somehow, more welcoming. It was hard to believe she could be softer and at the same time tighter around him, and yet, that was the case. He had always enjoyed their lovemaking, she was the best bed companion he had ever had, but this change made the experience sublime and he understood now why there had been some in his village who had kept their wives pregnant.

“Come to me!” Sookie called out and Eric understood what she wished. Using his nail, he cut his chest and then helped her lean forward. As she drank from him, pulling at his blood with lips and teeth, he felt the bond between them spark and warm. Each stroke within her, each movement she made to meet him, reminded Eric of the depth of their bond. He felt the first flutter within her and he felt himself swelling in answer. In the moment she gave herself over, her walls pulling at him, his release pulsing within her, he entered her mind. She was not thinking. She was feeling with him, lost in the sensations that took her and Eric basked in it. This sense of one-ness with her completed some part of him. He knew by dipping into her thoughts he was breaking trust with her, but it was only during these times. It was in these moments that he knew, beyond any shadow of doubt, that she was his and his alone. It was everything. It was enough.

XXxxx

“So, are you ready to have a good look?” Jane asked. She was in a white jacket and was in charge of running the ultrasound. Dr. Ludwig had stepped out of the room having taken Sookie’s blood. Eric wrinkled his nose at the jelly the researcher squirted on Sookie’s small belly, but his expression changed when the wand made contact and the heartbeat he had been hearing for weeks came through the speaker. Almost without thinking, he leaned over and speaking close to Sookie’s belly said, “Good evening, min son.” The sound shifted and Jane moved the wand to capture the same steady sound again.

“He recognizes your voice,” Jane acknowledged and Eric found himself absurdly pleased.

Sookie was watching the screen, and she reached over and took his hand. Eric smiled at her, then, following her gaze, turned to look at the screen, too. The ultrasound was one of the newer designs and the resolution allowed them to see the baby’s face. Eric found himself captured by the image. He saw eyes and a nose. There were lips that already looked like Sookie’s. A hand was curled toward his face and as they watched, he moved, his hand twitching and bumping. Sookie squeezed Eric’s hand and he lifted hers, kissing her palm, his eyes never leaving the screen.

“Looks like you have a healthy boy,” Jane was smiling, “Congratulations.”

Doctor Ludwig walked back into the room and stepping next to Jane, took the wand. “Just be a couple more minutes,” she said.

“Take your time,” Sookie voice sounded dreamlike and Eric understood. It did not seem real, that they could see what was hidden within her so well.
The images on the screen changed. The doctor remarked on the length of the legs and spent some time examining the spine. “My son will be tall,” Eric said, “He has long legs.”

“Hold on,” the Doctor said, and then she shifted the picture again.

When the doctor started laughing, Sookie asked, “What is it?”

“If I were you I wouldn’t put out the baby announcements just yet,” and she looked at Jane who seemed to understand because she smiled, too.

“What do you mean?” Sookie asked again.

“Well, there’s a certain part that we should be able to see by now, and this one doesn’t have it,” and Amy Ludwig smirked as she said, “Looks to me like you have another Valkyrie on your hands, Eric Northman.”

“A girl?” It stopped him. He had assumed. They had both assumed. He could see Sookie’s face, feel her shock, but in that instant Eric knew it was perfect. “Min dotter!” he smiled and then leaning over, regardless of the wand and jelly he kissed his wife’s belly. “Min krigare kvinna!” he whispered.

“You’re sure?” Sookie didn’t seem like she was so thrilled and Eric glanced at her.

“You are disappointed?” he asked. It didn’t seem likely, but the feelings he was receiving from her were not pleased.

“No,” she said, then more firmly, “No! It’s not that. It’s just that… well, everything I’ve seen… Well, you know!” and Sookie looked back at the screen and chewed her lip.

“Lover,” Eric squeezed her hand until she looked at him, “Sookie, it is possible that things can shift. Even your Grandfather has told you that not all visions come to pass as we see them. Perhaps the boy you saw was a second child. Perhaps some change has come that has moved our fates and this,” and he laid his hand over her belly, “is the outcome. A girl, a daughter.” He could see his wife was getting over her surprise. She laid her hand over his and her eyes warmed.

“Get dressed, we have some things we need to discuss,” the Doctor told them and then pulling Jane after her, they left the room.

“You are really happy about this, aren’t you?” Sookie swallowed, and he could feel with each passing moment her acceptance and then her joy.

“I do have a habit of favoring women,” Eric smiled, his eyebrow lifting in that way that said, ‘told you so.’ He helped her to sit forward and then handed her towels. “Yes, Älskade, I am very happy about this.” He leaned down to kiss her and he found himself wondering if the hard bed would make a suitable platform for lovemaking, but she pushed him back.

“None of that, Buster! You know Amy wouldn’t think twice about walking in here and I don’t need to be spending the rest of my pregnancy getting teased by her!”

Once Sookie was dressed, they walked down the hall and took seats in Amy’s small office. Jane was looking in a folder and her face was thoughtful. “I’m not happy about your blood pressure,” Amy said without any preamble. “Your cholesterol is too high and you appear to be retaining fluids. It’s too early for that. I’m not sure what you’re eating, but you need to change your diet. The fact that I’m seeing this in spite of your blood exchanges has me worried.”

Eric frowned and then said, “She prefers the fried food she gets from her friend’s restaurant.”
Sookie gave him a look that said ‘Traitor’ and explained, “I get too tired to cook in the afternoon so my friends at Maxine’s have been sending over food for all of us. Of course, when Tamsin comes, I end up making waffles and bacon most mornings.”

“You need more fruits and vegetables,” Jane told her.

“Fried pickles are not vegetables, Lover,” Eric joined in. Sookie looked around the room and Eric could feel it, the rush of emotion, and he leaned forward to try and stem the tide before it started, “I will help, Sookie. We will find someone you like. It can be just to cook meals; it doesn’t have to be someone who moves in. All will be well,” and he rubbed her hand, running his thumb over the heavy gold band that decorated her finger.

Sookie bit her lip, “I guess this means I can’t go to Minnesota then.”

“When were you thinking of doing that?” Doctor Ludwig asked.

“Tonight,” Sookie replied and one fat tear rolled down her cheek. It was everything Eric had not to lean forward and claim it.

“No, I don’t think traveling by air at the moment is the best idea. Let’s get your diet changed and I’ll come out next week and check your blood pressure. If it looks like there’s an improvement, I might be able to give you the all clear,” and Amy patted the telepath’s arm. “You’re not going to be away long, are you?” Dr. Ludwig went from sympathy to beady stare, but Eric had her number.

“No,” he chuckled, “only two nights including this one. I will rejoin my women before the third night,” and he gave Sookie a wink.

“Good,” Amy nodded. “Proximity is probably good for all of you. I’m not sure how your bond affects things.”

“I will be interested in asking you about it later,” Jane was taking notes, her eyes alight.

On their way home that night, Sookie groused, “That Jane! I feel like a test subject every time she opens her mouth!” When Eric only smiled, his wife turned to him, “I’m sorry about the way I acted earlier.”

“In what way?” Eric asked.

“About the baby,” Sookie explained. “I guess I was just surprised. I had been so sure…”

“Why does this bother you, Lover?” Eric asked. “I have no need for sons. Is there something you aren’t saying?”

Sookie laughed then, “No, I just need to get my head out of my ass. This is the best news, and did you see her? She’s so beautiful! She looks just like you!”

“No, my Lover, she doesn’t,” and Eric took Sookie’s hand, “She looks like her mother.”

The rest of the ride they were silent, lost in their thoughts. For Eric, they were happy ones filled with images of a laughing girl with her mother’s sweet eyes and his own defined chin. For Sookie, they were happy as well, but somewhere in the back of her mind she couldn’t escape the feeling that she was missing something, something important.

Minnesota
“How’d the trade talks go?” Russell asked Maude.

“Well. Northman’s Sheriff is smart. He pressed hard for better terms, but I’m not unhappy with the result. I’ll be his exclusive provider for silica sand next year and with their planned expansions, I will have plenty to fund my agri-research.” Maude had not attended the talks herself. The controversy over genetically manufactured seed was heating up and the Minnesota Queen was taking the time to engage herself directly in that conversation. Inger, her second, had overseen the negotiations with the Viking and Thierry. While Inger reported to her Queen that the work between the Amun Chief and his Sheriff had been smooth, she also reported the underlying tension at odd moments. “Any idea why he’s angry with his Sheriff?”

“The handsome and charming Thierry?” Russell asked, “I can think of a few ideas.”

“That’s because you won’t let things go,” Bartlett walked into the large kitchen and, with a quick bow to Maude, took the seat next to his mate. He turned to Maude and said, “You know the Sheriff was my guest once upon a time.”

“Do tell!” Maude gave Russell an arch look. There was some story here and it didn’t take any imagination to see that jealousy played a part. “He was charming and playful and a spy from Misha’s Court. I played, toyed, and then I broke him and sent him back.” Bartlett fixed Russell with an even stare, “End of story.”

“Well, it would appear that some things don’t change. Inger reports that the charming Thierry has managed to get himself on the bad side of the North Man. Nothing overt, but Northman rode him all meeting long.”

“Too bad!” Russell said with no conviction.

Bartlett’s mouth downturned, but before he could say anything, Maude asked, “So, are the famous and fabulous Kings going to the big movie event? I don’t think I can open any Internet account without seeing some promotion for it.”

“No,” Bartlett shook his head, “We have a benefit that night in Indianapolis. Our first vampires graduated the police academy. They all had perfect scores, by the way, and they’re being inducted with their class. There’s a second ceremony following, lots of town fathers and others making the most of this ‘historic event.’” and Bartlett used air quotes.

“I can’t imagine they wouldn’t do perfectly. Photographic memory and perfect muscle control. It’s a job that’s almost custom-made,” Maude shrugged.

“Our Weres would beg to differ;” Russell shrugged. “I’ve received protests from several of my contacts. They are worried that vampires will muscle in and take over their territory. They feel their instincts and larger muscle mass make them more natural fits to the law enforcement profession.”

“When are Weres not fighting about something?” Maude rolled her eyes. “Me, me, mine, mine.”

“I have a Packmaster who would take offense at that description. Two, in fact,” and Eric joined his peers.

“My point exactly,” Maude smiled. “It’s all they do, take offense. Harder to talk with than a bag of burrs.”

“But like burrs, once you have them engaged, you can’t get rid of them!” Bartlett laughed in return.

Russell looked sour, so Maude asked, “You giving your publicist a vacation? I thought she’d be
traveling with your entourage.”

“She is wrapping up her association with Bill Compton,” Russell told the Minnesota Queen. “He was her client first, but with the premiere, she’ll be ending her contract with him. She’s decided we are a full-time job.”

“Thank you again for the recommendation,” Bartlett nodded to the Queen, “Twy has done everything we needed. She really is brilliant and very hard working.”

“She did a credible job for Sookie and myself,” Eric agreed. “Although there were times I thought my Sookie would end her. Twy is direct.”

“She is. She plays the ‘bad cop’ in our little traveling show, and she does it well.” Bartlett said with an eye roll. Maude had been teasing both Bartlett and Russell during this trip about their exaggerated wardrobe. Draping sweaters over their shoulders and wearing pink topsiders had produced the desired effect, but both Kings were happy to be back in their ‘street clothes’ if only for a few days.

“So, you’re heading back tonight?” Maude asked Eric.

“The car will be here in two hours,” Eric nodded. “Thank you again for your offer to speak with Isaiah.”

“That old goat can’t hide from me!” Maude laughed. “Leave it to him to try and take a nickel and squeeze it into a quarter. I’ll get him to toe the line about the witches and to fork over an apology and some money. That should put an end to it.” She smiled, clearly looking forward to the encounter, “Idiot! I should rip something off him just on principal!”

“Well, if you can’t have fun…” Russell sniffed and they all smiled at each other. It was comfortable, being here. They agreed the peace with the witches was too important to allow a few to destroy it. Russell had called Stan and Eric called Sandy Seacrest. Stan would do what was expedient, but Sandy would see that now he’d given his word, he stuck to it. Stan could be slippery, but once he said he would do something, he could be a ruthless taskmaster. Eric was comfortable the Zeus rulers would toe the line.

Eric had called Felipe de Castro himself. The Narayana Chief agreed immediately, then kept Eric on the line for over an hour talking about the money he would make from their solar panel venture and the success of the first of his sex clubs. The sex club venture was a partnership the Nevada King had with Pam Ravenscroft. When Eric hung up, he told Maude that the conversation had been almost too easy. Felipe had said he wanted to let bygones be bygones, and it would seem that the vampire was being true to this word, as hard as that was to trust.

In the end, it was Maude who called Misha. “He’ll be more amendable to me,” Maude reasoned. “Pam is my friend and Pam has been spending more time there than anywhere else lately. She’ll be a voice of reason for him.”

The idea of his progeny being the New York King’s companion made Eric uneasy. He had warned Pam about him, counselled her to guard her heart. There was no indication his daughter wasn’t following his advice, but it would be difficult for any creature to remain neutral when spending every night with a person.

Misha agreed to reinforce the directive about the witches. He made a point of saying he would have particular challenges in working with the leaderless area of the Carolinas, then informed Maude that he had appointed an interim regent, “just to hold things together.” All of them had half-expected a visit from one of the Pythoness’ handmaidens to address all the kingdom shifts, but none had come.
“So, back to New Orleans and then where, North Man?” Maude asked.

“I have agreed to appear at the premiere of Viking’s Bond,” Eric shrugged. “They want me to stand next to the actor. Everyone agrees it will be good publicity for the movie and vampires in general. Once that is done, I look forward to staying within my kingdom until Amun Summit.”

“Will Sookie be going with you?” Bartlett asked.

Eric shook his head, “No, my Queen has business in our kingdom. I will take care of this social obligation and then we will be making some decisions about how to handle our appearances in future.” Eric had not told the rulers about the child. He and Sookie had talked about it over many nights, the possibilities, and they both concluded it would be best to keep the pregnancy a secret for a while. Over time, the natural course of gossip would spread news and rumors, but neither saw any reason to promote things.

It was possible Maude already knew. Pam knew and her telling her friend was a logical conclusion, but the Queen had said nothing. Instead, she nodded and then Inger arrived to inform the Viking his ride was waiting.

Thierry was standing next to the black car when Eric emerged from Maude’s palace. Eric sat in the back and Thierry sat next to the driver. Things were slowly improving between them, but both understood the steps it would take to reinstate trust. Eric used the trip through the flat Minnesota landscape to think through the conversations over the past nights. It appeared Eric’s prediction about having to choose between human or supernatural rules was coming to pass. Vampires would impress the humans with their ability to see through the dark and their keen senses. There would be no need for DNA analysis except to confirm what vampires would already know through their noses and taste. A missing person case had been solved and several murders wrapped up by the rookie vampire police. Eric knew Thalia was involved. She was coaching these new officers, collecting information from them and tracking her own leads to try and solve the mystery of the rogues.

When they arrived at the airport, there were representatives from Anubis waiting to walk them through the terminal and out to the waiting shuttle. As they passed through the concourse, something caught Eric’s eye. It was a display of small, stuffed animals. The toy at the top of the rack was a bunny, all soft brown fur and long ears. He thought of his Sookie, drunk from anesthesia, giggling as she leaned against his office door talking about decorating. She had called it a ‘bunny boy.’ Now they knew it was a bunny girl instead. Eric diverted into the store. He could tell the cashier knew he was a vampire and she didn’t bother to hide her curiosity.

When he settled in this seat in the plane, Eric took out his cell and texted Sookie. ‘Let’s make a deal. I hire you a dayman. You get the office.’ He pulled the bunny from its paper bag and placed it in his lap. ‘Yes,’” he thought. ‘Everything has changed.’
Chapter 20 - The Maelstrom

New Orleans

Lightning flashed across the sky and rain lashed against the window. In the glow of the candles, their reflection was soft and mysterious. Sookie’s hands were pressed flat against the pane and Eric noticed that each time he pressed her forward her knuckles would whiten just a bit. Her mouth was open and she turned her head, closing her eyes. “No, Lover!” he hissed. “Open your eyes! Watch me as I take you!” and his wife did as he asked. Her eyes in the window glass were dark, but he could feel her need and that supplied the missing definition. He reached beneath them, opening her lips and then leaning back so his balls could hit her clit. She made a sound and started moving faster to meet him.

“There is no rush,” he purred and he grasped her hip to control her movement. Sookie used her body to fight against his hands, pushing so hard that she would probably cause bruises, but his Sookie was made of stern stuff. If this was how she wanted things, he would feed her. “Feel me, Lover!” he told her. He pulled almost completely out of her and then massaged her back entrance with his thumb while pushing back, rising just enough to make his wife go up on her tiptoes, and then when he felt her begin to squeeze, he slapped her right cheek. Her warm, wet pussy clamped down and he moved quickly, rotating just enough to have her cry out before grabbing her hip and slowly pulling out from her again.

“Oh God, Eric!” Please, baby, please!” Sookie leaned her head down, arching her back, offering herself to him.

“And what do you want me to do?” he asked in the voice he knew she liked, dark and low.

“You know!” she panted and she looked up at him in the window’s reflection and sent her lust in a great wave.

With a snap, his fangs descended. He surged forward and then making sure his grip on her hips was secure, he stepped forward and began to move with more purpose. Sookie dropped her hand to rub her clit, relying on him to keep her from hitting the glass. “Mina!” he growled and when he felt her walls thicken, he smacked her left cheek twice more, not hard but enough to have her twitch and jerk. “Come for me, Lover!” he commanded, and as she cried out her release, he leaned over, sinking his fangs into her shoulder, the taste of her enough to trigger his own. He drove forward, grinding against her, deep but never deep enough and he allowed his thoughts to enter her as his essence entered her, making them one. He continued to stroke within her, lost, until he felt her falling forward and then he lifted her upright so that her back could lean against him, and still he stroked. He wrapped an arm under her breasts and reached between her legs, tapping her clit to prolong her orgasm. “I am yours!” he told her and he bent his head to kiss hers.
Sookie reached up to wrap her arm around his head. Eric looked up to see her reflection in the glass, her dreamy eyes and her slightly open mouth. She tugged at his hair and then rubbed her head against his shoulder. Together they watched the rain spend itself against the glass making the city lights beyond look like halos in the night.

After a bit, Eric dropped from her. He turned her toward him and picking her up bridal style, he lay her down on the chaise. With a quick motion, he covered her with her Gran’s old afghan and then lying next to her, he gathered her into his arms. “I would stay here with you until the days run to dust,” he whispered.

Sookie sighed beside him, “When we first met if anyone had told me you were such a romantic, I would have told them they were out of their mind.”

“You did not think I was romantic?” he smiled as he kissed her head.

“No!” the telepath snorted. “I thought you were a badass Sheriff with a nasty attitude. You said yourself you didn’t know what love was.”

“This is true,” Eric agreed. He laid his hand over her stomach. He seemed to do it often. “Pam would laugh at me. She told me that I could fool myself better than I fooled anyone else. It made me angry.”

“But she was right,” Sookie kissed her husband’s chest.

“That is why it made me angry,” he smiled against her hair.

Tomorrow Eric would leave for Rhodes. There had been a great deal of maneuvering, but James of Illinois had won. The King had lobbied hard for the premiere to be held in his city. Ever since the great explosion so many years ago, vampires had avoided booking any events there. James was sure that if the premiere of A Viking’s Bond, a romantic movie about a human and a vampire happened in Rhodes, it would eliminate the bad luck mark that kept so many away.

“I wish I was coming with you,” Sookie sighed again. The telepath hadn’t received the all clear from Doctor Ludwig. While the telepath had shown improvement, her readings were still not what the doctor wished, and so the ban on air travel remained in effect. “I just think about how that’s where we bonded,” Sookie ghosted her fingers down his arm until she entwined them with his own tenting their hands over her abdomen. “It would be like having an anniversary.”

“It is also the city where we were almost killed,” Eric reminded her.

Sookie laughed, “Remember when you came up the stairs? When I had that soda can bomb in my hand?”

Eric hissed, “I was very afraid for you,” he told her. “You should have handed it to me. You were so stubborn!”

“You told me you were angry we were so tightly bound!” Sookie snorted.

“I didn’t say I was angry,” Eric replied before gathering her more tightly against him.

After a bit, Sookie asked, “When did you know?” Eric could feel something from her, the lazy happiness that followed good sex, but something more.

“Know what?” Eric asked.

“When did you know you wanted me?” Sookie turned her head so she could look up at him.
“When Bill Compton brought you into my club,” Eric told her. It was an answer, just not the answer to the question Sookie was really asking.

“I know it sounds crazy, but I’ll always feel a little grateful to Bill Compton for that,” Sookie stroked Eric’s chest. For some reason, the memory of how terrible Bill was to her in the car afterward came to her mind. Sookie stilled and then made an effort to push it from her thoughts. Instead she thought of Eric as he walked in the door tonight, not saying a word as he swept her into his arms and then up the four flights of stairs to their chambers.

Beside her, Eric struggled to remain silent. He had not withdrawn from her thoughts as he should have following their lovemaking and the quick glimpse he had of her memories made him decide once and for all that he would end Bill Compton.

When he felt her fall into sleep, Eric carefully lifted Sookie and carried her across the sitting area. He pulled back the covers and slipped her into their bed. She slept more now, and slept harder, but that was to be expected. The bunny that he bought at the airport was still here lost in the blankets. Sookie had been delighted with it. She sat cross-legged on the bed, pulled up her shirt and walked the toy over her belly. She described the animal to their daughter, telling her how lucky she was to have a father who loved her so much already.

Eric slipped in next to his wife. He should have showered, but he would wait until Sookie could join him. He took the bunny into his hand, thinking to place it on the table, but instead he scooted down in the bed so his head was level with Sookie’s growing belly. It still wasn’t large, their child. Doctor Ludwig told them she was no larger than a lime. “Bebis?” Eric whispered against his wife’s skin, and then he turned his head so he could hear the thrum of her tiny heart. As he had seen Sookie do earlier, he started to walk the little bunny up and over the pronounced swell. He hummed a tune, a childhood song that came to mind. Almost without thinking, Eric started to tell a story. It wasn’t a real one; it was one he pulled from his head, about a brave girl and her rabbit. In his story the girl fought great battles and she was so clever she tricked the Gods. He made up adventures and whispered them against Sookie’s skin until he felt the pull of the sun.

Sookie woke the next morning to find herself wrapped in Eric’s grasp. She smiled to see the bunny in his hand. “I love her, too,” she whispered, and kissing his dead lips, placed the bunny on the table beside him.

Rhodes

When Bill arrived in Jackson last week, it was to find flowers waiting for him. His hand trembled as he plucked the photograph from the paper. Somehow, in spite of the horror he felt, Bill hadn’t been surprised. The face in the photograph, the person he was being ordered to kill, was his friend, his protector, Bartlett Crowe. That rat bastard in New York wanted him to trade what was left of his soul for another temporary reprieve for his descendants. Bill knew that even if he could bring himself to do this, it wouldn’t be over. There was nothing that could buy back his freedom. As long as he continued to exist, those he cared about would be in danger and it was a danger caused by vampires. He cursed the day Lorena found him. He cursed every day of his existence since then.

That night Bill went to the garage on the palace grounds at Jackson. He sat in the room where his Maker, Lorena, had imprisoned him, tortured him. He thought about each day since he was made. He remembered each thing he did that was not worthy and he placed it on one side of his mental ledger. Then he remembered each thing he did that was kind and good, and he placed it on the other side. The tale it told of his existence as a vampire convinced him. He was evil. He was evil, and it would require a sacrifice and a true, good act to redeem him.

He texted Carlo and told him that Bartlett and Russell were in Indianapolis. Carlo texted back, telling
Bill texted back, telling Carlo that Bartlett and Russell would be attending the premiere of the movie in Rhodes. He told Misha’s second that although news reports had the Kings in another city, his friends were making an unofficial detour just so they could be there for Bill. Within seconds Bill received Carlo’s reply and it was agreed. Bill would kill Bartlett in Rhodes.

Bill thought about Twy. The human had notified him this would be the last official event she would arrange for him. She was terminating their relationship to work exclusively for the Kings and Bill knew that in the short time she had been associated with them she had already managed miracles. Because of Twy’s efforts, the Kings were able to return to their home in Indiana and there was a movement afoot to put laws in place that would shield vampires from harassment. Granted, it was the Kings themselves who showed up to each event, charming the humans, but it was Twy who had forced open the opportunity that allowed it.

Bill decided he would find a way to keep Twy from being too close when the time came. Bill knew there would be others there, other vampires, and he wanted to know who they were so Bill sent Twy a text. In her usual efficient way, the list of those who were invited and expected to attend came from Brock, her assistant, within minutes. When Bill scanned the list he saw James, the King of Illinois, was at the top. Bill also saw his ‘friend,’ Matthias, would be attending. Bill knew that Matthias was part of a vampire paramilitary group, Vampires First. The group believed in treating humans as prey animals and Matthias had gone hunting with Bill more than once, a memory that now brought Bill shame. If Matthias was at the premiere, it was likely those around him would be members of that same group. ‘Good,’ Bill thought, ‘eliminating vampires like that is a worthy aim.’

Bill’s finger continued down the list, and there, toward the bottom, was the name ‘Eric Northman.’ Bill had been hoping, almost certain the Viking would come, but there were rumors that the Viking was canceling appearances and traveling less. Seeing that name seemed to make everything else click. The universe was in alignment and Bill knew that what he planned was the right thing.

Just as he started to settle, though, Bill remembered something. He rapidly scanned the list, searching for the second name, but Sookie was not there. Rather than risk it, he texted Twy, ‘What about Sookie Northman? Isn’t she coming?’

‘No,’ came the answer, and then a second text box appeared, ‘She had some prior thing. Producers were pissed but our Viking will be there.’ In that moment, Bill felt a great calm come over him. Everything else from that moment forward had been too easy.

Now, as he sat in his bedroom at the hotel in Rhodes, Bill had that same feeling of calm. He was struck by the irony that it was those things he learned at the beginning, in his human life that were the things that were most helpful now. During his time as a soldier in the Army of Mississippi, Bill had learned to create small shrapnel bombs. In those days they would load a canister with nails and bits of metal and glass, and then wire the charge. In many ways, it was easier now. He didn’t have to light the fuse and hope the wick burned clean. Two hours on the Internet had taught him how to build the spark that would fire the device. Before he left Mississippi, he scavenged supplies from the workshop at Russell’s palace and asked a guard to pick up a few things he couldn’t find. When he had everything assembled, he divided them into boxes and envelopes and mailed them to himself in Rhodes, care of the hotel where he would be staying.

The other thing he had prepared before he left were the hollow plastic pipes that he loaded with scraps of silver. It hadn’t taken long to collect it. It should have taken longer. He glamoured humans and sent them with money into the city. He had them buy crucifixes from religious stores. He sent them to pawn shops and thrift stores, buying plates and silverware. They used magnets to test each
item so they would buy only that silver that was most pure. He would only have one shot at this and he wanted it to count.

His humans returned with their small offerings of chains and charms, forks and spoons, and Bill gave each of them twenty dollars and a story about finding money on the street and sent them on their way. All these things he stuffed into the tubes and then he packed them in boxes and sent them to Rhodes as well.

Once he arrived in Rhodes he had gone shopping, finding an outdoor outfitting store so he could buy a camera vest. From there, assembling things had been easy.

In truth, from start to finish, there had been only one truly testy moment and that had been in the airport in Jackson when he passed the drug-sniffing dogs. They had looked his way and one had whined, but its human handler had realized Bill was a vampire and assumed that was what caught the animal’s attention. Bill was carrying the explosive he needed in a money belt secured around his waist. Had he been flying commercial airlines, he would have never attempted it. He would have needed to find a source in Rhodes, and that would have taken time he didn’t have. But Bill wasn’t flying commercial, he was flying Anubis Airlines. In their arrogance, the almost exclusively vampire service assumed that no vampire would try to harm the plane or their fellow passengers, well, except in the usual ways. Bill was sure there had been more than one staking accomplished high above the Earth, but it was accepted that what happened on Anubis stayed with Anubis.

The phone chimed. It would be Carlo asking for an update. Bill couldn’t think about it. It was too much. Bill was beyond it.

Finding a larger tuxedo, one with a jacket large enough to fit over the vest Bill assembled had been easy, too. Bill left a request with the floor concierge before he went to his rest along with a large tip and the tuxedo was waiting in the anteroom when Bill rose.

As Bill stood before the mirror, checking the hang of his jacket, he smiled. Soon everyone he cared for would be free. His Portia would never need to worry that her children would come to harm. His Halleigh and Andy would be safe, too. And then there was Sookie, his beautiful, wonderful Sookie. They wouldn’t go together, hand in hand into what awaited them, but Bill had been a Christian in his human life. He believed, had to believe, that with this selfless act, he would earn his place so he could be waiting for her when she finally came to join him. Bill looked at his reflection in the mirror and a smile ghosted over his lips. “I’m ready, Sweetheart,” he said. “It’s time to go.”

New Orleans

“You sure you’re up for this?” Devrah’s disapproval was in full evidence. The housekeeper’s shoulders were stiff and her eyebrows were pulled together so that they almost met between her eyes. Devrah’s lip jutted and her arms were crossed.

“You heard the doctor, same as me,” Sookie shrugged, throwing a second dress in the suitcase. “Everything is right back where it should be. It’s a miracle!” and the telepath made a second scan of her underwear drawer. “Besides, I’ll take it easy. It’s a direct flight to Rhodes and I’ll just have them let me into Eric’s room. You know, Eric and I bonded in Rhodes,” Sookie’s smile almost split her face. “He saved me. I had no idea at the time what an amazing thing he was doing, but I know it now. I want to be there, where we started and tell him how grateful I am.”

Sookie could see her housekeeper unbending, “Well, then let’s make sure you have the right tools for the occasion,” and Devrah walked into the closet and came out with a black lace number that Sookie hadn’t seen before.
“Where did that come from?” the telepath asked.

“Someone’s special someone brought that back from Boston. He may have been waiting for the right time, and this seems like it.” Devrah shook her head as Sookie carefully folded it into the bag, and then danced into the bathroom to get her makeup bag. “You have to promise me you’ll drink lots of water,” the housekeeper scolded, “and eat salad. I hear you’re back to those greasy burgers and I’ll come up there and fetch you back myself!”

Sookie closed the suitcase and then stood straight. The amusement fell from her face, “Thank you,” she told this woman who had become her friend. “I am most beholden.”

When the housekeeper released the telepath from a hug, she sniffed and said, “Now, go on with you! I’ll have Owen get that big suitcase. Let’s get you downstairs and into the car. Wouldn’t do to miss the plane.”

Owen would come with her. Sookie told Devrah she would wait for Eric’s return at the hotel, but that wasn’t the truth. Sookie had a knock-out dress and she couldn’t wait to see Eric’s expression when she stepped out on that red carpet and walked toward him. Viking’s Bond was their story, and Sookie wanted to see it for the first time with Eric by her side. She wanted to stand in the city where he had first offered her their bonding and tell him she was sorry she hadn’t appreciated it, appreciated him. She wanted to let him know that if she could do it all over again, she never would have broken their bond, and that she was grateful every day that things turned out as they had.

New York

When the driver brought her to the brownstone from the airport, Misha made a point of not being at the residence. He knew Pam. She would need time to adjust, to settle. Andrew was instructed to let her know where he was that evening and to offer her the option of joining him. Misha felt her reaction would tell the story.

But Pam hadn’t come to the art gallery to join him and when Misha came home, it was to find that Pam had asked to be moved to the rooms she had originally used on the floor above his bed chamber. Something had happened while she was in Louisiana visiting her Maker and it wasn’t to the benefit of Misha, the King of New York.

It had been hard, not walking up the stairs to see her. Misha had had many bed companions of both sexes over his long years. He made a point of surrounding himself with intelligent, interesting people. No one had ever fascinated him as Pam Ravenscroft did. She was everything he never knew he needed. She teased and provoked, she was a commanding presence wrapped in a deceivingly soft exterior. She put the yellow roses he surrounded her with to shame. She was so much more. Misha made himself stay in the library and he willed her to join him, but she didn’t.

He didn’t see Pam until the next evening. She was dressed to go out. She thanked him for allowing her the use of his home and she smiled and teased, but there was something missing. The woman whose eyes glowed for him in the flash of fireworks’ light wasn’t there. Instead, her eyes had a wariness about them, and when she would turn to touch a book or pour them blood, he would see a hint of sadness.

“Zolotse?” he asked when he could stand it no longer, “Have I done something to offend you?”

She was too bright, “No, of course not! I just have other things on my mind.”

“What happened in Louisiana?” he asked, “Your Maker is well?”
“Eric is always well,” Pam maintained her smile, “I just have so much to do. The new club is open and the renovation for the Manhattan Fangtasia is complete. I’ll be busy the next few nights and I’m just going to be a terrible guest.”

‘Her Maker has said something,’ Misha thought, ‘something that has upset her.’ “I am pleased your business concerns are progressing, Pamela. Selfishly, I am more pleased that there is profit here to provide an excuse for you to be in my kingdom.” Misha waited a moment, allowing her to settle into the expected compliment before adding, “When will you need to leave the state to inspect your other holdings?”

And it was there. The brief flash of gratitude. Misha knew now that she had been warned against him. “I’m off to Boston in a couple nights and then down to D.C. Felipe de Castro wants to come out in a couple weeks. We are planning to throw a big party for the downtown club. It’s in a trendier part of town and we think the foot traffic alone will have it picked up by the media. Felipe is certain we can create a buzz that makes sex clubs the equivalent of going to Starbucks.”

“I’m not certain how you would structure the annual contests for your baristas, but it’s an interesting concept,” Misha had chuckled, his mind racing. She was withdrawing from him. He was certain she was reluctant. It didn’t have the flavor of a Maker’s command, but he knew Eric Northman had to be involved.

Misha cocked his head to the side, and when he had her attention, he said, “You know Fashion Week in New York starts in less than a month. I know we talked about enjoying the collections together. If you were to incorporate the club launch with those events…” He let it linger, seeing the slight widening of her eyes. “I can secure tickets to every show for both us and for Felipe and his companion. We would be sure to be photographed. We could invite the models to the opening.”

“It would cement the vibe we’re looking for,” Pam nodded. Her eyes were a little brighter.

“I have rooms here. Your business partner need not make other arrangements. Of course, I have preferred rooms in the hotels downtown as well. I can have Andrew contact him with options.”

“Thank you,” Pam replied and, for a moment, the old warmth was back. It was enough to build on.

She left soon after, accepting the use of his car but nothing more. It was frustrating. Misha remembered the information Carlo had found in Boston, the documents about the doomed donors in New Orleans, but he hesitated. Pam had told him she was freed from her Maker. He had met Eric Northman. The Viking was formidable. Having a strong ally was never a bad thing, but now it appeared he was telling Pamela to keep her distance. ‘I will wait,’ Misha told himself. ‘I will see if he is merely being cautious for her sake.’

The next evening Pam was a little more cordial. The sex club was doing well, but not spectacularly. “Zolotse!” Misha had laughed, “It’s new! You won’t market it until the formal launch of the downtown club! Patience!”

“It’s the thing I’m usually better at,” Pam had laughed in return.

“Better than whom?” Misha kept his voice teasing.

“My sister. My Maker!” Pam shrugged. “Karin is all action. Eric plots it out and then keeps moving pieces until he gets what he wants. Me? I set things up and then push the button. Things usually turn out the way I think they will.”

“I have no doubt,” Misha took her hand. She stiffened. It was barely perceptible, but he felt it. He
didn’t raise her hand to his lips as he wished; he didn’t breath in her fine scent. Instead, he smoothed
his thumb across the soft skin that was the back of her hand. He kept his eyes on their hands together
as he said, “You are the most capable woman I know.”

He knew it was time. It was a risk, what he had planned, but it would demonstrate his trust of her,
her place with him. “I would like to continue our conversation, especially since you will leave me
tomorrow and I won’t see you again for weeks, but I’m afraid I have some official business in my
basement. Most distressing.”

“Of course,” Pam glanced up at him and then away as he released her hand.

“I caught a spy,” he continued. “I believe he comes from Dakotas.”

“Greyeagle?” Misha saw her quick interest, “What makes you think that?”

“He has been trying to develop influence,” Misha nodded, “Money. Like your Maker, he has
discovered the riches available through energy reclamation. He has many wells working and his
wealth has outgrown his wisdom. Unlike his neighbors, he has found a way to reclaim both the gas
and the natural gas his operations are creating. He probably has more money than me now.”

“Does he view you as an enemy?” Pam leaned forward, and it was everything Misha had not to
smile.

“That is the question,” he nodded. “I wouldn’t imagine he would. What possible interference could I
cause him from halfway across a continent, but the spy is here nonetheless.” With another shrug that
seemed to say, ‘another day…’ Misha turned toward the stairs. He waited just the right amount of
time before turning to her and saying, “Would you like to join me?” Pam didn’t answer him. She just
moved and together they walked down the stairs.

The vampire had been living in Misha’s territory for some time. On the surface he was a hustler,
working for one of Misha’s real estate firms. The tip off had come when the King’s infrastructure
team conducted a scan of employee email. It was something Misha had done every quarter, but never
across all his holdings. They were simply too vast and it would take too long. It was serendipity that
had included this office in the regular sweep and the program had red-flagged the vampire now
hanging in chains.

Misha’s guards had been working on him, softening him for the King. There might come a time that
vampires weren’t hardened to torture, but Misha couldn’t really imagine it. He glanced at the fierce
look that came over Pam’s face and realized she couldn’t foresee that future either.

They spent the next few hours questioning the vampire. Misha gained a new appreciation for Pam as
he watched her work. She had a deft hand and a highly evolved sense of when to push and when to
wait. At one point he had stepped back, “I defer to the Master in this,” he bowed to her.

The vampire eventually gave everything. He was a spy for Greyeagle. The Dakotas King was
curious about how other rulers were diversifying assets and he was not above corporate espionage to
learn secrets. He worried that environmental groups would put an end to fracking and he wanted to
be prepared. He liked living well and he didn’t wish to give it up.

“Feed him,” Misha ordered when he was satisfied. “When he is able to travel, return him to his King
with my compliments.” He turned to the sagging vampire, “And tell your King that if he wishes
business advice he need only ask. I am not so greedy that I won’t spend time with a fellow King.”

Pam stood beside him. At one point, she had removed her shoes and her suit jacket. She had pulled
back her white hair, fixing it on the top of her head with a pin. She was liberally dabbled with blood and her eyes shone. Her eyes didn’t hold the soft light that made him feel warm. What he saw now was a quick, fierce light and he recognized what attracted the Viking. Misha had seen many sides of Pam Ravenscroft. He had seen the savvy businesswoman and the sophisticated socialite. He had seen the pampered upper class lady and the demanding lover. Now he saw a warrior and he found there was not one aspect of this woman that rang false with him. “I am happy you are here with me, Pamela,” he said out loud.

“I am, too,” she answered and they both knew they were saying more than the words.

Pam left the next night for Boston. She stayed in the Beacon Hill house. Misha found himself turning on the cameras in the Master Suite and he watched her turn to stroke the pillow he used before day claimed her. He didn’t hear from her again until days before Fashion Week.

Felipe de Castro was in town with Angie. They opted for a private hotel close to the uptown club. Misha was secretly relieved. He had not wished to share the brownstone or his Pam’s attention. They started with the pre-week opening dinner and party. It was not the official start, but as years passed, the festivities crept back into the preceding days, causing the Week to be much longer. Misha’s plan was simple. Spend every night in a whirl of activities. Of course, there were collections they would miss, the ones held during daylight hours, but the most important shows were slated for evenings now. Misha had managed ramp chairs for every single one. Official evening three would be the sex club launch. Official evening four was Thursday.

Misha hoped the relationship between them would be repaired. He had been planning something special for some time, since Boston. Thursday was the evening the Neue Gallerie New York had their evening hours and he had made arrangements to have the hall with the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer all to himself. Just thinking about what he wished to do made him anxious. ‘Like a boy!’ he marveled. He hadn’t felt this combination of anxiety and hope in longer than even he could remember.

It went exactly as planned. Felipe and Angie were swept up in the festivities. The four of them soon relaxed around each other. Misha didn’t truly trust the Narayana Chief, but that was to be expected. Still, they found mutual things of interest and even Angie seemed to rise to the occasion, behaving in a civilized and pleasing way. They found themselves the center of attention everywhere they went. People wished to be seen with them and photographers wished to take their pictures. The club launch was everything they wished and every model from the show that night was there. The sidewalk outside became its own mini-fashion collection showing. You could feel it, that sense that it was right timing, right city. The club and the concept would be a success. Pam pulled him into a private room upstairs and together they played with twin sisters. Misha found that their skeletal bodies emphasized the beauty of Pamela’s body just as their frames served to emphasize whichever designer’s dress was draped over them.

Misha focused on watching Pam’s pleasure. One sister had her head buried between Pam’s legs while the other sucked him into her throat. He watched Pam’s eyes, listened to her moans, and pretended the sensation of tongue and teeth was her around him. The models were skilled and they timed their efforts. When Pam’s eyes began to roll back in her head, the woman on her knees before him reached forward to play with his sac and they found themselves reaching completion together. Pam held out her hand and Misha wrapped his own hand around hers. “Mine!” he growled, and his Pam smiled.

When they returned to the brownstone, Pam walked into his suite. She pulled off her clothes and stood before him.
“You don’t need to,” he told her.

“But I want it,” she replied.

He took her in every way she wished. He realized it was not something he would experience often, and he let her know he appreciated every moment.

They had found mutual satisfaction several times already. She never really came, but there was an unwinding about the experience that left them both smiling. He was not expecting more which was what made what happened so special.

Misha was sitting up and Pam was straddling his lap. They were holding each other and he was using his mouth to play with her breasts, kissing and nipping at her sensitive nipples. His Pam didn’t like anal play so he avoided touching or stroking her cheeks. Instead he focused on stimulating her clit. He knew his cock bent at an angle. He couldn’t explain it. It had always been that way and when he was stimulated, it bent more. As they moved, he saw her eyes open wide and he felt a surge of pride and possessiveness when she hissed and started to move more quickly. He focused on where he was dragging within her and when he hit a place that had her mouth fall open. He kept his suction on her breasts more gentle, but he moved from rubbing to tapping her engorged clit. Her walls were trembling, her eyes were wide and she moaned. It was the most amazing sound. He could see the surprise that turned to wonder and he looked away from her, willing her to focus on the sensation. She moaned again and he felt the trembling within her building to something more.

He glanced up again to see her head thrown back, her throat working. He bit then, not hard, on the nipple between his teeth and her pussy clenched around him and she was flying. She called out, her voice clear and strong as her orgasm took her. He wanted to flip her on her back, but was afraid to change anything about this but, in another moment, Pam had grabbed his shoulders and was moving faster. She pulled his face so she could capture his mouth and when he gave her the tongue she demanded, she bit and he came harder than he thought possible.

They came to themselves with him still within her. He had fallen backward and she lay across his broad chest. “That was…” she stammered.

“A gift, Zolotse. A rare gift,” and he lifted her hand to kiss her fingertips.

“You love me,” He couldn’t tell what she was feeling.

“I suppose that’s true,” he chuckled. “You’ve now had my blood. You know all my secrets.”

“I shouldn’t have…” and she started to pull from him, but he wrapped his arms around her, holding her and stroking her back.

“I wished it,” he assured her. “I am yours, my Golden Girl. It is right that you should know it.”

“I don’t know if I can give you what you want,” Pam whispered against his chest.

“What do you think that would be, Pamela? Perhaps what you have just given me is enough to last the rest of my existence, for it was perfection,” and he drifted his hand from her back to her head, petting her, realigning her hair. “If this was all we could have, this moment, Zolotse, I tell you now, it would be enough.”

And Pam looked at him then and said in her quiet, cultured voice, “But not for me.”

On Thursday night, Pam walked into the Neue Gallerie. They had all been together at a show earlier. Misha left Pam with Felipe and Angie at an avant garde gallery that was hosting a reception. She
knew where he was headed. She knew she was under no obligation to join him, but she excused herself and called a cab.

As she walked toward the hall where she knew he waited, she wondered what this would mean for her. She wasn’t sure what would happen, but she had an idea that they had crossed some threshold into a different place. What she did know was she couldn’t see a future where this strange, funny, challenging man wasn’t waiting.

When she turned the final corner, she saw him. He was sitting on the bench before Adele’s portrait. He stood and turned toward her. When she came close, he gestured to the place beside him and together, they turned to look at Adele as they had that first time they met.

Misha spoke to the portrait, “She was, by all accounts, a rare, vivacious person. She understood and appreciated art and she supported talent around her. Her husband was no beauty. He was older than her and set in his ways, but he had one rare gift. He recognized the treasure that was his wife and he let her know it.” Misha turned to Pam and waited. Pam glanced over, suddenly shy. She could see he had something in his hands and he moved to stand behind her. He fastened a necklace around her neck, a great collar of many parts and Pam realized he had reproduced the gold and gemstone collar Adele wore in her portrait. “I wish you to be my companion, Pam.”

She turned her face to the side. She could feel his sincerity. It had been impulsive, taking his blood. He could have killed her for it, but instead he seemed pleased. When she didn’t answer, he walked around her and taking her hands in his, he looked straight into her eyes. “I would have you as my Queen.”

“That’s not possible,” Pam swallowed. “My Maker is with us. It would be unwise for either of us.”

“I tell you so that you understand me, Pamela. I would not wish you to think that what I propose is temporary or that I would see you as less. What you say is correct. You could not be my Queen while your Maker exists, but that does not mean that I don’t wish it.” He leaned forward, and when she bit her lip he smiled. It was a boyish smile, and his broad teeth looked handsome. “Say yes, Pamela, say that you’ll join me,” and he waited, his shoulders loose, and Pam realized there was only one answer.

“I’m yours,” she told him.

Misha told her he had planned an official reception at the brownstone for the following evening. “I would like to introduce you as the Mistress of the house, but I won’t if you wish more time.”

“I don’t need more time,” she told him. “But you know I won’t live here all the time.”

Misha laughed, “Of course, Zolotse! I only ask that you make my kingdom your official base of operations. I could no more demand you stay in one place than I could demand it of a butterfly! You must be free! You will pick up your thoughts and your ideas, your adventures and your stories. You will follow your dreams and build your successes. I ask only that when you are ready to come home, that it is my door you darken,” and he kissed her. When they walked into the brownstone, it was to find several women awaiting them. Pam laughed at the King’s cheekiness.

“What?” she teased. “You don’t want a repeat of last night?”

The smile dropped from her face when he took her hand and pulled her close. His eyes were fierce and his voice low, “Last night was perfection! I will treasure it for the rare moment it was. I would not cheapen it. We may find that moment again, Zolotse, but it is enough that we embrace who and what we are.” Pam didn’t think it possible she could love him any more than she did at that moment.
They pulled the women into the guest bedroom, playing across the furniture and large bed. Andrew brought them blood when they called and agreed to join in when invited. The Master chamber would have been larger and more comfortable, but somehow they both knew that it would not be shared with others again.

Maude was subdued when Pam called her with the news the following evening. Pam knew she should have called Eric first, but, in a rare moment of cowardice, she decided to test the waters with the Minnesota Queen first.

“You’re really sure about this, Pammie?” Maude asked.

“I can’t explain it,” Pam shrugged. “He gets me.”

“You love him?” Maude asked.

“So much it hurts,” Pam told her. Until she said it, she hadn’t realized how true that statement was.

“So, what does the North Man say about all of this?” and when Pam didn’t say anything, Maude laughed. “You haven’t told him! Well, Pammie Pam, you’re going to have to face up to that music and soon. You know how folks gossip and if you don’t get in front of it soon, he’ll be hearing it from some person who has no business telling him about his progeny. You at least told Karin, right?”

“Well…” Pam started, and then stopped.

“Are you really sure you want to do this, Pam? You aren’t sounding as if you’re proud of it. This might be a warning sign.”

“Look!” Pam exclaimed, “I called you first because I know this isn’t exactly going to be the best news for my Maker. You know Eric as much as told me he wished I’d call it off. And Karin? She’ll give me all kinds of shit. She has a man who loves her fiercely and she can’t understand it. How would she even begin to understand this? You are my dearest friend, and I want you to be happy for me.”

“And I am,” Maude assured her. “If you say this makes you happy, that’s all I could wish for you.”

“Thank you,” Pam sniffed. She was surprised how much the acceptance by Maude meant to her.

“And if it makes you feel any better,” Maude continued, “Deirdre, Inger, and I had a pool for how long it would take you to accept him. I won.”

“You knew?” Pam snorted.

“From the day he started sending you those Victorian miniature circumcision kits. It was clear to all of us that he was your kind of crazy,” and Maude laughed her great, booming laugh. “It’s sure going to get quiet around here again, but we all knew it was only a matter of time before you would move out. You’re too much of a big city girl to be happy out here in the country.”

“Thank you, Maude,” Pam felt her gratitude all the way to her backbone.

“Now, don’t you go getting all sentimental,” Maude playfully scolded, and then more seriously, “And go ahead and enjoy the rest of your evening. Your Maker is in Rhodes tonight for that movie thing. I don’t think you’ll get his attention. No reason you can’t wait until tomorrow to tell him. Go dance your night away. We’ve been pulling up your photos on Google. I have to tell you, even Zorro and his loyal sidekick are looking good. Must be that New York air.”
Pam laughed and they spent the next half hour chatting about the week and what Maude had learned about Phoebe’s latest venture. “I can’t believe that there hasn’t been an accident. Being that close to any full fairy makes my fangs itch,” Pam snorted.

Pam turned her head when there was a discreet knock at the door. A maid came in, a new gown Pam had purchased earlier that week over her arm. “Well, it looks like I have to go,” Pam told Maude. “My dresser is here.”

“Go have fun, Cinderella,” Maude told her. “You deserve your ball."

Rhodes

Eric stepped from the limo and was immediately surrounded by the flash of cameras. There were people around him wearing badges who waved him to the first place where the human star who played the Viking in the movie was waiting. Eric smiled, turning his head first one way and then another, accommodating the media. The human was also smiling. They said a few polite words, but neither truly had much to say. The human had already started work on another project and Eric was anxious to return home. He looked around him. James, the King of Illinois, stood a little ahead of him surrounded by vampires and others. Just beyond that, Eric saw Bill Compton. He remembered the image from Sookie’s head, the one where Bill manhandled her in his car the night Eric had first met her. The Viking had to fight the urge to drop fang and advance on the smaller vampire. He wanted to rip him from limb from limb.

“Hey! You okay, buddy?” the human actor asked. His voice was nervous and Eric realized some part of his thoughts must have become apparent on his face.

“Oh, sorry!” Eric smiled in what he hoped was a disarming way. “Vampire moment.”

The actor chuckled, “Good one. Wish I could have got that look during the movie.”

“It might not have been romantic though,” and Eric did his best to smile pleasantly again. The human was laughing a little more and the cameras must have decided they were having a moment because they zoomed in.

Eric progressed down the carpet, stopping next to pay his respects to James. “A good night for Illinois,” he greeted his peer and gave a shallow bow.

“It is,” James said in his formal way. “I hope this convinces everyone that what happened that time was nothing more than an unfortunate accident. Rhodes is a wonderful city. It’s not right that it should suffer because of something that happened so long ago.”

“I agree, Majesty,” Eric replied, but he didn’t mean it. He couldn’t explain it, but being here made him nervous. He focused on the flash of cameras around him and the smiling faces, but he knew that as soon as he could, he would find his way back to the hotel and move up his flight home.

There were a number of vampires around the King. Eric recognized some of them from past Summits. Several were talking with Bill Compton. Bill seemed off. He was responding, but his eyes kept flicking around him, as if he was looking for someone. Eric looked around and didn’t see anyone who seemed of interest. The King was still talking, “I would like to propose that we hold another Summit here. Not the next one, of course, that will be with Rasul, but maybe the one after that.”

“We’ll see,” Eric replied. There was something about Compton. He had always been a slimy little shit, but his level of agitation tonight was on a whole new level. As if sensing his thoughts, Bill
turned and locked eyes with him, and then Bill smiled. Eric didn’t know what to make of it, but he got the impression that the person Bill was waiting for was him. The vampires standing around Bill stopped talking, and they turned and looked at the Viking, too. Eric excused himself and walked down the carpet toward Bill.

When he got close, Eric noticed Bill had kept his hand in his pants pocket. The way he was fisting his hand made the pants lie awkwardly, pulling across his front. When Eric was close, within five feet, Bill relaxed his hand and removed it. He said, “Guess I’ll see you in hell,” but before Eric would think what that meant, he heard his wife call him.

She was walking down the carpet toward him, looking amazing in a long black dress. Her hair was swept up and her feet were moving quickly in her strappy heels. She had hidden her pregnancy but Eric could see her sway every few steps, and Eric realized it was her balance being thrown off. As she smiled at him the meaning of Bill’s words hit him. He could hear Bill yelling something. It sounded like ‘No!’ but Eric couldn’t think about it. He was running faster than he ever had, placing himself between his wife and the disaster he knew was coming.

Sookie was on her back. Her ears were ringing and there was a hissing sound in them, like a white noise machine on steroids. She was having trouble breathing and she realized it was because there was something heavy on her. Her eyes opened, and she could see a disembodied hand on the red carpet beside her. As she watched it turned to dust. ‘Vampire’ her brain said automatically. And then she remembered.

Sookie remembered Eric’s frightened face rushing for her. She remembered the startled looks of the vampires standing near Bill and she remembered Bill’s own look of horror when he saw her. “There was an explosion” she said out loud, but she couldn’t hear her words. She reached out with her brain. There were humans all around her. Many were in pain. One died as she mentally touched her. ‘Eric!’ she thought and she felt him, faintly. He was the weight on her.

Sookie pushed and pushed until she managed to move him. She hurt. Her belly hurt. Her chest hurt. Her hands came away red and she could feel warm blood dripping, but she couldn’t tell if it was hers. She finally pushed him enough to crawl over him. He was bleeding. There were holes that were smoking in his chest. Worse still, his face was gone. There was one eye, but it was closed. His jaw was smashed and where his mouth should have been there was a hole. His nose was there, but it was out of place. He wasn’t moving and she could feel how weak he was.

There were others starting to move. Someone started to scream and for some reason all Sookie could think was, ‘no one can see you like this.’ She cloaked her smell and pulled a skin over him, making him look as he normally did. She found a piece of glass and she cut her wrist. She clapped it on the hole that was his mouth, noticing that she could see bone at the back. She trusted that the trickle of blood would find its way into her bonded and with everything she had, she thought of Dr. Ludwig’s hospital and willed them there in a way that refused to take no for an answer.
Chapter 21 - Dead Calm

Indianapolis

“Rusty, I think you’d better come out here.” Bartlett forced himself to smile at the humans clustered around his mate. The ceremony presenting the new vampire officers with shields had been gratifying. While the new officers had been marched apart from their human counterparts, it still felt like progress. Russell bowed briefly to the knot of officials and their wives, excusing himself. He could feel his mate’s worry. As time passed, their bond had become tighter. While there were some who would have chafed at the feeling of living in another’s back pocket, it was welcome between them.

“What’s happened?” Russell slowed as they walked into the lobby. People were gathered around the monitors that had earlier been used to show the ceremony to those who couldn’t fit in the hall. Now the monitors were streaming live footage of fire trucks and police vehicles.

“They think it was some kind of terrorist attack,” Bartlett squeezed Russell’s arm, “It was in Rhodes.”

“Again?” and Russell couldn’t stop the sick feeling that came over him. “How many of ours were there?”

“I don’t know, but Bill…” Bartlett and Russell exchanged a look. Bill Compton was a good friend. He had lived in their home in Jackson, watching over things when they traveled and being a charming houseguest when they were in residence. Both Kings had become fond of him. “I tried texting him, Rusty, but there’s no answer.” Bartlett touched his finger to his eye and licked the blood he retrieved.

“You don’t know anything yet, Bart. Have you tried Louisiana…” and then Russell stopped. He pulled out his own phone and fingers flew over the keyboard. “Northman!” he replied to Bartlett’s unasked question. “He was supposed to be there tonight, too.” As soon as he hit send, Russell took Bartlett’s arm and walked them both back into the hall. He steered them toward a quiet corner before saying, “Bartie, call the Illinois palace, the private line. James would have been at the movie, but someone will be answering the emergency line. I’m calling Thalia.”

Not so long ago Bartlett Crowe had been the Amun Clan Chief and he still had the private numbers on speed dial. Within minutes, Bartlett confirmed that the news wasn’t good. James, the King of Illinois, had been confirmed dead as were many of his courtiers. Bill Compton had last been seen standing with a group of those courtiers, including the one named Matthias. “Bill mentioned him to us,” Bartlett was speaking with William, the Illinois King’s Second. While the King had not

Author’s Note: I do apologize for leaving the last at a bit of a cliffhanger. Thank you for reading and hope you are not too surprised by the outcome.

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anticipated problems, he had still taken the precaution of leaving his Second behind. “Bill told us this Matthias was part of some group…”

“Vampires First,” William’s voice was harsh. “I told our King he needed to take steps to discourage them, but James couldn’t see it. He saw nothing wrong with vampires taking pride in themselves. He believed in their cause. Now, I fear it has cost us all.”

“You think they were behind this?” Bartlett asked, “Why? Why would they?”

“They believe humans are prey, not equals and absolutely not some romantic object. Matthias and his friends were angry about the film and they weren’t shy about telling anyone who would listen. They felt it betrayed vampires; made them look weak. They talked about stopping the movie or making some sort of demonstration to show the world the real face of vampires.” Bartlett heard William make a sound, “It doesn’t matter now. They were there, almost all of the trouble makers.”

Bartlett thought about it. Perhaps the Vampire First people had planned something, but if they did it had gone wrong. Still, it seemed odd that someone as careful as James would have surrounded himself with anyone unstable enough to use bombs. William continued to speak, “My worst fear is that someone will have overheard them, someone not a vampire. I have people on the scene, but the destruction is wide. We may never know for sure who among us was lost. They are using hoses and the dust is being washed away. What I have been told is that many of the humans were killed or injured. If they find out this was because of vampires, I fear there will be no place for us to hide. They will come for us now that we are weakened.”

“Are you prepared to step in as interim King?” Bartlett cut the Second off. It was a blunt question, but he needed to get William moving in the right direction.

“Yes.” There was no hesitation, but Bartlett could still hear the Second’s surprise.

“Good. I am going to send some of the new vampire police. We are not far away so it will only take a few hours for them to arrive. They will need a place to go to ground when the sun rises and I hope I can count on you. Get in touch with the local authorities and let them know the special vampire task force is joining the investigation in a support role. Make sure you use those words, ‘support role.’ It’s important to them.” When William acknowledged the instructions, Bartlett continued, “I know this is unorthodox, but I would ask you to offer your blood to heal the humans. Explain the consequences and demonstrate how it works on surface wounds. If we save some of them it may help to blunt any future anger. Don’t make the offer publically. Try talking with an ambulance crew or approach a receptive doctor in their medical tent. We can’t have everyone trying to drain us for a miracle cure.”

“The blood is sacred!” William hissed.

“Yes, and making sure that your vampires survive is now your sacred duty. Make your choice and do what is needed.” When William didn’t protest further, Bartlett said, “You have my number. I would ask one favor. If you hear anything about Bill Compton or Eric Northman, please call me right away.”

Russell was waiting when Bartlett turned back toward him. “Any news?” he asked. When Bartlett shook his head, Russell said, “Thalia is heading to Louisiana. She made it all the way to Ohio. She thinks she may be making progress.” As they stood there, phones in hand, the enormity of it hit them.

“Oh Rusty!” Bart sighed. “What could have happened? Why would someone do this?” but neither of them had answers.
“Why don’t you ask him?” Indira smiled her shy smile, the one that let Karin know she wanted to be a friend.

“Why doesn’t he just tell me?” Karin shrugged in return, and then she frowned. Indira didn’t need to say it out loud. ‘Because no one ‘tells’ you anything.’ Karin finished mentally.

Karin was on her way to Little Rock, Arkansas. She told anyone who asked that it was time for her to check in with the territory but in reality, she was checking in on Thomas. Karin had been moving around the kingdom for months, but since being named Eric’s War Chief, she had pretty well based herself in New Orleans. She was doing what was required of her, but that was only half the truth. She was also avoiding Thomas.

When they were last together Thomas pointed out how well they were getting along, which was true. He laughed at her jokes and she found him amusing, too. Sexually they were compatible. She was unreasonably happy when she rose and found him near her. He made her smile and frankly, that was the problem.

Being with Thomas felt too permanent. When she was with him she would feel her chest get tight and she would find herself worrying that staying would make her less. He would do something wonderful. They would have a moment when she felt deliriously happy. It was fine… until later. Later her panic would crowd her and the voice in her head would scream, ‘Run! Run before it’s too late!’

On their last night together, Thomas had asked her about bonding. They were standing on the balcony that looked out over his woods. The night birds were calling and the moon shone on them. “Would you consider it?” he asked, lifting her hand.

“You’re the only one I would consider bonding with,” she’d replied. It wasn’t really an answer, but he seemed to read it as an agreement. He tilted her face toward him and kissed her. She waited until their next rising to tell him she was leaving.

Now they texted. He never asked when she would return and she never offered the information. They seemed to have found a balance.

But then Sookie told Karin about Nabila. When Karin was alone she texted Thomas. He confirmed that the Carolinas Queen was now a guest in Little Rock. ‘Fine,’ Karin thought, ‘as long as she’s not a guest at the house up north.’ That didn’t last long.

Within days, Karin received reports of the two of them together. Nabila was making herself useful. She understood money and was helping with business deals. Karin found herself unable to stop asking specific questions of her contacts in the Area. There were several of her correspondents in Arkansas who were all too happy to provide her details. Karin received reports including places and times. She was given details of when they were seen talking or walking together. A photo was sent. It showed the two dark heads close together. Thomas was smiling. It pierced Karin like a stake.

Karin hadn’t been able to stop growling over it, picking at her anger like some sore spot. She almost deleted the photo a dozen times, only to pull it up and growl some more. On the next night’s rising, she pushed the button to call Thomas. Karin knew the female who answered her lover’s phone had to be Nabila. Karin listened to the woman asking if she was there, but instead of speaking, Karin terminated the call, packed her bags, and started the journey north.

Now, as Karin sat in Fangtasia, she had a sad suspicion her days of freedom were over. Indira was
using her kind words to lecture her friend. She told Karin that rushing north to ‘catch’ Thomas and Nabila was unworthy. “Why don’t you just call him back and tell him how you feel? Apologize! Allow him to explain.”

Karin sighed. She was going to tell Indira she was right when she felt it, the ripping sensation inside of her. “Eric!” She must have said it loudly because things around them became quiet and many heads turned. Karin couldn’t explain it. It wasn’t that the bond with her Maker was suppressed or even cut off. This was something else, something worse.

“Come with me!” Indira hissed. Her friend almost lifted her bodily from the booth, whisking her down the hall toward the office. Karin had known Indira was strong, but she hadn’t appreciated how strong until now. When they were behind closed doors Indira turned to her, “What happened to you?”

“The bond,” Karin was gasping. “It’s… not gone… but he’s hurt. Eric’s hurt.”

Indira grabbed her phone and started texting. Karin scrambled for her phone as well, but her fingers were shaking and she dropped it. When she managed to pick it up she texted her Maker and then she waited, staring at the screen as though willing him to answer her.

“Karin,” Indira’s voice cut through her thoughts. The Sheriff sounded grave and she was looking at the television screen mounted in the corner. “I think something terrible has happened.” Indira hit the remote to turn up the volume. The image on the screen was a reporter who was saying, “Again, there has been an explosion at the movie premiere of A Viking’s Bond in the City of Rhodes. While there are few details, the damage appears to be extensive and there are reports of fatalities. We will continue to interrupt our regular programming to bring you updates as this story unfolds.”

“He was there,” Karin choked. She checked her phone again, fighting her rising sense of doom.

“So you think he’s…?” and Indira stopped talking.

“I don’t know,” and Karin realized that aside from her Maker, the one person she wanted to see was Thomas. ‘Hell of a time to figure that out!’ her small voice mocked her. Karin texted Maxwell Lee instead. Within seconds her phone rang. It was Max.

“Have you heard from him?” Max asked.

“No,” Karin told him, “But I felt him. Something has happened. I know it.”

“I called Thalia,” Max answered. “What else should I do?” and Karin realized this was her job now. She was Eric’s War Chief. Her Maker had trusted her to do what was needed in times like these and that realization allowed Karin’s thoughts to shift. She sank into the work that needed to be done in this moment.

In a steady voice, Karin told Max, “Start reaching out to the Sheriffs. Tell them to be vigilant, double the guards. Don’t say anything about Eric. I’ll reach out to Pam and some of the other monarchs for news. Call me immediately if you hear anything. I’ll do the same.”

Karin texted Pam next. She didn’t know what she would say to her sister, but she was sure Pam had felt it, too. When Pam acknowledged she would come to Shreveport, Karin thought she probably should have called instead, but she wasn’t sure she could trust her own voice. It didn’t explain why in the next second she was dialing the phone instead of allowing her fingers to do the job.

“Hello,” Thomas answered and just hearing his voice made her shiver. There were so many things she wanted to say to him, but she couldn’t. ‘Now is not the time,’ she told herself, recognizing it for
the excuse it was.

“There’s been an explosion in Rhodes,” she said instead. “The King was supposed to be there. I need you to secure your borders.”

“Of course, Chief,” he replied and Karin realized his voice sounded different now.

When he didn’t hang up she said, “Thomas?”

“Yes, Karin?” and he waited.

“I miss you.” It shouldn’t have been so hard to say the words, and yet she couldn’t bring her voice to say them in more than a whisper.

“Call me when you mean it,” he told her and the connection disconnected.

New York

The brownstone was filled with the best and the brightest of New York. Old money, new money, they mingled together. There were up and coming artists from the Village, a wealthy financier, a woman who had been a movie star in her youth who now ran a successful publishing house. Each person glittered with vitality. There were many from the fashion industry as well and Pam found herself crowded with requests to serve as either muse or mentor. From his place near the fire, Misha watched her with pride. Earlier she had stood with him at the top of the staircase, greeting each of their guests. She was wearing the ice blue column of a dress. Her hair was upswept and around her neck she wore the collar he had given her. It was an exact replica of the necklace worn in the painting they both admired. Misha had consulted on each step of its construction, including his personal selection of each gemstone. He had seen the admiration on each guest’s face as he proudly introduced her, “And this is the Mistress of this house and my most particular friend, Pamela Ravenscroft.”

Misha recalled her slight start when his second, Carlo, had bowed to her, murmuring, “My Lady.” Carlo was the first of his subjects to be formally presented but he hadn’t been the last. Each of his vassals repeated the gesture, bowing, hand over heart. When the King overheard a human asking about it, he heard Andrew explain that among vampires, bowing was the equivalent of hand shaking; the lower the bow, the greater the sign of respect. The King heard one older woman say, “Well that’s quite a bit of respect going on then.” It was perfect.

Pam was laughing at something that had been said, her manners perfectly reflecting the company around her. Misha appreciated the skill it took, the poise to appear so at ease and yet, somehow, above it too. “Madonna,” he told himself.

“Ah Querida!” Felipe said from beside him. Misha hadn’t noticed the King’s approach and it rankled. With a small gesture, De Castro continued, “I was tempted to offer for her myself when she was my subject. You have to hand it to the Viking. He has a rare eye for quality.”

“Pam is unique,” Misha replied. The reminder that the Nevada King had ruled Pam or that he would choose this time to remind Misha that Pam was another’s creation seemed deliberate.

“Yes, she is that rare combination of beauty and intelligence,” Felipe continued. “She has mastered that balance that allows her to lead a business discussion without appearing mannish or weak. Yes, she is a perfect choice as consort although…” and Felipe’s eyes were pitying, ”it is a tragedy that she can never be a Queen. Not while her Maker remains among us.”
Knowing for certain that Felipe meant his remarks to sting still didn’t moderate Misha’s reaction. His face might not have shown it, but his burst of anger was swift. He saw Pam’s reaction as their blood tie relayed it to her. She stopped her conversation in mid-sentence and flashed a quick look in his direction. Her face reflected her concern and just as Misha realized his mistake in forgetting that she would feel his reaction, he also realized Felipe had seen their interplay and recognized it for what it was. It fueled Misha’s feeling that somehow things were slipping out of control and he was finding himself being led to a dangerous place.

Misha forced a smile onto his face and savagely suppressed the anger he felt roiling within him. He pulled his world weary smile over his face and tilted his goblet Pam’s way. He pushed her a sense of general satisfaction and watched her glance quickly at Felipe before nodding in acceptance. She gave him her soft smile and Misha heard her charming apology to those standing with her as she returned to her previous conversation.

Once he was satisfied the moment was smoothed over, Misha turned bodily toward Felipe so his back was to his Zolotse. “She is my Queen in every way that matters to me,” he hissed softly.

“Sharing blood is an important step,” Felipe purred, “I congratulate you both,” and then he chuckled. “I can just see Stan Davis’ face. He will work himself into a jealous frenzy thinking you’ve fallen under the Viking’s influence!”

Misha hissed again. It wasn’t loud. There were too many people to make a clear threat display, but Felipe could not have mistaken it. “I didn’t mean to insult you!” Felipe placed his hand over his heart and sketched a small bow, “but surely you see how this will be perceived. I believe her to be independent from her Maker’s command, but others don’t know her as we do.”

“And by saying this you seek to warn me?” Misha purred. Anyone who had worked for the New York King would have recognized it for the threat it was. It was the voice Misha used just before he killed someone.

“We are business partners,” Felipe changed his tone. The Narayana Chief dropped his friendly courtier persona and returned the hiss. The swift shift in the Nevada King’s attitude caused Misha to pause, as it was meant to do. “I have serious money invested with Miss Ravenscroft which I hope to recoup with profit. I’ve invested money with the Viking, too, through his energy company. If you intend to keep her, dealing with Eric Northman is inevitable. You are too much of a chess player not to have considered that.”

Misha opened his mouth to cut De Castro down to size when there was a sharp sound from across the room. Pam had gone rigid. Her mouth was open and as he watched, she made another keening sound. Pam seemed to fold into herself, suddenly boneless and slipping to the floor. The New York King moved faster than he thought possible and with a single motion, had her in his arms and up the stairs. When he laid her on their bed, she curled into herself, blood tears tracking down her cheeks. “Zolotse? Pamela?” She looked as if she was in shock. After a moment, she turned to look at him, her eyes glassy. “What is it? What has happened?”

“Eric,” her voice was weak. “I need to find my phone.” She was rubbing her stomach and her eyes closed as if she was in pain. When he handed the phone to her, she turned away from him. Her fingers were moving and she was swiping at her face, leaving streaks of red across her perfect cheeks. Misha stood beside the bed, uncertain what to do. She was different from others, but she was still a woman. When she continued to lay still, facing away from him and staring at her phone, Misha couldn’t remain silent. “Pam?” he asked, “Zolotse?”

“Go away,” she told him. Her voice sounded small and broken and it struck him, the injustice of it.
His Pamela wore his clothes and the necklace he had made for her. He was prepared to give her everything and he knew she was happy to accept it, but the moment something happened to the mighty Eric Northman, it didn’t matter what they were to each other. What had that weasel, De Castro, called it? The ‘Viking’s influence,’ and Misha found it difficult to suppress a growl. Rather than allow his slipping control to cause her more difficulty, Misha walked out and then down the stairs. There were guests that needed to be sent home now and that was less confusing than the puzzle the woman upstairs presented.

Pam was still reeling from the shock of it, that sudden feeling that she was in a life raft in the middle of the ocean and there was no land in sight. It was more than mere physical discomfort, it was as though someone had pulled the strings that held her together, body and soul, and cut them across with a knife. Pam knew with dreadful certainty that something terrible had happened to Eric. She remembered falling and she remembered being in someone’s arms. She was on a bed and it was all she could do to gather her scattered thoughts. “I need my phone,” she remembered saying. It was Misha who handed it to her. Pam texted Eric and waited, but there was no response. Next she texted Sookie. She waited. She texted again. Finally, she texted Karin and this time she received a message.

Karin: ‘Me too.’

Pam: ‘Do you know where they are?’

Karin: ‘No. You should come home to Shreveport.’

Pam: ‘Yes. I will come. Text if you hear.’

It was a plan. It gave Pam the strength to stand up and move toward the closet. She felt stiff and disjointed. She and Karin might not know where Eric and Sookie were or what happened, but she knew she needed to be with family and that was Karin, and not New York. She picked up her suitcase from its place near the door. She hit the number on her phone that called Anubis Airlines. “I need an emergency flight from JFK to Shreveport,” she told the person on the line. “The fastest you have.”

She disconnected the line, and then returning to the closet grabbed more clothing. Misha walked back into the room. He looked worried, but Pam couldn’t think about it, not now. “I’ll need a ride to the airport,” she told him. She struggled to keep her voice steady. She was feeling the calm that descended on her before battle asserting itself, but she wasn’t there yet. Misha said nothing, but he wasn’t moving either. Pam had a hard time meeting his eyes and for some reason she thought of Thomas. ‘I’m not like Karin!’ she told herself, but she suspected she was.

Now he did step forward, “Pamela,” and he reached out to take her hand. She didn’t pull away, and he must have taken that for encouragement. “Please, Zolotse, tell me what has happened.”

Had he just hugged her, she would have accepted it, but he was asking things of her, so Pam pulled her hand away, “There’s nothing to tell.” Less than twenty-four hours ago she had agreed to be this vampire’s companion, but, in this moment, he felt like another impediment standing between where she was and where she needed to be. If she was being truthful, it might have been the shock that caused her to pull away, but she found she couldn’t trust him enough to say the words that were repeating in her brain, ‘I think Eric Northman is gone.’ Pam closed her suitcase, lifted it, and started toward the door. Misha stepped in front of her, blocking her way and without pausing, Pam dropped fang and hissed her hands curved into fists. She realized in that moment that if Misha didn’t move, if he tried to restrain her, she would attack him and fight him to the death. She could see it in his eyes, how much she had just hurt him.

“It will be as you wish,” he told her and she felt a cold fury from him. He stepped aside but he made
no move to help her. Pam picked up her suitcase and continued walking down the stairs. Andrew was waiting at the bottom of the staircase for her and she asked him to call her a car. The houseman glanced up the stairs and Pam followed his gaze to see Misha watching them. The King looked sad, but it didn’t match the feeling Pam sensed through their tie. Misha nodded once and Pam heard Andrew move behind her. The houseman picked up the house phone and spoke quietly, asking the driver to bring the car around so that Mistress Pamela could be on her way.

As Andrew spoke, Pam glanced back to the top of the stairs, but the New York King was gone.

XXxxx

Misha walked back into the bed chamber that had been ‘theirs’ for so short a time. He wouldn’t watch her leave, running to the tug on the leash he could now see all too clearly. He headed back downstairs only after he heard the front door close. There were still guests collecting wraps and lingering, waiting to speak with him. Carlo was waiting, too, and mounted the stairs to meet him halfway. His second leaned in to whisper, “There’s been another bombing in Rhodes. It’s on all the news stations. The movie premiere? Compton’s thing? It happened there.”

“Was Compton involved?” Misha had a bad feeling about this.

“Probably. There will be footage. I’ll get it streamed to your office.”

Misha nodded, “Find out what you can. I will join you in a minute,” and Misha turned his attention to making apologies as he helped Andrew show his guests to the door.

“How is she?” Felipe asked when Misha approached him. “Losing your Maker can be painful. Although, I have to say, I am impressed. I couldn’t have maneuvered this better myself.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Misha kept his face neutral. “What makes you think the Northman is gone?”

“Oh, I know he was at the movie premiere,” Felipe stroked his mustache. “The Viking with the real life Viking? Angie has been reading me press releases for days. To think we were just talking about ways to rid your new mate of the inconvenience of a Maker, and here we are!”

“I believe you are mistaken,” Misha said carefully, “I had nothing to do with this.”

“Of course,” Felipe purred. “How could you? You were thousands of miles away. Genius!” and taking his cape from Andrew’s arm, he lowered his voice, “She’s strong. She’ll recover, and she’ll be free. That’s what’s important.” With a quick bow, Felipe de Castro turned and collecting Angie, walked down the stairs and into the night.

“Do you really think he had anything to do with Rhodes?” Angie asked once they were in the car.

“What does it matter?” Felipe shrugged. “We have found his weakness and now it’s time to exploit it.”

Nebraska

“It is difficult to examine the facts and see this as other than cruel,” Mr. Cataliades was keeping his voice neutral, but no one was fooled. The attorney was furious.

Niall lifted his eyebrow, “I appreciate your opinion, demon, and it has been noted, but I warn you that any further protest from you will have consequences.”
“You are sure the Viking wasn’t killed?” Dermot interrupted. Of all of them, he feared his father the least. “If he doesn’t survive this whole exercise was for nothing!”

“You can feel her!” Niall snapped. “She is in pain but she continues. If her vampire was finally dead you would feel her leaving us. You don’t. My vision is true.”

“Was there no other way?” Tamsin was staring at her feet. Finn took a step closer to her and laid his large hand on her shoulder. She covered his hand with her own and her sorrow was like another person in the room.

“You carry on as if there was some great loss!” Niall let his annoyance show. “Sookie has benefited from the training we have provided. She has proven herself a credit to her race. Her quick reactions saved her vampire. All is as it should be.” When those around him didn’t react positively, the Prince added, “And now everything moves forward as it should.”

“You’re a hard man,” Finn didn’t meet the Prince’s eye either.

“No harder than the times require,” Niall sniffed. He turned to Dermot, “You will accompany me. I don’t wish to linger there. She has too many creatures patrolling around her house now. We will complete our errand and leave. I am not totally without feeling. I will give her time to grieve.”

“You had better hope she never finds out what you did,” Dermot told his Father.

“And who will tell her?” Niall smiled. “You? You are all equally implicated in this. You could have warned her, but you didn’t.” Niall’s calm face turned into a snarl, “If she should find out, I won’t be alone in facing her wrath. Perhaps it will help to think of it this way. Now they will be able to fulfill the terms of the contract and the Viking will have earned our protection.”

Niall looked carefully at each those assembled in Finn’s living room, waiting as one by one they nodded and Niall knew he’d won.

Shreveport

They were on the floor in the middle of Amy Ludwig’s hospital. Sookie knew the blood flowing from her wrist was slowing but she kept her arm clamped against the place she knew led to this throat. “Help! Help me, please!” she yelled. She couldn’t tell if she was making any sound at all. There was a slight change of pressure in her ears and she remembered how she’d been mostly deaf following the Rhodes hotel bombing. This time she’d been much closer to the explosion. She smoothed her hand over what was left of Eric’s chest. There was a hole that was oozing blood and a small tendril of smoke lifted from it. ‘Silver!’ she thought.

Leaning her head over, Sookie started to suck at the wound. She couldn’t tell if it was doing any good, but then there was something in her mouth. She gagged and lifting her fingers, pulled out a small charm. It was some kind of dog and Sookie felt overwhelmed by the impossibility of this. Her Lover, her husband, her friend was lying underneath her, his life blood seeping from him. She didn’t know what happened, not exactly, but what did it matter? Eric was dying. She could feel him slipping from her.

“No!” she shouted. She pushed her love at him. She pushed her need and her lust. She screamed in her head that he couldn’t leave her. “I love you!” her mouth shouted, but all she heard was the hum of the white noise in her head.

A rough hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her up, and Sookie could feel her teeth manifesting
and she was sure she was hissing. Two hands grabbed her face and forced her to look up and she
saw it was Dr. Ludwig. The doctor seemed to be yelling at her. “It's Eric!” Sookie said the words
and hoped Amy understood. Amy moved her hands to Sookie’s shoulders, and looking her in the
eye, she nodded. Amy glanced over her shoulder and Sookie followed where she was looking. The
telepath could see many people coming. She recognized a nurse from other visits here and she felt
something brush her leg. She jerked, turning to see another person kneeling beside her, inserting a
needle in a vein that was all too visible in Eric’s arm. Amy shook Sookie’s shoulder to get her
attention, motioning that Sookie should lift her arm from Eric’s mouth. Sookie shook her head, but
Amy pointed to another round wound on the Viking’s torso that was still bleeding. She pointed at
Sookie, and then pointed at the wound and Sookie understood that the Doctor was telling her to get
the silver. Sookie knew the silver would keep Eric’s wounds from healing; it would just continue to
burn and poison until it finished killing him. Nodding, Sookie removed her arm and then leaned over
to place her mouth on the next wound. The person next to her took hold of her arm and put some
kind of tape on it, holding the edges of the wound Sookie had made with the glass together. Sookie
couldn’t pay attention. She was too busy doing what she could.

Sookie looked to her right and saw Amy take a scalpel in her hand. The Doctor was looking up and
down her husband’s torso, assessing the damage. Sookie knew how he looked. He looked like
bloody, torn meat. It was almost impossible to see the vampire she loved. The people around her
were cutting away Eric’s remaining scraps of clothing. Sookie knew Eric was missing part of one
hand. She was afraid to look at his other arm; afraid that the hand she had seen turn to dust in Rhodes
was his. He had a large hole where the muscle of his chest had been ripped away. He was missing all
the muscle on the front of one thigh leaving the bone exposed. She couldn’t look when they cut his
pants from him but she knew he had lost some part of his genitalia.

Sookie captured more silver in her mouth and lifted her head. Amy was near her, digging at another
part of him with her knife. Sookie glanced up, thinking, ‘I hope you can’t feel this,’ and the sob
captured in her throat all over again when she saw the bloody blank where his face had been.

As Sookie forced herself to calm down, turning to locate the next piece of silver, she noticed there
were multiple bags of blood hanging around them now. Dr. Ludwig stood up and tapped Sookie’s
shoulder. She gestured that the telepath should back up and when Sookie staggered, the tiny doctor
almost bodily lifted her. The team rolled Eric onto a sheet and then lifted him onto a gurney. When
they started to move him down the hall Sookie raced with them, holding the swell of her belly, not
thinking, not wanting to think.

They wheeled him into a small room, pulling curtains and shutting doors. Sookie leaned over him,
wiping away blood, looking for the cuts that still dripped. She knew there was a frenzy of activity
around her but she couldn’t acknowledge it. The world was this; Eric and bleeding and silver. She
would bat people out of her way, pushing and shoving to get to the next wound. Her mouth was
bloody and her hair was crusted in gore. Every once in a while she would have to push on her belly,
willing the pain that was there to end. She was sure she groaned, but she couldn’t hear it. It was not
important. All that was important was in front of her, under her hands, under her mouth, and she
could feel him, faint, so very faint.

Across the bed, Amy looked at Sookie. She couldn’t imagine what had happened, but this had all the
earmarks of a bomb blast. When the telepath had appeared out of nowhere with the vampire under
her, Amy was certain that he was already dead, but then she’d seen the blood flow. Amy still didn’t
think much of his chances. They had to get him stabilized by daybreak. If he started to heal when
day death took him, he might make it. If he was still losing ground, it was more likely Eric Northman
would slip into his day death and never recover. Amy had seen it before, the moment when true
death overtook a vampire and he returned to the dust from which he came. She glanced now at the
telepath. She wondered if Sookie could feel him, if she could tell how strong he was.
“Get me a pad of paper,” she told one of the nurses. When the nurse returned, Amy stopped long enough to write, ‘Can you feel him? Is he aware?’ She poked Sookie until the telepath raised her head. For the first time Amy really looked at the telepath. She looked vacant and for one minute, Amy wondered if the North Man wasn’t the only victim, but in the next she dismissed it. The Viking was bleeding and the telepath was doing what she could to stop it.

Sookie looked at the message and she closed her eyes. When she opened them she nodded, but Amy could tell it wasn’t good. The Doctor nodded and placed her hand on Sookie’s arm.

Picking up her scalpel, Amy turned to the nearest attendant and said, “Find Jane.”

Almost thirty minutes elapsed between the time Sookie and Eric appeared at the hospital and Jane arrived. The vampire took a look at the body on the stretcher and her nostrils flared. Amy felt they were getting ahead of the larger pieces of silver and some of the deeper wounds had started to seal. The doctor appreciated how the sight of this much carnage would make it difficult for Jane to process what she was seeing. It almost explained why the former Sheriff instead chose to rush around the bed and grab Sookie’s arm, “What are you doing? This isn’t good for you! You’ll hurt the baby!” The face Sookie turned on Jane was something Amy Ludwig knew she would see in her nightmares for the rest of her life. Thinking about it afterward, Amy figured Jane was lucky she didn’t lose her hand.

“Leave her!” Doctor Ludwig hissed at the vampire. “I need her where she is and it won’t make any difference now. What’s done is done. We need his progeny. We are giving him blood, but blood from his bloodline will heal him faster. Karin is closest. Get her here! He needs every advantage if he’s going to make it through to nightfall.

Amy could see that Sookie’s attack had made an impression, but Jane recovered and nodding, she grabbed her phone and texted. “She’s coming,” she acknowledged a minute later. Glancing around again, she said, “How did they get here? This happened in Rhodes, didn’t it?”

“Rhodes?” Amy asked. She paused in what she was doing. Was it possible? If that was true, somehow Sookie had managed to bring them both hundreds of miles in an instant. Amy shook her head. She’d think about it later. She glanced at the clock, “Four, maybe five hours for Karin to drive here from New Orleans,” she shook her head. “I don’t know if she’ll make it in time.” Doctor Ludwig looked at Sookie. She wondered if she should ask the telepath to go get Karin the Slaughterer, using whatever trick Sookie had used to bring Eric here but then she dismissed it. It was unlikely the telepath would leave the Viking. Amy sighed. It was possible that Sookie couldn’t leave him. The Doctor knew all too well what would happen if Eric Northman turned to dust. It wouldn’t happen for Sookie right away, but it wouldn’t take long either. From what Amy had been told Sookie’s end would be painful.

Jane was texting again. She lifted her head and said, “Karin’s not in New Orleans! She’s here in Shreveport! She was on her way to Arkansas and staying with Indira. She’s on her way!” Amy almost sagged with relief. It was the first piece of good luck they’d had since the Viking appeared.

Another twenty minutes passed; minutes spent washing away blood only to discover more seeping holes, minutes spent draining more and more bags of fresh blood into the hulk on the bed. At one point the Viking gave a fine shiver, and Amy thought, ‘That’s it. He’s gone!’ but it was a false alarm.

Karin rushed into the room, her face grave. She took one look and then bit her wrist, almost ripping her own flesh off before placing the freely flowing wound over the place that was Eric’s mouth. The improvement was immediate. Small wounds on the Viking started to heal. Amy could watch the deeper wounds pulling together. She nodded to her orderlies and more blood was brought. Sookie swayed on her feet and Jane stepped forward to catch her. Amy could see that Jane was terrified of
the telepath now, but she stepped forward anyway.

“Water,” Sookie croaked. A nurse ran from the room. Another pulled forward a chair and Jane lowered Sookie into it. The telepath struggled, but Jane got in front of her and holding up one finger, seemed to convince Sookie to wait. The nurse returned at a run, handed Sookie the bottle of water and then walked back to the bed to resume sponging the blood from the vampire. There was another nurse helping Dr. Ludwig extract the nuggets and slivers now. The pile was growing and all Amy could think was ‘How close were you?’ When they seemed to run out of seeping holes on his front, they tipped the Viking up on his side. His back was almost fully intact. Whatever had happened, Eric Northman had faced it head on.

“Sookie?” Jane’s voice sounded uncertain. Amy glanced over. She could see an ugly bruise forming on the side of Sookie’s face. The Doctor figured the telepath must have hit something pretty hard.

“Get her an ice pack!” Amy yelled at Jane. A nurse told the vampire where to find them and Jane left, disappearing down the hall. Amy kept an eye on the telepath, but it seemed Sookie had lost her steam. She sat in the chair, her eyes patiently watching her vampire. Amy had started stitching now, drawing flesh together where she could. Those places where limbs were missing or flesh gone would have to regrow. Amy knew that with this catalogue of damage and even with his progeny’s blood, it would take a long time before Eric Northman fully recovered.

Reaching across his body, Amy grabbed Karin’s wrist, “Enough! I can’t have you killing yourself for him. If you seriously injure yourself I can’t use you as his primary blood source, not to mention the pain of you weakening yourself could kill him. Think! You are linked.” When Karin lifted her wrist, licking it to heal, Amy said, “See if you can get ahold of Pam. It would be better if you were all here together.”

“I’ve already asked. Pam is coming,” Karin replied

From across the room, Sookie seemed to wake up. She stood up and staggering toward the bed cried out, “I’m here!” Her voice was unnaturally loud and sharp.

Karin hissed, but Amy grabbed her arm and shook her head, “She can’t hear you!” and then the Doctor walked around the bed and placed her arm around Sookie. With Eric as good as he could be for the moment, the Doctor turned her attention to the telepath.

Sookie was covered in blood. She had one hand gripping the headboard and the other was laid on an undamaged part of the Viking. Amy grabbed a wet towel from one of the nurses and began soaking and then wiping away the gore that coated Sookie’s face and chest. With the blood coming off, the Doctor could see the extent of the bruising. It wasn’t much right now, but it would be colorful and painful within twenty-four hours. With a frown, she reached down to place a hand on Sookie’s abdomen, but the telepath pushed her away. Amy looked in Sookie’s eyes then and what she saw told the story. “Do you want to sleep with him?” she asked, and then she remembered that Sookie couldn’t hear her. The Doctor grabbed the pad of paper and wrote the question down.

Sookie nodded, and Amy told one of the nurses to get a hospital gown.

“We should check the baby,” Jane insisted, but Amy shook her head.

“Leave it. There will be time for that later.” Doctor Ludwig walked with Sookie into the small bathroom that served for that area of the hospital and she helped her step under the shower. When the worst of it was washed from her, Amy took a towel and dried Sookie the way she would have dried off a child. The Doctor walked around her, helping her into the gown, and she held the soft robe so that Sookie could dip her arms into it. With her arm around her, Dr. Ludwig walked Sookie back
into the room where her husband lay.

“Lift her onto the bed,” Amy told Karin. The telepath made a sound like a wounded animal, but then she turned, settling herself on her side and laid her hand on the bandage that covered her husband’s chest, Amy gestured for the blanket to be pulled over both of them and raised the safety rail.

“Keep changing out the blood bags until sunrise,” she told her staff, and then glancing at Karin and Jane she said, “Come with me.”

They walked down the hall to the small room that served as a lounge for the staff. Amy took the remote and turned on the television. There was a reporter standing near fire trucks. The tagline along the bottom of the screen read, “Tragedy in Rhodes – Suspected Terrorist Bombing.”

“How did she do it?” Dr. Ludwig asked, but no one had an answer.
Chapter 22 - Reefing Sails

Chapter Notes

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Nautical Note: When you are in a strong wind, like the wind that blows before a storm or afterward you may have to reduce the amount of sail you carry. You push up the bottom of the mainsail and tie it down. If the wind is still too strong, you may ‘take in another reef.’ By reducing your sail, you can still move forward without risking being capsized by the gale.

New York

The last of his guests had left. Andrew turned out all but one light on the front step and Misha found that Felipe de Castro’s words lingered. If the Nevada King suspected him, others would, too. For most, it didn’t matter, but when it came to Pamela Ravenscroft, it did matter, it mattered very much. As angry as Misha was with Pam’s behavior this evening, he understood it. The tie between a vampire and her Maker was not a choice. It was a duty and a compulsion. If Eric Northman decided to have Pam return to him, she would. If Eric Northman decided to take Pam into his bed, she would submit herself. If he ordered Pam to kill all she loved best, she would be angry and unhappy, but Misha knew she would take up her sword and lay waste to all around her. A child belonged to its Maker with a wonderful, terrible certainty.

Misha walked up the stairs to his office. The glow of the monitors met him and he turned on a few table lamps. Carlo didn’t mind basking in the artificial light, but Misha found it annoying. There were different news sources on different monitors, all reporting on the same story. “Have you heard from our friend in Illinois?” Misha asked his Second. Over the years, Misha had planted spies in many courts. His source in James’ court had been in place for many years.

“No, Majesty,” Carlo shook his head. “It is likely he was among those killed.” Misha’s Second used a remote to spool back the feed from one of the newscasts. They watched a film taken of the events shortly before the blast. Carlo freeze-framed and used a key near the computer to enlarge the image slightly. The film showed groups of vampires standing close to each other.

Misha recognized James, the Illinois King. He has speaking with a tall vampire. “Northman!” Carlo nodded. There was another group of vampires standing several feet away. “And there is our spy,” Misha pointed to the dark-haired vampire speaking with another vampire standing to his left.

“Yes, and that vampire standing in the middle is Bill Compton, the author.” Misha stared at the famous William Compton. He had only met the vampire in passing at the recent Moshup Summit.

“Did we know Compton would be in Rhodes?” Misha asked.

“Yes, it was on his schedule, Majesty” Carlo nodded. “Compton told me the Kings, Russell and Crowe, were supposed to make an appearance. He as much as told me he was going to finish his assignment in Rhodes.”
“Stop it! There!” Misha exclaimed. Carlo hit the button, freezing the image in place. “Put it on the bigger screen.” When Carlo did as he was told, Misha studied the faces. “Find out who each of these vampires are. Compton seems to know them.” Misha gestured and Carlo hit the button to advance the screens. “See?” Misha gestured, “See the way he answers that one beside him, the smile? He knows that vampire. They are friends, but not good friends.”

“The vampire he is speaking with is Matthias, the one he said was part of…”

“Vampires First,” Misha frowned. “Compton told the woman he was ashamed of being a part of that, and yet, there he is, smiling and nodding. A mystery.” Misha watched the film and then said, “Go back a little,” and watched again. “There! Do you see it? Compton is looking for someone. He shifts from foot to foot. He is nervous, the weasel!”

“The Kings?” Carlo offered.

Misha took a step back and looked to the other monitors. There were pictures of humans being flashed on the screen. Several famous people had died in the blast. One of the movie’s producers was reported dead. The film’s director was in critical condition and not expected to recover. The film’s male star was in the hospital as well. Misha found the volume control for the unit just as photographs of vampires were shown. “James Lincoln, a prominent Illinois businessman and vampire has been confirmed dead. Sources at his residence confirmed a number of his business associates were also at the premiere this evening. Many are missing and presumed dead in this terrible tragedy. Two more names from that community that were well known on the international scene? Eric Northman, the so-called Vampire King of New Orleans was reported to be near the center of the bomb blast. He has been declared dead by those at the scene. Another luminary who was caught up in this tragedy, the world mourns the loss of renowned writer William Compton.” The reporter launched into a biography of Compton. Most of the reporter’s facts appeared to have been pulled from one of the writer’s book covers. There were photographs of Compton at various events being flashed on the screen. “Perhaps they would like the layout of the little graveyard near his home, this paragon,” the King growled. Misha muted the volume and turned to watch other reports when he saw the Kings, Russell Edgington and Bartlett Crowe, appear on a television. He jerked his chin and Carlo scrambled to find the remote that would adjust the volume for that particular monitor.

Bartlett Crowe was being interviewed for his reaction. “We are horrified. We were originally scheduled to attend, but we had to give our apologies to our good friend, Bill Compton.” Misha didn’t move, he didn’t look at Carlo. “Russell and I were committed to being here in Indianapolis tonight, to see the first of our new vampire special task force graduate from the police academy. Those new officers are already headed to Illinois to help support local law enforcement efforts. Unlike humans, vampires do not continue once killed, and that is why identifying those who were lost tonight is proving difficult. Our new officers are uniquely equipped to help in those efforts, but…” and Bartlett looked directly into the monitor, “If anyone took a film or a video of this evening’s event, we ask that you post that film to the site listed at the bottom of your screen. Your record may be the thing that gives closure to the families and friends of many who were there.”

“I want you to find a way to gain access to that website,” Misha hissed, not looking at his Second. The New York King felt his fury coil within him like a snake. When he managed to throw a loop over it, only then did he turn to face Carlo. He even smiled slightly. “It would appear our friend, William, decided to deceive us,” he said mildly. “Perhaps by watching the videos we can determine what happened.” Carlo wasn’t saying anything, but he didn’t have to. Misha could feel his Second’s fear coming off him in great waves. “Now, now, Carlo!” he boomed, allowing his face to split into a gap-toothed smile. “Bill was unstable! You told me, you tried to warn me! I didn’t listen closely enough and that is my fault. I should have trusted you more!” He could see his Second visibly relax, that was what the King intended.
“If our friend, Bill, decided to betray us about this, perhaps there are other things that are not as they should be,” Misha continued. “He was in Jackson before Rhodes. It will be difficult, but you must find a way. It is likely he was caught up in all of this, but it would be better to be certain.”

Carlo bowed, “It will be as you say, Majesty.” His relief was embarrassing.

“Fine, fine,” Misha smiled, touching Carlo’s shoulder to get him to straighten up. “Now, I will send you on your way. Do not delay in getting to Jackson. All too soon those investigating will decide to track Compton’s steps. It is best to sift the breadcrumbs first, yes?”

“Yes, Majesty, yes,” Carlo was almost stumbling over himself to head toward the door. Misha knew his Second had hoped to be named Regent, even King of the Carolinas. His hints had not been subtle. Now, that would never happen.

Misha walked into the library and poured himself a goblet of blood from the heavy decanter. The warming plate that kept it at a constant temperature was subtle, another of the small luxuries that made for a civilized life. Misha walked back into the office. He walked from monitor to monitor, tilting each to face the armchair he preferred and then gathering the remotes, he sat down.

“I’ve locked the front door and turned off the exterior lights,” Andrew informed him, gliding in to stand close by.

“It has been an interesting evening,” Misha nodded.

“Do you need me to arrange anything for downstairs?” Misha knew what Andrew meant. He thought about it. An hour ago, Misha would have agreed, the ritual of the young boy shaking in fear so known and comforting, but now? There was still a great deal to be found out, possible problems to be addressed, but as he watched the pictures of Eric Northman captioned ‘Presumed Dead’ flash across the screen he found he felt better. Misha did not feel the need to assert his control.

“No, but perhaps you would join me here for a little while?” and Misha raised his goblet, his eyes never leaving the screens.

Andrew poured himself a blood and brought the decanter closer. He settled himself in the matching chair and reached for one of the remotes, “You mind?” Misha shook his head and Andrew turned up the volume.

‘The outpouring of grief has started already. Flowers for the victims are being laid at a makeshift shrine, here at the foot of a poster advertising the premiere of Viking’s Bond, the first movie about inter-species cooperation. We are asked to discourage members of the public from coming here. This remains an active crime scene…’ The video clip of the humans with their flowers and candles featured a young woman holding a large photograph of Bill Compton.

Andrew muted the television while turning up the volume on another, ‘It has been confirmed that the damage is the result of some kind of bomb. Whether the device was planted or was on some person has not been confirmed.’

“Nor will they,” Misha shrugged.

“You think it was Compton,” Andrew’s eyebrows drew together.

“I believe so. He was unraveling. Carlo pressed to have him kill Crowe. He thought that Compton had a reasonable chance. He was their friend, so they would let him get close, but he pushed too hard. Carlo has no patience.” Misha turned to his houseman. Of all his companions, Andrew had been with him longest. They had been friends of sorts, boys turned to prostitution and petty theft
together in the rough streets of the Five Corners. Misha had outgrown the flesh trade quickly, his looks and build making him less favored. Andrew had remained peddling his body for far longer. When Misha convinced his Maker to turn him, he had known that finding one to turn Andrew was the first thing he would do when given the opportunity. In all their many years together, it was a decision Misha never regretted. Andrew had a sure instinct about things and his read of character was seldom wrong.

“So what will you do with him?” Andrew asked.

“Carlo? His time has run out,” Misha told his friend. “He failed me on the Crowe thing,” and he nodded toward the monitor where the Indiana King was making his appeal for videos again, “and he misread Compton. He is either incompetent or unlucky. Either is a liability.”

“But you sent him to collect information?” It wasn’t a question as much as a statement.

“True,” Misha nodded. “Fear will motivate him to dig deep. That can serve my purpose later.” The two vampires sat together watching the story be repeated over and over. There was a ding on the King’s phone and he flicked his fingers rapidly, and then changed the output to one of the terminals.

“That was fast,” Andrew said as the videos from the police site appeared as files on the screen.

“He is clever and connected,” Misha replied. The King was not surprised that Carlo had already found someone capable of hacking in and routing the King a feed from the website. Several people had already posted their cell phone footage. Together, Misha and Andrew watched first one and then another of the videos. There were several of Eric Northman standing with the human star of the movie. There were also several videos of Bill Compton standing among a group of vampires. One was looking particularly angry. “Matthias?” Andrew asked. Misha had few secrets from his houseman.

“Yes, the Vampires First person Compton took on his hunting trips,” Misha nodded.

“The Indiana King is headed to the crime scene. All he needs is his white horse,” Andrew nodded at another of the monitors.

“That should be my white horse,” Misha grumbled again. The New York King had planned to recruit vampires as investigators for the rogues’ crisis, establishing himself as a hero to humans. He had gone to some trouble to arrange it while at the same time discrediting Bartlett Crowe. Misha was convinced the Indiana King had somehow found out through spies in New York and stolen his idea. Now, there was nothing to do but watch his enemy bask in the lights of the cameras. “We have that information on Vampires First from Compton’s fuck and feed still?” Misha asked.

“Yes, Misha. It is broken down and catalogued,” Andrew turned his head, giving the King his attention.

“I think a good citizen should inform the Illinois police about the nature of those vampires who stood around Bill Compton. An anonymous call. It should come from somewhere close.”

“It might make the reception a little chilly for those vampire police,” Andrew smiled.

“It will give the humans something to investigate, something other than Bill Compton,” Misha agreed.

Andrew tapped the next video. It showed Eric Northman’s face. He was talking with someone, presumably Bill Compton or the vampires standing around him, and then he suddenly turned around. There was a woman walking toward him. “Sookie Northman was there,” Misha said out loud.
That is his wife?” Andrew asked.

“Yes,” Misha nodded. “I had not heard she was expected. I wonder if Compton knew. He coveted her.”

“Northman’s wife?” Andrew repeated.

Misha smiled, “She was his muse, the inspiration for his great romance. She was his before she became the spouse of the famous Viking. A small world in those Louisiana wilds.”

Andrew frowned, “And Miss Pamela requested an emergency flight to Shreveport. Why Shreveport? If Northman and his woman were in Rhodes…”

“Another mystery,” the King nodded. “We can assume there is no record of the Northman woman being at the premiere since her name has not been mentioned by these news people.”

“Because there is no body,” Andrew speculated. “She is known. She was in all the magazines for almost a year. If she was injured, she would have been taken to some hospital by ambulance and her name leaked to the press. Northman could be dust, but her?”

“It is possible she is there, but her injuries prevent her identification. Still, there is something here that doesn’t add up,” Misha agreed.

Andrew stood then and walked away. Misha could hear him on the phone. When the houseman returned, he refilled the King’s goblet and then his own before sitting. “The call will be made. I also asked to have someone look specifically for the Northman woman. If she is there we will know.” When Misha didn’t reply, Andrew added, “It would be better for everyone if the reports were true and Miss Pamela’s Maker was gone.”

“She is an amazing woman,” Misha nodded.

“Well suited for you, and for her life here,” Andrew agreed. “I am so sorry about this evening. It was all going so well. She captured everyone she met.”

“She is the one I have waited to find. She is my Adele,” and Misha nodded. “Perhaps it is better this way. My Pamela will grieve with her nest and then what is there for her? She has been living with the Minnesota Queen. There is no special attachment to Louisiana. Her sister, the Slaughterer, will return to Europe.”

“Unless they decide to take the kingdom,” Andrew reminded Misha. “Your Pam is loyal. If her sister decided to try and continue the legacy of her Maker…”

Misha considered this. There were so many possibilities. He could simply turn over the information about the donors in New Orleans. That would drive the vampires from that part of the world, but it would damage his Pamela. He could ignore the situation and arrive there after a suitable period, reminding her of the life where she belonged. “It would be better if someone else were to take the kingdom,” he said aloud.

“A takeover wouldn’t be unusual in these troubled times,” Andrew nodded, “But it is not close to your holdings.”

“I’m not interested,” Misha shrugged, “and how could I be involved without making my Pamela feel betrayed? No, there is someone else we know who has a history there. He enjoyed that kingdom I think, and now it is far richer than it was before.”
“De Castro?” Andrew laughed. “You think he would try again?”

“I think he would see it as the hand of fate,” Misha chuckled. “I know how my Zolotse enjoyed being under his rule. She would be quick to pack.”

“And Carlo?” Andrew reminded the King.

“Yes, I will be in need of a new second. Let’s see what he uncovers about Compton in Jackson. Hopefully he will be caught and staked, but if he survives it would be best to keep attention away from the writer as long as possible. I am not happy about the Kings returning to Indiana. Even if we are successful in pointing the humans toward vampires, having our kind investigating will become inconvenient. I think the time has come to put away my toys. Bartlett Crowe isn’t going anywhere and someday his luck will be less. Yes, when Carlo is finished, I think he needs to clean up my little farm in the Adirondacks. My gifts have served their purpose for now, and we have the benefit of the experience. Now, if we need an army we know how to quickly create it.”

“You will send your candidates with him?” Andrew asked. The houseman had seen the King do this before, eliminate a failing vassal using his successor.

“Screen through the possibilities. You spent time in Boston. There should be one or two who might be worthy. I don’t know if you had time to look over the Carolinas group. Nabila would have recruited well.” The King stood and stretched. “Pick the right one. Make sure he understands I need Carlo to be identifiable. There will be documentation of his betrayal and his intent to build his own army. I don’t mind looking too indulgent this time. It will help build my Pamela’s sympathy. She has a need to protect, to fight. She should feel I need her.”

Andrew nodded, “It will be as you say.”

“Give it a few days,” Misha stopped at the door. “Find out where she rests in Shreveport. Send her roses. And get in touch with Maude of Minnesota. Tell her I was so moved by this terrible tragedy that I wish to have Sanctum officially re-opened and that I am declaring it neutral territory under her stewardship.”

Andrew smiled broadly, “You were always the clever one,” he laughed.

“And you were always the beauty,” Misha nodded. “Would you honor me?”

Andrew smiled and stepped in, lowering his head to capture the king’s lower lip between his teeth. “You know I enjoy our time together,” he purred. “Shall I go upstairs and wait for you?”

“The guest room, Andrew,” Misha nodded.

“You love her, don’t you, Misha?” Andrew’s eyes softened. “In all your long years, I have never seen you warm to another as you have warmed to her.”

“She is my destiny,” Misha nodded. “She is the one I was meant to be with until my end.”

Andrew drew the belt from his pants and with a smirk, slapped the King across the buttocks, “Well, destiny can wait! It’s been a long night and I think you could use some distraction!”

“You would play with me?” Misha grabbed for Andrew, who slid from his grasp and rushed up the stairs. “I love to chase!” the King called out and they were boys again, chasing through the rooms of the brownstone, rounding corners and slamming doors until they caught each other and fell in a tangle of clothing and mouths.
Rhodes

It seemed only a few hours before Bartlett and Russell were standing in front of cameras again. It was late, two in the morning. William, the acting King of Illinois, was waiting when the van doors opened.

“We understand you were friends of Eric Northman, the self-styled Louisiana vampire King. Do you believe the rumors that he was among those killed this evening?”

Bartlett’s face dropped, “For the sake of his wife and family. I hope that proves not to be the case,” he replied. “It is almost overwhelming to stand here, knowing that this place has seen so much tragedy. Russell and I will be offering any help we can provide.” Bowing away from the cameras, the Kings allowed themselves to be led to the tent William had set up for his people. There was equipment lining several tables and the vampire technicians were running videos and films of the event. Every so often a printer would hum to life and a photo would be taken and compared to those already taped to several easels. There were other rigid white boards with names written on them. These were all the vampires that had been identified and next to each name was a dot. Green signified the vampire was still with them. Yellow signified the vampire had been wounded. William told the Kings he had wounded vampires transported to the palace. There was a hospital of sorts being set up in the basement. Donors were lined up, volunteering blood.

Red dots were for those who were finally dead. Russell couldn’t help scanning the lists of names. Most were followed by red dots, including William Compton and Eric Northman. “I can’t believe it,” Bartlett said beside him, slipping his hand into Russell’s.

There was a noise at the tent entrance and one of the new vampire investigators entered. “Trouble?” Russell asked.

“They won’t let us near the site,” the officer told him. “They said we’re not authorized.”

“I was afraid of this,” William told the Kings. “There was a call about an hour ago to the local police telling them that it was vampires who caused this. The caller was well-informed about the Vampires First movement and gave them enough to turn things against us.”

“We anticipated that,” Russell nodded. He picked up his cell phone and placed a call. When he hung up, he told William, “That was our attorney here in the City. He is on his way with his civil rights associate. They are most anxious for camera time. I think we can count on this being cleared up rather quickly.”

While they waited, the vampire police stayed in the tent, surveying photographs and matching faces to the scents of clothing and personal articles brought by friends and families. There were several nest mates waiting anxiously on chairs. “Family?” Bartlett asked.

William nodded, “The King was anxious to have a good showing. He encouraged our community to come out and show support. James wanted Rhodes to show its best face.” William looked at the list of names on the rigid board. James Lincoln, the name the Illinois King had adopted, was first, a red dot beside it.

“Bartlett?” Russell’s voice sounded odd. Bartlett saw his mate standing near one of the tables a short distance away. “You are going to want to see this,” he said.

Bartlett walked over to stand next to Russell. The vampire at the table clicked on the arrow and the
video started to play. It was Eric Northman. He was speaking with someone and Bartlett said, “That’s Bill he’s talking with, isn’t it? I recognize that jacket.”

“Yes, I think so,” Russell murmured, “but look at this.” The Viking suddenly turned around and there, almost skipping toward him, was Sookie. She was wearing a black dress and she was smiling. Eric seemed almost a blur and the screen went blank.

“It was found on one of the cameras we recovered from the area,” the vampire running the feed told them. “You know her?”

“Yes, it’s the Viking’s bonded mate,” Russell told the vampire. “Do you know where she is?”

“No,” the vampire shook his head. “She’s been one of our mystery people. I couldn’t figure out why we were seeing her with vampires. Now it makes sense. Still, she doesn’t look vampire.”

“She’s not,” Bartlett replied. “She’s…well, mostly human. So, no one has seen her?”

“No, no one here,” the vampire turned around. “If she looked human she may have been taken by ambulance to the local hospital. It’s a few miles down the road and all the victims were taken there. It’s not like the last time. While this explosion was terrible, nothing collapsed, so no one was crushed. Aside from trying to identify the dust that’s left, everyone who was injured or killed has been transported out.”

Bartlett took Russell’s hand, “If she’s in the hospital, we have to find her. If the North Man is truly gone…”

“It would be terrible for her,” Russell nodded.

They turned to see their attorneys walking into the tent, “I have rarely seen a more hostile crowd,” their lead counsel announced. The Kings introduced William and gave the attorneys a brief overview of the state of things. “Leave it to us,” their counsel told them, “We’ve brought our own television crew. We’ll have this sorted in no time.”

“It is late,” Russell told them. “If they disturb the site, sweep, or continue hosing it down, we may never know for sure.”

“I know what to do,” the lawyer assured them, and, with a nod to William, headed back out the door.

“We have to get to the hospital,” Bartlett informed the Illinois vampire.

William bowed, “Please, take my vehicle.” He waved them toward a black sedan with clear access to the street. “Take my driver, too. He’ll get you where you need to go and bring you to the palace when you’re ready.” The Kings made their thanks but didn’t linger. Finding the telepath was too important.

“I can’t imagine what she must be feeling,” Bartlett whispered. “If I were to lose you…”

“It really is a matter of how long the bonding sickness will take,” Russell squeezed Bartlett’s hand. “They are tightly bonded, according to Maude. Pam told her when they were separated they became ill.”

“Do you think they are both gone? Do you think she’s Fae enough to have turned to dust?”

“It might explain things,” Russell nodded. “We won’t know until we see if she’s with the other humans.”
The hospital staff didn’t look too closely at the Kings. There were so many people wandering through the emergency room. Only those who were holding cameras were held back. “We’re looking for Sookie Stackhouse,” Russell told the nurse.

“Sookie Stackhouse Northman,” Bartlett corrected. “She would have come in with the bombing victims. Her name hasn’t shown up on any of the lists. Are there any adult women here who still aren’t identified? She might not be able to tell people who she is.” Russell squeezed Bart’s hand again, giving him strength.

“There are several women who have not been identified yet,” the nurse looked closely at them. “Are you saying she’s like you? I mean…”

“No, she’s not a vampire,” Russell shook his head. “She’s human. She is married to a vampire, however, and they were here for the premiere. Sookie is the wife of Eric Northman. You may have heard of him.”

“Who hasn’t?” the nurse shook her head, “You mean he was there, too? I hope he’s not…”

“We haven’t seen him,” Russell said quickly, “That’s why it’s so important we find his wife.”

The nurse looked around her and then walked out from behind the desk, “Follow me,” she told them.

Keeping an eye out, the nurse took them from room to room. They peeked in on an older woman with a tube snaked up her nose. Her eyes were closed and a machine was beeping next to her. Next there was a younger woman. She looked at them, but they didn’t recognize her. “There’s only one more,” the nurse told them. “She’s headed for emergency surgery. Not looking too good.” She opened the door and Twy looked up at them.

“About time you found me!” she snarled, but there were tears slipping from her eyes. She was bandaged and there were tubes running from under the sheets.

“Twy! I had no idea you were here!” Bartlett walked forward. “I knew you were arranging things, but I didn’t think you’d be close. Aren’t you usually standing with the television people?”

“It was stupid, really,” Twy rasped. “I wanted to wish Bill luck. Brock was carping at me and I thought I’d torture him by making him spend more time with Bill. I know you loved Compton, but he really got under Brock’s skin.” Twy shuddered and she closed her eyes for a moment. She swallowed, seemed to regain herself, and smiled thinly. “I usually get the pleasure of firing my assistants. Brock cheated me of that,” and Twy shrugged while wiping her face.

“Are you in much pain?” Bart asked, and stepped forward to take the publicist’s hand. He couldn’t help but notice how cold she was.

Russell stepped outside with the nurse. “Is she the one you were looking for?” the nurse asked.

“No, no she isn’t” Russell told her, “But she is a friend. You said she’s in trouble?”

“She’s thin,” the nurse gave Russell a meaningful look. When the King didn’t seem to understand, she said, “She’s too thin. She’s probably been starving herself most of her life. Her body just couldn’t handle the abuse she took. Her kidneys shut down. We’ll put her on dialysis, but without transplants, she’s not going to make it.”

“Are these transplants likely?” Russell asked.

“At her age and in her condition? Probably not,” the nurse shook her head, “I’m sorry.”
Russell nodded and walked back into the room. Bartlett and Twy were laughing. “Did you know Twy has pictures of Bill in a dress?” Bartlett asked.

Russell walked up next to the bed and taking Twy’s hand in his said, “I am being told you are not likely to survive this.” Russell didn’t need to look at his mate to know that Bartlett’s face had dropped.

“I heard that, too,” Twy nodded. “I always figured I was too mean for the angels to want me. It seems the devil’s fine with taking me instead.”

Russell looked at Bartlett. They didn’t need to speak. They knew what the other was thinking. Bartlett Crowe squeezed Twy’s hand, “Have you ever considered becoming one of us?” he asked.

Quick tears spilled and tracked down the woman’s cheeks, but her words didn’t sound sad, they sounded pleased. “A vampire? People have been calling me one for years! Will be nice to save them from their lying.”

“Well, we can’t have that!” Bartlett smiled, but then his expression turned serious as he said, “I would be honored if you would allow me to become your Maker.”

“Oh Bartie!” Twy teased, using the same tone Russell used, “No problem here, but if you think this means I won’t make you wear pastels, you’d be wrong!” They laughed, but then Bartlett squeezed Twy’s hand and she nodded.

The ambulance was arranged and Twy was transported to the Rhodes palace. When they carried her downstairs to the basement bedroom that would be their shared grave for the next three days, Twy said to Bartlett, “Thank goodness! I’ve been worrying about accumulated sun damage to my skin. Now you’ll fix that forever.”

“I’ll see you soon,” Russell stroked Bartlett’s hair and kissed him.

“I don’t suppose I have to do that, do I?” Twy sniffed.

“No,” Bartlett laughed, “No, I’ll take my price out of you in other kinds of trade.”

As she lay back, watching the slight glow as the vampire leaned over her, Twy sighed, “No doubt about it, I’ll be the best looking corpse on Wall Street!”

Shreveport

Sookie woke. She wasn’t sure where she was and she had a moment of panic. Her ear hurt and when she rubbed it, her finger came away with dried blood under her nail. Eric was under her. He was solid, but she couldn’t feel him through their bond, so she was pretty sure it was day. When she tried to lever herself up, Sookie couldn’t help groaning. Finally, she resigned herself to just rolling over, inching herself around until she could reach the cord with the call button. Within minutes of pushing it, the door opened. There was soft light, but nothing that came as far as the bed. The door shut and an overhead light was turned on. It was Doctor Ludwig.

“Can you hear me?” Amy asked her.

Sookie nodded. “But it sounds like you’re far away,” she told the doctor. The telepath’s voice sounded loud inside her head as if she had some massive head cold. “I need to get up,” she told Amy. “Can you help me?”

“Just a minute,” and Doctor Ludwig left the room, but returned a minute later with a nurse. Together
they lowered the rail on Sookie’s side of the bed.

Sookie felt like a beached whale as they helped her maneuver herself until she was sitting up, and then they helped her to lower her feet to the floor. It wasn’t that she was so large, it was just that every part of her hurt. She had muscles aching that had never ached before and Sookie had a moment when she wondered if she could just forego the bathroom and lay still for a while longer. Thinking about it, she realized her bladder wouldn’t give her a choice and there was no way she was using a bedpan lying in bed with Eric.

“I have to get to the bathroom,” Sookie whispered, and Amy Ludwig grasped her under her arm, pulling her the rest of the way into a standing position, and then helped her to walk slowly down the hallway.

“I’ve seen a lot of brave things, Fairy Girl,” Amy told her as they limped toward the bathroom, “but what you did last night will be at the top of my list for a long time.”

Sookie nodded, but she didn’t feel brave. Eric was hurt. Vampires were dead. “If you wouldn’t mind waiting,” she asked the Doctor when she reached the door, and she shuffled in and used the bars to lower herself onto the toilet. She rested her hand on her abdomen and for one minute she felt everything swirl in on her. Her throat was closing and she almost felt lost in her emotions, it was so overwhelming, but then she took a deep breath. ‘You can’t think about this right now,’ she told herself. ‘There will be plenty of time to think about all of this later. Right now you have to figure out what to do next, just right now, not tomorrow or even later.’ It steadied her.

It was painful, but Sookie managed to hoist herself up and get her clothes back in place. She waddled to the door without having to call for help and just that seemed like a victory. Doctor Ludwig was waiting for her when she opened the door. “How are you feeling?” the small woman asked.

“Like someone hit me with a sledge hammer,” Sookie told her. “How’s Eric?”

“He’s still solid, which is a pretty big deal. Do you feel up to talking?” and Amy gestured toward her office.

“Sure,” Sookie nodded, but inside she was thinking, ‘This can’t be good.’

“You look like you could use some coffee,” Amy said, and without waiting, the Doctor poured the telepath a mug and added milk and sugar. She handed it to Sookie. ‘It doesn’t matter if I drink caffeine anymore.’ The words sprang into Sookie’s mind and before she could think about what they meant, Sookie pushed down her emotions, grit her teeth, and lifted her chin.

“Your vampire’s in pretty bad shape,” Amy was watching her closely. When Sookie nodded and sipped the coffee, the Doctor leaned close and patted Sookie’s arm. “He’s lost one hand and the other is banged up. I ran him through the scanner and confirmed all the silver was extracted. If you hadn’t gotten him here when you did, Fairy Girl, I don’t think he would have made it.” Sookie fought to keep her mind quiet, her thoughts neutral. She nodded, but the effort to remain emotionless was making her hands shake.

“What else?” she heard herself ask, and she gave herself a mental pat on the back for sounding so steady.

“Well, you’ve seen his face. There was some muscle loss there. Muscles always take a little longer to regenerate, but his skin will heal fairly quickly. If all goes well, most of his surface covering will be back within days. His teeth are another matter. They’re bone and regrowing bone can take a long
time. He’ll be sipping his supper through a straw for some time to come. The muscle loss to his chest and legs was extensive. That’s where he took the major part of the blast. And his other parts…”

“How long?” Sookie asked, cutting off any further description of the litany of damage her husband had sustained.

“I don’t know,” Amy told her.

Sookie swallowed, “But he will get better,” and she stared at the Doctor.

“Yes,” Amy nodded. “Provided he continues to feed and his progeny are available, within months.” Sookie looked away. Months was a long time for a kingdom. Sookie could see Sophie-Anne LeClerq’s face. The Queen had been injured after the last Rhodes explosion. Felipe de Castro and his forces had tracked her down and killed her while she lay helpless. Sookie thought about Andre, Sophie-Ann’s child whom John Quinn killed at Rhodes. She thought about how much she’d hated Andre, but she thought that if he’d survived Rhodes, the Queen might still be alive. Andre would have guarded her. He would have known what to do the safeguard the kingdom, and Sookie knew what she had to do.

“At least he’ll recover,” and Sookie squared her shoulders.

“I do have a theory, Fairy Girl,” Doctor Ludwig cocked her head to one side. “I am convinced that if we were to take your vampire to Bon Temps and bury him for three days in that crazy fertile soil, it would accelerate his healing, maybe even shave weeks off the process.”

“Then that’s what we should do,” Sookie said with more confidence than she felt. “Is Karin returning at sunset?”

“Yes,” Amy nodded, “Along with Jane, Indira, and Pam. Karin texted me that Pam arrived last night. I’m pretty sure they are all at Indira’s home.”

“Good,” Sookie nodded, and she found she was having trouble keeping her thoughts together. She sipped her coffee and realized she was staring in the general direction of Eric’s room.

“We better talk about the baby before everyone arrives,” Amy’s words broke through Sookie’s fog. When the telepath raised her head, her eyes wary, Amy said, “You’re sure?”

Sookie took a deep breath. Her mind flashed to that moment when the pressure hit her and she was rushing backward. The air was hot and there was a roar in her ears and, in that moment, she felt the thing she hadn’t realized wasn’t her stop. She knew that was the moment she felt her child’s life end. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Would you mind if I checked?” Amy’s face was kind, kinder than Sookie ever remembered and it surprised her enough that she nodded. Doctor Ludwig pressed her hand to Sookie’s abdomen. She closed her eyes and seemed to focus hard. After a minute, she looked at the telepath and then the Doctor laid her hand against Sookie’s cheek. “Miscarriage in the first trimester is more common than you think. Happens with Weres all the time. We will need to complete this one and soon.”

“What does that mean?” Sookie couldn’t feel sad. She couldn’t feel anything. There were too many things to do and now this would need to be fitted in.

“You take a pill. That gets things going. Takes about twenty-four hours.” Sookie had a good idea that the process wouldn’t be as simple as the Doctor was telling her.

“How long will it take me to recover?” she asked.
“I generally do it as out-patient. You’ll go home same day and just rest for another. Fact is, we could implant again in two weeks.” Sookie grit her teeth but in spite of her best efforts, a single tear slipped down her cheek. “I am sorry, Fairy Girl. I know it’s a disappointment.”

Sookie wasn’t sure where the steel within her came from, but she thought of her Gran. Within the space of a year her Grandmother, Adele, had buried both her children. She found herself raising grandchildren with almost no income, yet she never made either of her grand-babies feel like a burden. “When Karin and Pam arrive tonight I’ll tell them I want to take Eric to Bon Temps. He needs to recover as quickly as possible and spending the time in the ground is worth a shot. While he’s there we’ll take care of this other thing. Can you make the arrangements?”

Amy nodded, “Yes, I’ll get things set up. We’ll want to do your procedure here at the clinic. If you don’t have someone to give you a ride, I’ll do it myself. Sookie…” and the small doctor paused, then without saying another word she leaned forward and kissed Sookie’s forehead. When she stood back, she looked as surprised as the telepath, and she pulled a frown back in place, “I already called to have some breakfast sent up. You need to eat!” she snapped, and somehow Amy Ludwig growling and snarling at her made Sookie feel better.

Sookie looked at the television mounted on the wall. Following her gaze, Amy grabbed the remote and turned on the set. The news was on and there was a reporter standing near the broken front of the building in Rhodes. Yellow tape was flapping in the wind. “The investigation is now moving forward with the assistance of a new vampire investigative squad. They actually sniff for remains,” and the reporter made a smirk that looked mocking. “As a result of their work they have confirmed that over thirty vampires, mostly local citizens, were killed in the blast. These deaths add to the mounting number of fatalities including two who were well-known names on the national level. Eric Northman, the popular New Orleans vampire, is reported among the dead as is renowned novelist and screenwriter, William Compton. The outpouring of grief from Mr. Compton’s fans…”

“Folks think Eric is dead?” Sookie exclaimed. “We can’t have that! If vampires think he’s dead, they’ll be high-tailing it down here faster than poor relatives! I need to find my phone!” and Sookie started to push herself out of the chair. “Have you seen my phone?” she demanded.

“No, no telephones came through with you. The two of you arrived with the clothes on your backs. The Viking had a wallet in his back pocket and I set that aside, but nothing else.”

“People will have been texting,” Sookie said half to herself, and then she turned to Amy, “Can I borrow your phone? I need to call Mustapha.”

When the call went through it picked up on the second ring, “What do you want, Troll Lady? I don’t have any blood to donate today.”

“Mustapha,” Sookie could hear her voice shaking, “It’s me, Sookie.”

“Shit!” he sounded as if the wind had been knocked out of him. “Shit, where are you? There’s rumors flying all over that you were killed with him!”

“Listen to me,” Sookie interrupted him, “Neither one of us is dead, well, not finally dead. Eric is here in Shreveport and we need to let folks know.”

“Well, why don’t you come down to Fangtasia…” and Sookie interrupted again.

“He’s hurt, Mustapha. He’ll heal, but it may take a little bit. The first thing I need is replacement phones, one for me and one for Eric. People will have been texting us, calling us. I need to return those so it gives the impression we’re okay. I know it’s asking a lot…”
Mustapha chuckled, and the deep warm sound of it made Sookie feel better. “You need me to be a
dayman for a day, huh? Well, I guess I can lend a hand. Let me get a piece of paper. I need your
phone numbers and social security numbers. I’ll get someone to set up replacements and download
your settings. Assuming you were both good about backing up into the cloud?”

Sookie gave him the information and then asked, “How long?”

“The package will be delivered to the hospital in about an hour,” and then the Were asked, “What
about you? Were you hurt, too?”

“Not like Eric,” Sookie told him.

“You know he’s going to have to be seen around if you want to keep the scavengers from sniffing
too close,” Mustapha told her.

“I have a plan,” Sookie replied, “and I may need your help with that, too. But there’s some other
things. We’ll be in Bon Temps, but I don’t want too many people around. I’m going to have the
New Orleans guards come up here to cover days. Just Charles and Owen. Bubba and Heidi will
handle nights. I want you to give the rest of the guards a vacation. I can’t risk anyone seeing him
right now.”

“How bad is it?” Sookie could hear the Packmaster’s concern.

“He’s missing some parts,” Sookie told him. “Nothing too vital, but he looks bad. Amy thinks he
could be pretty well back to normal in a few weeks.”

“Weeks is a long time with injured vampires,” Mustapha reminded her again.

“I know, but I have a way to make it look like Eric’s up and around. It will take some play-acting,
but I’m sure we can carry it off.”

Sookie hoped she sounded more certain than she felt, and she figured she did because the
Packmaster chuckled in his mirthless, too cool way and said, “I can’t wait to see what you have
cooked up.”

‘Yeah, me too.’ Sookie thought, when she disconnected the call. Breakfast came and Sookie
managed another shower with help. The phones arrived and she spent the next hour returning texts.
She texted those who had called as well. She returned two texts from Eric’s phone when she realized
it wasn’t sundown yet. She hoped no one would notice.

When Sookie could feel it was getting closer to sundown, she headed back to the room.

On her way down the hall, a woman stopped her. “Here, Amy asked me to give you this.” It was
one of the nurses from last night and she had Eric’s wallet in her hand.

Sookie took it with her. She used a button to lower the bed, and then pulling up a chair, she sat as
close as she could. She had been so relieved when Dr. Ludwig confirmed that the hand she’d seen
dissolve the night before wasn’t Eric’s. He was on his back, his good hand resting against the rail
and Sookie reached out to stroke his long, strong fingers. She thought of that hand and how it felt on
her. Although it still jarred, she glanced at his face and noticed that it looked less raw than it had
yesterday. She looked at the wallet in her lap and flipped it open. It seemed odd that in all this time
she’d never looked through his wallet before and she found herself smiling at the line-up of credit
cards. His driver’s license was behind the see-through plastic. “Figures,” she said, “You would take
an amazing picture!” She pulled it out and ran her thumb over his rakish smile, then lifted it to her
face and kissed it. She put it back in its place and opened the bill holder. There was about a hundred
dollars in small bills, probably money he figured for tips. She ran her finger into the pocket under the cards and she pulled out two pictures. The one on top was a photo from their pledging. They were smiling at each other. It was the shot Sookie had wanted for their official portrait, but Eric had told her it was too informal.

The picture under it was the ultrasound. It was creased as if it had been pulled out and looked at many times. The place that was the baby’s face was smudged, and Sookie was sure it was Eric’s thumb that had damaged it. Seeing this made her remember his face when they found out they were expecting a girl, how happy he’d been, and the enormity of what had happened washed over her in a great wave. Not knowing what else to do, she wrapped her hand around the rail closest to his hand, laid her head against the bed, and gave in to the hole that opened in her chest, crying out her pain in great gulping sobs. She cried for Eric and she cried for their child who would never know them. She cried for all the others who died in Rhodes and she cried for the days that lay ahead. Sookie cried until her throat was sore and her face ached, and then pulling herself up, she walked to the table and grabbed the tissue box.

Watching herself in the mirror, she wiped herself down, and blew herself out. When she didn’t feel so damp anymore she looked at Eric reflected in the mirror behind her. “I’m okay now,” she told him. “I’ll be strong for you just like you’d be strong for me.” It was in that moment she felt it, the quickening that she knew was his rising approaching him. She took a deep breath, and then sending all the calm and love she had in her through their bond, she sat back down by the bed and held his hand.
Chapter 23 - Beating Upwind

Chapter Notes

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Nautical Note: Sometimes you find yourself trying to sail into the wind. To make forward progress, you must make a repeated series of tacks where you sail first one way, and then another, tricking the wind to use its force to move you forward by playing vectors.

Rhodes
Thalia walked toward the cordon of vampires who were standing in a straggling line, fending off anyone who seemed too curious. Thalia knew the building was the Rhodes palace, even without a sign. She had received the email from Russell two days ago and it had taken more time than she thought to get here.

Russell’s email had followed a panicky text message Thalia received from Karin. That first message had demanded if Thalia knew where Eric was. Thalia had just been going to ground south of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and the message took her by surprise. She was picking up the phone to call Karin when the email came through from the Mississippi King, informing her of the explosion and asking her to come to Rhodes as quickly as possible.

For weeks she had been following winding paths and collecting disjointed stories, following the rogues’ trail upstream, each clue leading her slowly and inexorably north east. Initially, there had been more false starts and dead ends than progress, but lately she had the sure feeling she was gaining on it. Now she would have to step away from the trail and hope that while she was gone it didn’t go cold.

Calling a Were she knew near the capital, she was able to browbeat him into giving her a ride the next night as far at Pittsburgh. When he dropped her off, she was faced with the unattractive prospect of running through the mountains at night. Rather than take the risk, she dug deep into the ground and spent the remaining hours before sunrise assessing her options. Bus travel would be most convenient, but it would mean consorting with humans. Anubis had a terminal in this city and that was a possibility, but it was unlikely the airlines would fly into Rhodes under the circumstances. Finally she settled on renting a car. She should be able to reach her destination in one night’s time if she started early and didn’t stop.

While she stood in the rental office she found herself stepping away when the news bulletin flashed on the television. “Turn up the volume!” she ordered the clerk. When the woman gave Thalia a surly look, the small vampire dropped fang, stepped forward and said, “The volume,” in a tone of voice that promised many terrible things. The woman squeaked and fumbled with the remote. Had Thalia’s reflexes not been perfect, the remote would have hit the floor. The woman looked like she was trying to bolt so Thalia leaned closer and said, “I am much faster than you. If you run, I’ll catch you and that will really piss me off. Do your job, finish the paperwork and I’ll be on my way.”

The bulletin reporting Eric Northman as being finally dead had been a jolt. Thalia knew humans well
enough to know they seldom had information about vampires right, and if the Viking was gone, Russell would have told her. Instead, the Mississippi King was asking her to come to Rhodes. It didn’t make sense, but these things rarely did. Thalia resisted the pull to head to Louisiana and instead had made her way west.

“Who are you?” a tall vampire in the palace cordon challenged her. A dozen smart ass answers came to mind. ‘I’m tired,’ Thalia realized. She was saved by one of those vampires she had mentored through their police training. He stepped forward from among the guards.

“Thalia! I knew you would come!” It was pleasant to watch the reaction of those around her when her name was mentioned. The one who initially challenged her bowed his head and the heads of other vampires and guards swiveled to face her, all going silent in that ultimate display of vampire respect. “Come with me, the Kings are waiting!” her acquaintance continued.

Thalia followed the vampire and another guard through the doors and into the palace. Like so many of these city dwellings vampires used, it was a former hotel. There was a lobby and some public rooms that were transformed into meeting areas. The upstairs was a series of resting chambers with the better ones being located on the upper floors. The elevator stopped on the floor just below the penthouse and Thalia found herself escorted down a short hallway and then bowed through a set of double doors.

The floor had been opened. Structural walls remained in place giving the space an odd angularity. There were only a few windows and those faced the walls of other buildings. Thalia was sure the glass was both bullet proof and light tight. This was a nesting area. She had heard James was more traditional and it appeared the rumors were true. His vampires assigned to this floor would rest together on the large, cushioned area that stretched along the far wall. The rest of the floor was taken up with seating areas, televisions and a small counter with a refrigerator and a microwave. ‘James must have been modernizing,’ she thought with a sardonic smile. Thalia doubted the refrigerator held True Blood or even Royalty. Most likely it was filled with blood bags purchased from the local hospital or taken from donors. It was amazing what money could do.

Russell Edgington was sitting with another vampire and they both rose and began walking toward her. “Thalia! I told William you would be here soon, and here you are! Welcome!” and then in a lower voice Russell told her, “I am so grateful you came. We need you!”

Once the formalities were over, Thalia sat down with her warmed blood in hand. It was pleasant that they were able to offer her her favorite flavor, AB negative. It wasn’t a common blood type and after the travel and stress of her weeks it was more welcome than she wished to acknowledge. “Is it true?” she asked, “About Northman?”

Russell shook his head, “No, I don’t believe so. I received a text from Sookie. I texted both she and the Viking when the news broke, and I heard from her on my next rising. She told me they are both in Shreveport.”

“Then they were here?” Thalia frowned. Why would the news be reporting the North Man dead if the Viking and his Queen were healthy enough to take a plane home?

Russell must have guessed at the direction her thoughts were taking because he gave her a slight smile, “It is a mystery. We have several videos showing our Clan Chief here in Rhodes. He was in front of the building and spoke with many vampires and humans. We also have a short clip that appears to have been taken just before the blast showing Northman talking with Bill,” and Russell bit his lip and breathed sharply through his nose. He flashed a tight smile, nodded and continued, “Talking with Bill Compton, anyway, our Eric turned around and you can see Sookie walking toward him. They both must have been right next to the blast.”
“So, how did they…” and Thalia’s eyes narrowed. This reeked of Fae magic. She glanced at the vampire sitting beside Russell, the one introduced as the new standing King of Illinois.

“You’re thinking Fairy magic,” Russell told her, “I’m thinking it too. I don’t know how she did it, but I think she managed to protect them both and transport them to Shreveport.”

The vampire, William, was looking as if he’d stepped into some bizarre conversation and she and Russell were speaking in tongues. Thalia gave him her ‘disapproving’ stare and said, “What? You’re a dead man walking and you think you’re the only magic in this world? The Fae existed long before you did and your Clan Chief is married into the most magical of the Fae families. If you’re the new King of Illinois you better bone up on your lore.”

Russell chuckled, “Thalia, be kind to William. He didn’t expect to find himself in this position and it’s been a trying few days.”

Thalia sipped her blood and then looked around, “Where’s your better half?” she asked.

Russell made an odd face as if settling something in his own head, “Bartlett’s downstairs, resting with his new child.”

Thalia’s hand stopped mid-motion. She focused on the King’s face and willed her mind to still. After a moment she said, “I expect congratulations are in order. I was not aware your mate was interested in creating progeny.”

“It was unexpected,” Russell replied. “The circumstances presented themselves and we both realized it was right. She will be a remarkable addition to our family. They are expected to make their first rising tomorrow.”

“She?” and Thalia’s eyebrows rose. “I would have assumed…”

“I believe you know her.” Thalia cocked her head. There was something about how Russell said it and the fierce vampire realized the Mississippi King was enjoying himself. Rather than give him the satisfaction of watching her guess, Thalia remained perfectly still. It was a power play and they both knew it. Both allowed the minutes to stretch between them and finally Russell sighed, “Twy, Pam’s friend, the woman who has been helping us with our work in Indiana.”

“Twy?” Thalia screeched, and then drew herself back, set down her glass and settled her hands in her lap. It seemed so unlikely. That unattractive, nasty-tempered woman as a vampire felt… and then Thalia considered it. The woman was a fighter. She moved to action rather than talking things to death. She carried herself with purpose and she had several talents. She was too thin and stork-like, but physical attributes were not a requirement. “Congratulations,” Thalia concluded and inclined her head in the appropriate gesture.

“You are a rare vampire,” Russell told her and laughed out loud.

“I take it Compton is finally dead,” Thalia said without any more preamble.

“Yes,” Russell’s face dropped. “He was standing right next to the Vampire First people. The police received an anonymous call. It seems that group has claimed responsibility.”

Thalia’s eyes narrowed, “Why would vampires choose to end themselves?”

William spoke up, “Vampire First was angry at the movie, at Compton’s work. They felt it was an insult to vampires, to suggest they should be in any kind of equal relationship with a human.”
“Angry enough to commit suicide?” Thalia scoffed.

“It does make a statement,” Russell shrugged. “They take the apologists with them. It shows the world that vampires are dangerous. I will tell you that the idea that vampires were responsible for this has been a setback to all the hard work Bartlett and I have done. There are humans protesting that for every good vampire there are a dozen blood-thirsty vampires waiting their chance to drain their children.”

“Children are tasty,” Thalia shrugged.

“Not helping,” Russell narrowed his eyes.

“Are there any other suspects?” Thalia asked, staring at William in a way that had the new King squirming.

“Based on what we’re seeing in the videos and clips that have been sent to the police, no, I can’t say there are. The direction of the blast, the burn marks. Everything points to the bomb being in the group where poor William was standing.” Thalia looked as if she was about to say something when Russell continued, “You can’t believe the outpouring of grief for Bill! The area is carpeted with flowers. William and I went there last night. I knew Bill’s books were popular but I had no idea he reached so many young humans! There were balloons and so many notes. I couldn’t read them all, but the messages were heartfelt. When Bartlett rises, I am going to suggest we host a memorial service here, honoring Bill and his contribution to human/vampire relations. When you take a step back and think about it, he has done so much. There was his computer directory that helped us to find other vampires and connect. There was the way he lived openly vampire in Bon Temps. You know the people there would call him ‘Vampire Bill’ and wave at him on the street? They really accepted him as one of their own! I heard from his human descendants. They called me. Bill left them both my number and Bartlett’s in case something happened to him. They were so distraught! I had no idea he stayed in such close touch with them. Their children called him Papaw. His one descendant, Portia, was particularly affecting in her devotion to him.” Russell glanced away and Thalia was appalled to see the King wipe away a tear.

Thalia knew Bill Compton too, but the vampire she knew didn’t resemble the paragon the Mississippi King was describing. The vampire she knew was a slimy weasel who bad-mouthed the Viking to try and slip into his Queen’s bed. The vampire she knew was a selfish human-abuser. The thought of him being cast in the role of honored martyr caused the taste of the blood in her mouth to sour. “Any chance that Bill was involved in this thing?” she asked, and she could see her mistake the minute the words left her mouth.

“How could you think that?” Russell challenged her. Thalia knew the King feared her, but his emotional reaction to her question was enough that he forgot that fear. He leaned forward and his fangs clicked down. “Bill was our friend! He lived in our house! He was a gentleman and a truly educated man!” Russell sat back, visibly shaken, “I can’t hear that kind of talk about him! I can’t!”

Thalia nodded, “I assume you would like my help investigating,” she said, making sure her voice was steady and level.

“Yes,” the King shifted in his chair, “Yes, we would. I’m sorry about my outburst, but the suggestion that this dear friend could be in any way responsible for this? It just isn’t possible!”

“I understand,” Thalia nodded, but she knew that there was more to this than met the eye, and every instinct was telling her that Bill Compton was the key. Russell did call the local police about getting Thalia access to Bill Compton’s hotel room. Since the arrival of the vampire Kings’ attorneys, the relationship between the vampire squad and the human police had gone from chilly to glacial,
now the FBI was involved too. The agents arrived during the day announcing they were taking jurisdiction and they were bringing in their own vampire consultants. This change made the human police more accommodating. Russell laughed about the enemy of my enemy being my friend. What Thalia knew was she felt better knowing that humans had just as many rivalries and petty feuds as vampires. It made humans more predictable.

When the local police sounded as if they would delay, Russell called the FBI agent in charge. “We already have control of the scene,” the King was told. “Our consultants will be giving the place a going over…”

“Tell them to ask the consultants whether they will grant Thalia a favor,” Thalia suggested.

Russell relayed the information and after another protest, the FBI agent told the King to hold. Within a minute there was a new voice on the phone, “We would be honored by Thalia’s presence,” Russell was told. “We will await her arrival so that we may examine the room together,” and arrangements were made to meet at the hotel the following night.

Thalia didn’t need to have Russell relay the message. She could hear the person on the other end of the line perfectly well. She turned to the new King of Illinois, “Can you arrange a lift?” and that was that.

When Thalia arrived at the hotel the FBI was already waiting. A human stepped forward. Thalia could tell he was about to deliver some sort of verbal dominance display. It was in the way he walked and the set of his jaw, but a vampire who was standing behind him rushed forward, placing himself between the human and the fierce vampire. He bowed, almost as low as would be appropriate for a King, “Thalia! It has long been a wish that I would have an opportunity to meet you. You are a legend among us and I am honored!”

Thalia glanced at the stormy expression of the FBI human agent. His mouth was twisted and Thalia was certain there would be words between these two later. Keeping her eye on the human, Thalia inclined her head saying, “I appreciate your help in arranging this. I consider this a favor,” and she flicked her eyes back to the vampire, “but I would know the name of the vampire to whom I am indebted.”

“John,” he answered her and bowed lower.

“And I’m Special Agent Robert Chance,” the agent stepped around the vampire and inserted himself so his back was to the vampire. “I want it on the record that I didn’t want you here. This is a high profile case and the last thing we need is to have some civilian screw up evidence!”

“Your objection is noted,” Thalia allowed her lips to curl just the slightest amount. It was hard to stand near these posturing humans and not consider how fragile they were with their puffing voices and strutting ways.

“We are ready to examine the room,” John’s eyes shifted nervously between the agent and Thalia. He didn’t move until she gave a brief nod and then he led the way into the hotel. It was satisfactory.

The room was a disappointment. Housekeeping had been through and everything was tidied and the room swept and dusted. “Mr. Compton was out shortly after sunset,” the hotel manager told them. “We like to get staff in at once. Vampires are very particular about cleanliness. It’s the odors…” and he had the courtesy to look slightly embarrassed.

“Would it be possible to speak with the staff?” Agent Chance was asking. Thalia walked slowly around the room. There was nothing to see, but faint odors still lingered.
Turning to John, she asked, “How are your scenting skills?”

“It is not a gift,” he replied. Thalia wished she had Heidi here. Heidi had one of the most acute noses she had met. The woman could track ants over rock. Thalia walked slowly around the room, taking the air in. She stopped near the dresser and opened the drawers. Bill’s clothes were in the top two, folded and organized in Compton’s usual fussy way, the socks folded and the underwear stacked with the edges precisely matched.

“Looks like the clothing matches the length of his stay,” John mentioned. Thalia glanced over to see the special agent had opened the doors of the closet. There was a suit and a pair of khaki pants hanging in a perfect line. On the floor was a pair of casual shoes lined up under the pants.

Thalia nodded, “It looks as if he wished it to appear he did not expect that night to be his last.”

“Why would you think that?” Agent Chance asked.

“No reason,” Thalia answered. It was her nature to be wary and the human had done nothing to gain her trust. As for John, he was in thrall to a human, a position that didn’t make Thalia think any better of him.

“This is the maid who cleaned the room,” the hotel manager announced.

The woman was worried and stammered through her answers. She confirmed she cleaned the room shortly after Bill Compton left for the evening. She told them it didn’t take her long because the room was almost pristine when she arrived. “What about the boxes?” Agent Chance asked.

“Boxes?” Thalia asked John.

“The front desk told us there were several boxes waiting for Mr. Compton when he arrived. They were marked as media.” Thalia’s lip curled. They had told her they would wait for her, but clearly they had not. Looking around, Thalia recognized the subtle signs that the room had already been examined at least once.

“There were no boxes in the room,” the housekeeper shook her head. He must have taken them with him. ‘Or taken care of them himself,’ Thalia thought.

“It appears Mr. Compton was a meticulous person,” Agent Chance glanced at the open drawer showing its carefully folded contents.

“Not even a hair in the sink,” the maid nodded. “Course, lots of vampires are like that.”

Agent Chance looked at John who nodded, “Old habits with older vampires. It’s how they were conditioned to avoid detection.”

Thalia glanced at the drawer. What John said was true, but most vampires were not obsessive compulsive in the same way Compton had been. “There were no notes? No lists?” she asked the housekeeper.

The woman shrugged, “No, none. I didn’t even have to change the wastebasket liner.”

Agent Chance made a noise, “Vampires!” he mumbled under his breath. John glanced at Thalia and she could see his discomfort.

“You prefer not to work with vampires?” she challenged the human.
“It wasn’t my choice, no,” the Agent shrugged. “I don’t need superpowers to solve crimes. I did fine on my own before this.” Thalia glanced at John. It could not be pleasant being tied to such a human.

“You seem to be a person interested in bringing justice,” she said carefully, “perhaps with the advantage of a vampire, you can help even more people than you did before.” Thalia could see a brief moment when the Agent considered the possibility, but his face shut down shortly afterward. This one would need a long time before he would welcome change. Thalia nodded to John, “Thank you again. I am done here.”

John was bowing, but Agent Chance took an aggressive step forward, “And what did you learn?” he challenged.

Thalia glanced around the room, “The same thing you did,” she said steadily, then stared at him until he stepped back. Thalia knew the room could have been staged by the FBI, but she thought it more likely that Bill had staged this room to be sterile. It was in the scent that lingered on his clothing. Bill did not want to reveal himself here, which meant he was hiding something. Boxes labeled media, but no record of his distributing anything? He would have interacted with his publicist on his arrival. It was time to return to the palace and await Twy’s rising.

Thalia considered whether she should share the information about the New York woman, that Twy was no longer among the living, but not among the dead either, and then decided against it. It was a matter of pride for the Agent to bring justice? Why ruin his mission by allowing him to connect pieces too quickly? He was interested in the hunt? Let him hunt!

On the way back to the palace Thalia made arrangements for a flight to Jackson tomorrow night. Compton would have spent his last days there. If he was preparing for something, it was more likely he would relax his discipline in the place he considered home. Thalia had never been close to Compton, although as the former Louisiana Queen’s procurer she crossed paths with him fairly often. He was precise then too, but not like this. Why was he so meticulous here? What was he hiding?

It was on her next rising that Thalia was shown back to the next to upper floor. Bartlett and Russell were sitting together. The Indiana King was freshly showered and recently fed. They were holding hands and Thalia found herself wondering again at the attraction of connecting yourself to another creature. It seemed so inconvenient to tie your own sense of well-being to the well-being of another. Russell looked up, “What did you learn?”

“Nothing beyond what we already know,” Thalia replied.

Russell filled Bartlett in on Thalia’s purpose this evening. Bartlett asked how the working relationship with the FBI appeared and Thalia shrugged, “These Agents are humans like all humans. They seem incapable of accepting help when they are intimidated.”

Bartlett nodded, “It will be a challenge. As they come to know us and our abilities, it will occur to them how much better we are at almost everything and that will create resentment.”

Russell shrugged, “We must remain courteous and pleasant about it. Eventually our superiority will naturally assert itself. You know these things are inevitable.”

“Still, humans do have their uses,” Bartlett shrugged. Thalia was certain he would mention blood, but he surprised her when instead he said, “They have a unique way of looking at things. They can be quite clever, I’d even say more innovative than vampires. It’s probably the immediacy of their lives.”
“I’d appreciate being able to speak with your child,” Thalia averted her eyes, making it the request it was.

Bartlett actually grinned, “She is with the attorneys. Come! I’ll take you to her!” The entire way from the hall to the elevator and then down another hall was filled with Bartlett singing Twy’s praises. She transitioned beautifully, she took to feeding right away, she demonstrated remarkable control; it would seem Bartlett had found the perfect child and he was delighted to bore Thalia with every detail. When they walked into the office Thalia had to admit, Twy did show well. She looked less brittle somehow, but since the publicist had always been cadaverously pale, it was hard to tell.

“Welcome to the night,” Thalia gave the customary first greeting.

“I just love that!” Twy purred. “It feels so… right!” She gave Thalia an appraising look, “Oh, I do see it now. You really are scary, aren’t you? When you’re human you don’t really see the nuance but with the combination of scent? You look like death walking!”

Thalia couldn’t help the quick laugh, “Your Maker was right. You were meant to be vampire.” Thalia walked around the desk. She nodded at the lawyer, letting him know she wanted his seat. When he scrambled to collect his things and leave, Thalia sat so she could face Twy. “I want to talk about Bill Compton.”

“I still can’t believe it!” Twy shook her head. “Stupid waste! I didn’t think much of Bill but he did what he was told and he made a lot of money, which meant I made a lot of money. I told him this was my last job for him. I was planning on working exclusively for the Kings. Guess that worked out!” and she sniffed dramatically and smirked at Bartlett who smiled back.

“When he arrived, did you see him the night of the event?” Thalia asked.

“I did, but not for long,” Twy told her. “I went up to his hotel room. He was breaking down cardboard. You know how he was! I gave him the run down and he told me he’d be where he was supposed to be.”

“Could you tell what had been in the boxes?” Thalia asked.

Twy frowned, “No. Nothing lying around at all, but that was typical of Bill. Always ‘Mr. Momma’s Boy,’ everything in its place. Brock loathed him,” and then Twy glanced away before saying, “I’m going to miss that little drag queen. He was more high maintenance than me, although,” and Twy glanced at Bartlett again, “I am assured I can hire a day man now as soon as I’d like. I have to say, this whole dead thing is better than I ever expected,” and Twy looked at her hands in satisfaction. It was a well-known fact that human hands were one of the first parts to age. Thalia hadn’t thought of the publicist as being obsessed about her appearance, but now, seeing her happiness with her current state, Thalia realized she had been mistaken.

Thalia thought about what she had heard and then she turned to Bartlett, “I have a favor to ask. May I speak with your child without you in the room? Your tie is new and I do not wish your feelings to color what your child recalls.”

“We are one!” Bartlett protested. “You know this! I don’t understand…”

“It is a great deal to ask,” Thalia bowed her head, knowing full well that her doing so would have an impact on Bartlett and it did. He stopped, his mouth open, and after a minute said, “Only for a minute,” and left. Thalia turned back to Twy, “Do you have any idea why Brock loathed him, as you say.”
“He thought there was something off about Bill,” Twy shrugged. “He was pretty sure Bill had a mean side. He told me one time that Bill reminded him of one of those crazy serial killers that all the neighbors like and then they find out he had human remains in his freezer.”

“Sounds like Bill,” Thalia shrugged. “Most around here don’t feel that way. What about you?”

Twy sniffed, “I make it a habit never to form personal opinions about clients,” she told Thalia, “but I wouldn’t have trusted him. He never did or said anything that I could tell. It’s just a feeling, but I make my living from reading people. I trust my instincts.”

‘So do I,’ Thalia thought. She stood up and opened the door to find Bartlett waiting in the hall.

“Thank you again, Majesty,” she said courteously. “I will be leaving tomorrow and would like to stay in Jackson for a night, if that meets with your approval.” She didn’t tell the King she intended to search Bill’s rooms. It was clear to her that the Kings would protest, having decided Bill Compton was now a martyr to the cause.

“Of course!” Bartlett assured her. “You are always welcome in any of our homes!” He looked past her to Twy, “Isn’t she marvelous?” and then to Twy, “If you are up for it, Russell and I are hoping you will help us to plan a memorial service. We both think it would be a kindness to give Bill’s fans and admirers an opportunity to say goodbye.”

Twy was now standing beside her and Thalia could feel the publicist’s joy. This was a side-effect of the tie. When her Maker was pleased, Twy would be pleased. It would take her a while to differentiate her feelings, but for now she would be a mirror reflection of Bartlett Crowe whenever they were together. “I would love to!” Twy said with more enthusiasm and less bite than Thalia had ever heard the New Yorker use before. The small vampire couldn’t stop her lip from curling when she saw the publicist’s momentary surprise with her own reactions. Thalia nodded and walked away from them. There was much to do, and Thalia had been promised a progress report from Shreveport. Following Karin’s quick text message she had received a second from Pam informing her that it was necessary to bury the Viking and that Karin had gone into the ground with him. It spoke to a serious injury. Now three nights had passed and tonight the Viking would emerge.

Thalia thought back to a conversation she had with Niall, Prince of the Sky Fae over a year ago in Nebraska. The Viking had been joined with his Queen in the Fae traditions and they were preparing to travel back to Louisiana. Niall had pulled Thalia aside and taken her to a place within the great forest that stretched to the north of their lands. It was an odd forest, hand planted by people over the years. It was late and the sky stretched above them in a great blanket of stars and galaxies. There was a basin set in rock and Niall had gestured her forward, “I wish to show you something,” he told her. In the still waters she had seen Eric and Sookie Northman sitting on matching thrones. There were many people surrounding them, people of all species, bowing and showing respect. A tall youth stood behind the Viking. His face was the image of the couple in front of him and a young woman who could have been his twin was saying something that made them both laugh. “This is what awaits them,” Niall told her. “But it is a time of crossroads. There are other possibilities,” and he waved his hand. The image changed and Thalia instead saw the Viking on his knees. Sookie was being restrained. The telepath had her arms wrapped around a young girl and they were both weeping. From the back it looked like Felipe de Castro raising the stake.

“The future is like a great river,” the Prince told her. “Sometimes it shows its secrets and sometimes it hides its hazards. I have viewed the future here many times, trying to understand what triggers will make the difference between one outcome and another. And you, Thalia, you are one of those triggers.”

The Prince told her that if she wished to save Eric Northman from the fate she had seen she needed
to stay apart from him. “How long?” she asked.

“You will know,” he had told her in that arch, superior way that made her want to rip his head off. When she saw the report of the explosion and received word that Eric Northman was injured and in Shreveport, she knew. It was time to go home.

Shreveport

He could feel her beside him. The pain on his waking was overwhelming, so much so that he shivered and a sound came from him. He tried to say words, but he realized there was something wrong. He started to lift his hand to make sense of it, but his Sookie squeezed his hand harder. “You can’t speak just yet,” she said in her ‘talking to a child’ voice. “Do you remember the explosion? If you do, just squeeze my hand.”

He did remember. He remembered everything, the conversation with the King, the sly looks of the companions around Compton, Bill Compton telling him he’d see him in hell. He remembered the sound of Sookie’s voice and the panic he felt that he wouldn’t reach her in time, that what was coming would steal her from him. He squeezed his wife’s hand and he couldn’t miss the relief in her voice, “Oh thank goodness! If you didn’t remember, if you couldn’t hear me! Oh Eric,” and she was placing her lips on him. He could feel it in places. He was sure she was crying. Where she touched him felt wet but he couldn’t smell her tears. It was disorienting. He focused on his eyes. He could see blurry images and then he was able to see a little better. It was only from one side so he imagined his other eye was damaged or gone. He wanted to ask her what happened, but he couldn’t. He made a noise but it sounded like an animal.

Sookie sighed, “You probably have a lot of questions, Eric, and there is a lot to say before Karin and the others get here. You are in Shreveport.” She squeezed his hand again. “Don’t worry. You didn’t lose a lot of days. When the explosion happened, I don’t know how I did it but I got us both to Doctor Ludwig’s. I teleported us. You know Tamsin’s been trying to get me to do it, but somehow it kicked in and here we are!” Her voice was cheery but he could sense her tension. She was hiding things but he would be patient. If she didn’t tell him everything he would dip into her head and take the rest.

“You are probably wondering why you can’t speak. It’s because your beautiful face took a hell of a beating. Your jaw and your teeth are going to have to grow back. You already look a lot better than you did!” and he could hear her swallow. “It looks like you can see me,” and she brought her face a little closer on his ‘good’ side and she smiled. Her hair was pulled back and pinned on top of her head. She had a black eye and a bruise on the side of her face and he tried to frown. “Oh!” she exclaimed, “Guess your eyesight is doing just fine! Don’t you worry one little bit about my bumps and bruises. Doctor Ludwig has already checked me out and I’m right as rain. You saved me, Eric! If you hadn’t put yourself in front of me, I wouldn’t be here. But you did! And you’re going to be all right too.” She leaned over him and kissed his forehead again. He could see the tears, but still there was no smell. He couldn’t smell the sweet smell of her or the rich smell of their child. She sat back up and nodded a little, swiping at her cheek.

“When Pam and Karin and the rest get here, we’re going to take you to Bon Temps. Amy thinks if you go to ground there for three nights it will help your regeneration. You lost a lot of muscle. Karin’s blood helped with the missing skin but the bomb? Eric, it was filled with silver. It took us hours to get all of it out of you. You’re healing, but you know how this goes. Silver poisoning is bad and it’s making things go a little slower.”

Eric felt a creeping sense of panic. If he was incapacitated it wouldn’t take long for trouble to come looking. Their group of allies was thinner than it had been. The Kings were busy in the north. Maude
could come in support, but she would have her own worries. Eric was sure James would be dead. He
was so close to the blast and that meant an unstable neighbor to Maude’s south. Nabila would have
been an ally, but she was now a beggar Queen, living off his charity and attracting her own set of
enemies. He found himself thinking of Thierry’s words, that Misha would not tolerate interference
with Pam, that he would find ways to make Eric pay through those he loved. There was so much he
needed to say to Sookie, so many things she needed to understand and he had no way of telling her.

“I can feel you getting yourself all worked up,” his wife told him, her voice taking on a more
business-like tone. “I know you think I don’t know how dangerous this is for us, but you’d be
wrong, Eric. I totally understand what’s going on. This is how it started with Sophie-Ann. She was
hurt and all the scavengers came looking. I’ve seen our balance sheets. Hell! I helped make the
money and I know what an attractive target we are. It’s bad, too. The news channels have been
reporting you dead. So let me tell you what I’ve done so far.” Sookie talked about sending the texts.
She told Eric about Karin being there, and Pam arriving. “You see, it’s not like Sophie-Ann. We
have our Andres right here beside us!” She told him about Mustapha and then she listed every person
who knew that Eric was injured. “It is not a long list,” she assured him. “You know how I can make
colks look different. In three nights when you rise, I’ll be heading to Fangtasia. I am taking
Mustapha. He’s the easiest because he knows how you talk and how you move. Everyone will see
you. Folks know you were in Rhodes so they won’t be surprised we’re keeping folks away. We’ll
explain it’s because we’re in mourning.” Sookie thought briefly about the part of the cover story she
wasn’t telling him. They would let it be known they had lost the child. It would make the story of the
grieving, withdrawn couple more believable.

Eric felt it, the mental slight of hand, the shift in emotion and he reached for her mind and she
released his hand and slapped it, “You stop right there, Buster!” she scolded him. “You think I didn’t
know what you were doing before? I felt you every time you decided to take a little quickie in my
head. You must have thought you were pretty slick, but you said it yourself. You married a clever
woman!” Sookie took his hand in hers again and stroked his forehead, “I am hiding things, but not
about this. Rhodes was bad, Eric, and there’s more to say, but right now I want you to focus on
going better fast. Worrying yourself about things we can’t change right now isn’t going to help
either one of us. I promise you, when you rise I will open my mind to you and you can take a walk
through it any time. Fact is, I like having you there. I wish I could do the same. It… I don’t know…it
gives me comfort. But I can’t have you there just now. Promise me?”

Eric didn’t like it. He instinctively tried to grind his teeth and felt more frustration that he couldn’t.
Instead, he squeezed her hand and he could feel her relief, “Thank you!” She seemed to shift and he
could feel the presence of his children. “He’s awake,” Sookie told the others and he felt first Karin
and then Pam lay their hands upon him.

Sookie rode with him in the van they were using to avoid attention. Amy had recited his list of
injuries like they were a grocery list. None were things he hadn’t experienced before. Even the loss
of his scrotum was not new. “Thought we’d lose the whole package,” Amy had been far too gleeful,
“But I held that club of yours in place and it reattached!” He hoped the doctor was right and his soft
tissue would heal at an accelerated rate. He could already feel the broken bones of his legs knitting.
The ache was deep and when the bone fibers began to fuse the itching would start.

“Karin will be going into the ground with you,” Sookie told him. “You are doing well with her
blood and she’s the fiercest fighter if anything should happen.” Initially he felt uncomfortable with
the way Sookie had so obviously taken charge, but as she continued talking through each of their
challenges, he felt his pride growing. She spoke with confidence and he felt oddly comforted. She
had become what he knew her to be, a strong woman. “Charles and Owen are arriving tonight. I sent
the rest of the guards away. We don’t need too many people too close, and I’m not planning for us to
stay here long. We’ll be safer in New Orleans.”
When they stopped, the doors opened and the gurney he was strapped to was pulled from the back of the van. Sookie was helped down and he noticed she touched her belly. It gave him hope. He noticed he was surrounded by women. It was an odd moment. Karin had already dug the hole. It was near the house. The belts were taken from him and Karin lifted him in her arms. Sookie stepped forward and kissed him beside his eye. She touched him and he was in the ground. There was something about it, the feel of earth. It was a pleasant feeling, one a vampire instinctively craved. He felt Karin wrap herself around him and pull the blanket over them and then it started, the quick feeling of the weight of the earth, more comforting than a blanket, more welcoming than any mother’s arms. He heard Sookie’s voice catch. He knew she couldn’t understand this. All she would see was her husband being buried in the ground. ‘Soon,’ he thought, hoping she might hear him. ‘Soon I will emerge and I will be able to tell you how much I love you!’

Pam wrapped her arm around Sookie and turned her back toward the house when Bubba started shoveling in the dirt. “It’s not what you think,” she assured the telepath. “He is happy to be there. It’s like being reborn for us.”

“I know what you’re saying,” Sookie nodded, “But you know I can’t see it that way.” Amy Ludwig was waiting for them. She had sent Jane away with the van and now she sat alone on the wide porch. She had a glass of ice tea and there was another on the table next to her. “Got that for you,” she said to Sookie, then to Pam, “Blood’s inside. Get it yourself!”

Sookie sat down and when Pam went inside, said, “Can I take that pill now?”

Amy held out her hand and Sookie took the pill from her. She stared at it a moment, then taking a deep breath, she placed it in her mouth and washed it down with the tea. Amy nodded, “I’ll stay here with you and we’ll drive into Shreveport in the morning. I wish you had someone to come with you, to hold your hand.”

“You know I can’t have vampires around,” Sookie shrugged. “I won’t be able to cover my scent and it wouldn’t be safe for any of us. And I can’t tell any of the folks here. It would get them too close. Someone could glamour them and this would all be over before it began. I’ve got to keep Eric’s condition limited to a small group and if I have too many people coming in and out it won’t keep for long. Tomorrow I’ll post the announcement about the miscarriage and that Eric and I are in mourning and ask folks to respect our privacy during this time. We get through the meeting with the Sheriffs. We allow the fans at Fangtasia to see us arrive. We get through an Assizes and we should be good. We take a few photos and post those and that should make anyone thinking about coming down here to take a look think twice.”

Pam joined them on the porch, and then Bubba walked up on the porch too. They started laying out the timing for things and sending invitations. Pam texted the Sheriffs using Karin’s phone, and then texted Maxwell Lee as herself. Indira confirmed she would close the club for the special meeting and soon they were being carbon copied on another series of announcements. After an hour a pair of headlights turned onto the road. Charles and Owen climbed out of the car carrying bags of groceries. The guards acknowledged Sookie before heading into the house and within a short period of time, Owen walked out on the porch with an omelet. He handed it to Sookie and asked Amy Ludwig if she’d like one too. Sookie headed inside and ate at the table. The atmosphere was subdued, but when Pam and Bubba started telling a story the conversation flowed more freely. Sookie found herself laying her hand on her belly. She excused herself and headed upstairs. She walked into their bedchamber and looked at that great, over-the-top bed. There, lying on the blankets was the bunny Eric had bought their daughter. Sookie climbed up onto the bed and taking the bunny in her hand, she curled up and around herself. She didn’t think she could possibly sleep, so she was startled when Amy’s hand shook her.
“It’s time, Breather,” Doctor Ludwig said in her growly voice. Sookie sat up, realizing she was still holding the bunny. She took it as far as the dresser and then set it down to pick up a carved wooden box. It was one that had come with Eric’s things, a dagger box, he had told her.

“I want you to put her in here,” Sookie told the Doctor. “When the time comes.”

Amy looked sympathetic, “We don’t usually…”

“I don’t care!” Sookie flared, “She’s my daughter and I’m bringing her home!” Sookie picked up the box and cradled it against her chest.

“I won’t be able to… I can’t embalm her, Sookie,” Amy told her. “If I put her in that box you are going to have to bury her right away. You can’t wait. You understand?”

Sookie nodded, “Yes, so you’ll do it?”

“Of course,” the Doctor assured her. Sookie walked to the bathroom. She took care of her human needs and brushed her hair. She brushed her teeth and thought she should probably change her clothes, but somehow that was too much.

“I’m ready,” she told Amy. When they got to the bottom of the stairs, Owen was waiting.

“I’ll be driving you,” he told her. Sookie looked at this Were guard who had been there with her during so many of her happiest and saddest moments. She looked at his quiet eyes and hesitated, but then he said, “My wife and I, we have two wonderful children but we lost two as well. They were almost as far along as yours is now. I remember how hard it was, all that promise cut off before it even started. I know what you’re going through and I’d be honored if you let me be there for you.”

Sookie didn’t know what to think. She was numb and she was starting to feel a low ache that she had a feeling was going to get worse before it got better.

With a nod, they walked to the car, the three of them.

It was night when Sookie returned. Owen carried her up the stairs, all three flights and laid her on her bed and then left. Pam bit her wrist and wouldn’t take no for an answer. Within minutes, the pain was gone and Sookie felt her energy return. “Where is she?” she asked.

Pam walked from the room and returned with the box. Sookie held out her hands and Pam handed it to her. Sookie stroked the top of the wood, the inlay and pattern, and then closing her eyes, she held her hand over the box and a soft glow started. Pam watched in wonder as the edges of the lid sealed and seemed to grow together. The wood almost seemed alive again as it fused and melded into one solid block. When she finished, Sookie smiled sadly, “There! Now she’s all protected, safe and sound.”

“What can I do for you?” Pam asked the telepath.

“You can take me to the cemetery,” Sookie replied. “I’d like to bury her near Gran. Can you help me do that?”

It was an odd procession. Pam carried the box. Bubba insisted on carrying Sookie and Owen followed with a shovel. Sookie had taken the little bunny, the toy that had been their child’s, and brought it with them. Owen carefully turned back the carpet of daisies and then dug a hole, not exactly on Gran, just a little to the side. When it was deep enough, Pam lowered the box down into the ground. Bubba set Sookie on her feet and held her arm as she stepped forward. Sookie felt oddly hollow. Although the tears fell in a slow, never-ending stream from her eyes, she couldn’t weep. “Goodbye,” she whispered. She kissed the bunny and placed it on the box. “I’ll never forget you.”
Sookie took a handful of the dirt and fisted it, as though the feel of it could make this moment less real. When Owen finished, he turned the daisies back over the small grave and pushed them down.

“Come on,” Pam told her, and turning Sookie, the sad parade walked back toward the house.

When they had gone and the crickets and night birds resumed their conversations, a light appeared, bouncing along the cemetery walk and then stopping at the grave. “At last!” Niall sighed, and plunging his hand into the ground, he extracted the bunny.

“It is a terrible price!” Dermot sighed.

“Not so terrible!” Niall scoffed, “You can feel it. It was never more than human! What use would it have been? But this,” and he smiled over the toy, “This carries the magic of both of them. We must hurry.”

In another moment they were in the bed chamber in the house. Dermot depressed several of the inlaid planets and a door popped open. Niall placed the bunny in the secret place and clicked shut the door. “Now it can begin,” he told his son and with a quick flare of light, they were gone.
Nautical Note: The appearance of surface fog on the water is seldom a good thing. Fog prevents you from seeing hazards. Fog distorts sound, making things seem closer or farther than they really are, but if you are trying to lose a rival or turn the tables, fog can be a powerful ally. With a crafty turn of tactics and a firm handle on navigation you can trick your rival and gain the advantage.

New York

“I’m so sorry I’m missing her!” Angie prowled around the living room, pausing briefly to examine objects, the knickknacks that graced Misha’s tables and shelves. Misha almost immediately recognized the common element to those things that attracted the Nevada vampire’s attention; they contained some element of gold. There were paintings and wood reliquaries on display that were far more valuable, more artistic in their rendering than those objects Angie chose to admire or stroke with bony fingers, but De Castro’s Second passed them with no understanding. It was the shiny thing that called to her, and that summed her up as far as the New York King was concerned.

“I am sure Pamela will be sorry she was not here to greet you,” Misha replied, his voice giving no hint of the disdain he felt. Pam had told him a story about this woman being invited to her Maker’s home and repaying her host’s hospitality by dancing on his expensive coffee table, digging her heels in, and causing such damage that the table had to be replaced. While Misha understood the use of a demonstration of power in making a point with a wayward Sheriff, he did not feel that art needed to be compromised in the process. Bodies healed. Art was irreplaceable.

“Well, I’ll be in town for several days,” Angie leaned over to look at a gold-rimmed snuff box. The way she angled herself was to provide the King a view of her breasts. Misha found the equally clear view of the bony projections of Angie’s shoulder blades removed any attraction.

‘My Pamela is lithe without appearing emaciated,’ he thought. ‘I am a fortunate man.’

“The clubs are really catching on and I had some ideas. Do you expect Pam to return soon?” Angie raised her eyes and Misha was reminded of a snake, a baby snake, trying out its wares.

“Pamela’s business in Shreveport shouldn’t keep her much longer,” Misha smiled. “She informed me she would have a better idea of her travel schedule when we speak later tonight.” The King realized that only yesterday he would not have been confident in his answer. Pam hadn’t returned his texts for several days. He was able to find out she was resting with the Area 5 Sheriff, he knew she was visiting Bon Temps, but beyond that, nothing. He assumed when Maude called to thank him for his concessions with Sanctum that Pam’s would be the next message he received. It hadn’t happened.

Finally, last night, she called. Her voice sounded so strained it caused him to ask how he might help her. He even offered to come to her in Louisiana to stand by her side. Pam laughed, denying she was having any significant problems. “Eric’s returned from Rhodes. It was a terrible tragedy,” she told him, “and he felt the need to see both his progeny. That’s all there is to it.” When he asked about her Maker’s condition, Pamela laughed again, “Oh, Eric is always in the best of health,” but he heard the
tightness return to her voice. When he called her on it, asking again if she was sure all was well, Pam told him that if she did sound stressed, it was because of her businesses and launched into a perfectly plausible explanation involving her events planning and nightclub expansions and the need for more liquidity. Yes, it was all perfectly plausible, but knowing Pam now as he did, he could tell she was not being totally honest with him. Misha had no doubt that the business troubles his companion was describing were real, but he was also certain that her business was not at the root of what troubled her.

“Well, since everything is going so well, when do you think you can return to our home, Zolotse?” he asked when she paused in her story. “I never noticed how quiet this house is, but now, without you, it seems an empty place.” Misha heard the catch in her voice and the King experienced a moment of insight. Someone was warning her about him. Someone was telling her she shouldn’t trust him, and Misha knew who would have that kind of influence with his companion. It was the same vampire who could call Pamela, making her leave her house full of guests and travel long distances because he wished to see her. If things were as Pamela said, and Eric Northman had summoned her, that was his right. It seemed another thing altogether to have freed his progeny and then to interfere with her choice in whom she trusted.

“Soon,” she said after a moment and he was sure he heard longing in her voice. “I will be able to give you my schedule at tomorrow’s rising,” she assured him, and then after a second, “I miss you, too.”

Earlier, while Misha waited for Angie to arrive he found his frustration growing. Eric Northman was the progeny of Appius Livius Ocella, and Appius had traditional views about the role of one’s progeny. The old Roman hadn’t hesitated to place his child in a contract although he had freed him many hundreds of years before, so why would that same child hesitate to place restrictions on his progeny? While Misha admired Appius and tried to model his life after the Roman’s example, he now found the close relationship most annoying. Misha concluded rather sourly that as long as Eric Northman continued, his Pam would be shackled to her duty as the Viking’s progeny. Their lives together would be hedged by the uncertainty that came with a capricious Maker and his ability to command.

Angie didn’t appear to have noticed Misha’s distraction because she continued to prattle on, needing no acknowledgement from him. The Nevada vampire assumed the New York King would be interested in hearing about the progress of Felipe de Castro’s solar power endeavor with Eric Northman as well as his interest in rebooting his mixed martial arts business to include more extensive overseas exposure.

Misha settled back, made sure his face looked attentive, and allowed himself to mentally review the conversation he had with Carlo. It had been a busy evening, first Pam, and then his Second calling to report his findings following his search of Bill Compton’s quarters in Jackson. Misha was surprised that his current Second survived his time in Jackson at all. ‘Edgington must have terrible security,’ he concluded. Misha really more than half expected to receive a terse message from Russell Edgington and a set of fangs, but that hadn’t happened. Instead Carlo reported he made it into Compton’s quarters and found clear evidence proving the writer made the bomb used in Rhodes. Receipts, scraps of silver and drawn plans were scattered around the quarters along with a letter addressed to Sookie Stackhouse. Carlo confirmed he cleaned up and destroyed all the evidence, including the letter. Carlo confirmed he found nothing that implicated New York and he emphasized his search had been thorough. Carlo finished by saying he was heading to upstate New York to clean up the vampire spawning operation. He thanked Misha again for the opportunity to test the prospective Sheriff candidate from Boston. He would be meeting the vampire in Pennsylvania and they would
travel together to the upstate New York facility.

Misha had been careful in how he worded his responses, leaving just enough unsaid to have Carlo stumbling over his words. Misha purposely fueled his Second’s hopes, allowing Carlo to fill in the blanks with his own assumptions that the King intended to give him regency over the Carolinas kingdom. It never failed to amaze Misha how easily someone could fool themselves when they desired something. Their avarice colored everything to make the words they heard appear as they most wished. Instead of the power Carlo imagined, Misha’s soon-to-be former second would find himself at the pointy end of a stake and the Sheriff candidate from Boston would have proved his worthiness to work for the King of New York.

Misha couldn’t help the smile that crept across his face and then realized his mistake. Angie must have been making some sexual proposal because she brightened and started unbuttoning her shirt. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression,” Misha tried to sound apologetic. “I leave all decisions about bed companions to Pamela. Your offer,” and he could see he had guessed rightly, “must be made to her.”

“It’s rare to find a man who values his woman as highly as you do,” Angie replied. She re-buttoned her blouse, shrugged, and said, “So, what do you make of the rumors about Eric Northman?”

“Which rumors?” the King made sure to sound slightly bored, “the rumors that the Viking was involved in the death of those Silent Witness women?” Misha paused. While the King was in possession of correspondence between the two women which implicated Eric Northman in a series of murders, he hadn’t decided whether to use it. For now, it was enough to see what reaction this kind of bait might produce.

He didn’t have to wonder long. A greedy look marched across Angie’s face as she said, “I hadn’t heard that one. Is there proof?”

“I’m not sure,” Misha smiled, “but I have heard there is a link between the women and Northman, one that has been overlooked. Of course, if I were to come into such proof, I would turn it over to the human authorities. I hear their investigation has stalled. So sad.”

“If the FBI arrested him it would be sad for him. They don’t like vampires,” Angie purred. “It would create quite the power vacuum.” She glanced at the King, “I hope you wouldn’t find it inconvenient.”

“Not likely,” Misha shrugged. “Pamela would be concerned about her Maker, but she is a free woman.”

Misha settled back, enjoying the speculation that animated Angie’s face, but after a minute she seemed to pull herself back from her imagining to say, “No, I meant the rumor that Eric Northman is alive and well in Shreveport.”

“Oh,” the King shrugged. “That is not a rumor, Angie. Pam is in Shreveport now because he summoned her to him. He is certainly there.”

Angie leaned forward and her expression was angry, “How do you think he managed it? We all saw the videos. He was standing there right next to those Vampire First members. One minute he’s in Rhodes, the next he’s in Shreveport. There is no way he could be that close to that explosion with that amount of silver and escape without a mark! He may be in Shreveport, but I’m betting he’s in rags,” and then Angie seemed to catch herself, “No offense meant.”

Misha laughed and stood, walking over to pick up the blood decanter and then returning so he could
fill Angie’s goblet, “No offense taken! My interest is in the Viking’s progeny, not in the Viking! I don’t mind telling you that my life would be substantially less complicated if Northman were no more, but, of course, I wouldn’t wish ill of my companion’s Maker.” He gave Angie a knowing look, one that said he could wish ill of Northman. He set down the decanter and continued, “There does seem to be something more here than meets the eye. Of course, our lucky friend in Louisiana is married to a Fae and they are a notoriously tricky breed. It could be that she was involved in this somehow.” Misha sat back down, pursing his lips, inviting Angie to speculate further.

It didn’t take much. The Nevada vampire launched into a long list of kills attributed to Sookie Stackhouse. It was all information Misha had heard before and it allowed him the space to remember his own reaction when he heard the initial report that Eric Northman was among those killed in Rhodes. It felt far sweeter than he would have anticipated. Misha had experienced actual joy thinking that the problem of Pamela’s Maker was over with no effort on his part. Pam’s near panic in rushing from his home seemed to reinforce the idea that Northman was finally dead and Misha had eagerly anticipated his companion’s confirmation that she was truly free, but his joy was short-lived. Within twenty-four hours there were new reports denying Northman’s death and then Misha received Pam’s call telling him that her Maker was with her. To have the solution to his problem with Pamela so quickly snatched away was infuriating. Although he had no real basis for it, Misha felt betrayed.

“It’s not right!” Angie’s laughter was brittle. “Northman lands in shit over and over and yet he keeps finding a way to come out of it even better than before! For once I’d like to see some of it stick to him! There’s luck, and then there’s witchcraft. I don’t think he comes by his luck naturally.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t!” Misha chuckled. “We vampires admire strength and guile, but let’s call things as they are! Northman has stacked all the odds in his favor. Fae alliances? Witch alliances? Were alliances? Who isn’t in his pocket?” Misha watched Angie. It was laughable how easily she was led.

“If there is truth to the rumors about those Witnesses all his fairy luck won’t help him!” Angie protested. “Humans will lock him in silver and chain him to the top of the highest building. It won’t matter how old he is or which mythical family he married into. With all that truth and justice talk Edgington and Crowe are making they couldn’t afford to let Northman get away with it.”

Misha nodded sagely, “Of course, it would be a scandal at a time when we wish to be seen as good allies. I worry for my poor Pam. If the rumor is true, I don’t see any way she could avoid getting dragged into some part of it. Northman had law trouble before and my Pamela found her name publicly linked with her Maker’s disgrace.” Misha waited for another moment before adding, “How I miss the old days. Monarchs who became inconvenient became finally dead. I wonder…” and he looked at Angie’s face. “I wonder if it is as you say. How could he have been so close and not sustained some injury? That bomb was loaded with silver. Most vampires were killed outright and more succumbed to silver poisoning. Only a handful survived…” and then the King laughed. “Oh, it’s déjà vu, in a way! Louisiana monarch laid low by Rhodes.”

“I’m never going to Rhodes!” Angie shuddered. “It’s a cursed city!”

“You aren’t planning to attend the memorial services?” Misha allowed his amusement to show.

“What a shit show that’s going to be!” Angie laughed. Andrew chose that moment to join them, another decanter of blood on his tray. Angie continued talking as she walked toward the housekeeper, holding out her goblet for a refill, “They’re creating some kind of memorial to Bill Compton! Can you believe that? You’d think he was some kind of saint the way the humans and Russell Edgington are carrying on. He wrote a book, big deal!”

“The television reports show mountains of flowers and candles left by his many fans. They had to designate alternate sites for the humans’ offerings,” Andrew offered. “Of course it is King Crowe
and his entourage who are heading up the planning for the memorial. Crowe has become a beloved figure, a symbol of unification,” and Andrew met Misha’s eyes. The whole turn of events with the Indiana King was unfortunate. Crowe’s timely arrival at the scene with his mate and the vampire police, the involvement with the local press and law enforcement in the investigation, the donating of blood to victims was making Crowe too popular. For Misha, it meant he needed to focus his attention elsewhere for now. Carlo would complete cleaning up the rogue rookery and New York’s plans for revenge against Bartlett Crowe would go dormant. There would be another opportunity in the future, and the waiting would make it sweeter.

“All of this goes to prove how truly stupid humans can be,” Angie snarled. “Compton was a barely competent spy who ran at the first sign of trouble. He was nothing but a scavenger, waiting for the scraps to fall from the tables of his betters. Now they are going to make him some martyr; Saint Bill,” and she sniffed.

“Speaking of scraps,” Misha lazily held out his goblet, his eyes meeting Andrew’s as the vampire poured, “I hear it’s more than trifles pouring from the Viking’s kingdom these days. You’re in business with him,” and he smiled brightly at Angie. “Solar panels, isn’t it? It seems too good to be true, the turnaround in fortunes for that kingdom. But, you were there ruling that kingdom when it was at its worst. I suppose there must be some pleasure in seeing all your hard work coming to something, even if it is under someone else’s rule.”

“The kingdom was stolen from my King,” Angie snapped and then she schooled her face, “but then again, who am I to question my King’s new allies?”

“Still,” Misha smiled “It does seem like déjà vu, doesn’t it: A kingdom with a wounded monarch surrounded by a weak crew? I’ll grant you he does have two of my own; three if you count Jane; all money makers. You know, I still hear from Thierry. After all these years, he continues to value the lessons he learned while serving me. He thanks me for them.” Misha looked away, his eyebrows pulling together, “I wonder.” When the King felt he’d left the silence hang enough he looked at Angie and said, “I think I’ll contact him, ask him for a better idea of what’s going on down there; nothing that would compromise him, of course, but Pam’s feelings in this matter can hardly be expected to be objective. I have no interest in these matters for myself, and as Pam’s companion, I would hardly act on it if I did, but as one of my business partners, I think it’s important that you and your King understand whether your investments are safe. Of course, the money you’ve invested with Pamela is as good as money in the bank. You know I stand behind her, although she has no need for my support. But the energy investment…” and he looked at Angie expectantly.

He could see her almost bouncing with excitement. ‘Yes,’ he thought, ‘you put all the pieces together. You are drawn to the possibilities.’

“My King was impressed with Thierry. He told me he has rarely seen a shrewder vampire with a better head for business. I suppose he has you to thank for that,” and Angie lifted her goblet in salute.

“Most kind,” Misha replied, “Yes, yes I’ll send a message. I find I too am curious, and what about his lovely wife? What about the charming Miss Stackhouse? I know you have told me she is a formidable fighter in her own right, but if Northman is injured, then our dear Miss Stackhouse would be weakened as well through their famous bond, don’t you think?” Misha had to bite his cheek to keep his expression from morphing into open gloating. Angie was not bothering to hide her ambition. The words the King used had done their job and Misha had no doubt that the minute she left, Angie would be on the phone with Felipe de Castro agitating for a takeover of Eric Northman’s kingdom. “Come,” he said instead, “Let’s sample another goblet of this most excellent blood and toast to better days,” and they did.
It had been three nights since Eric Northman and Karin the Slaughterer had gone to ground. Now, on the evening of the fourth it was expected that the Viking would rise with the coming of the moon. “Can you feel him?” Sookie asked Pam. Yesterday the telepath found herself standing next to the grave, her face turned up to the moon and searching for some sign, some feeling that he was there below her, but there was nothing. Pam explained that it would be unusual for anyone, even a vampire, to feel a connection during this time.

“He was severely injured, Sookie. The magic of regeneration works differently for us. It is almost as if we go into hibernation. It’s as if we are starting again,” Pam assured her. “Even I can’t feel him, but I don’t feel his absence either, and that tells me things are progressing.”

Now, as the time approached Sookie looked around her. Bubba was standing near her elbow. He smiled and nodded in that reassuring way he had and Sookie patted his arm. Heidi was there, too, and Jane. Jane had spent the past few nights glamouring those at Doctor Ludwig’s hospital, making them forget how Eric Northman had arrived and the horrible hours that followed Rhodes. She told Sookie that when she offered her services to Doctor Ludwig, the small woman had threatened to glamour Jane instead. Sookie smiled as she thought about it. Her eyes traveled to Charles and Owen, standing together, waiting. It struck Sookie how much both she and Eric owed these two Weres. They had become more than guards. They were friends.

“They come!” Pam suddenly hissed and Sookie’s eyes snapped to the ground at her feet. At first she could see nothing, but she could tell the vampires around her were hearing something. It was a slight movement of the soil and then a hand, his hand, emerged. Sookie wondered if she should take hold of it, but the vampires around her stood entirely still in that way they had. As if sensing her thoughts, Pam laid a hand on Sookie’s arm, holding her in place. Eric’s hand was followed by an arm and then another hand. It almost appeared he was swimming up from the soil, and then his head and shoulders appeared.

“Eric!” Sookie couldn’t hold back any more. She fell to her knees and grasped his hand. When he looked at her she could see that although there were still features that weren’t quite right, his face was almost entirely there. His nose looked smaller and his mouth was oddly sunken. His jaw was too small for his face but his skin was there. His chest emerged followed by his torso, and then, almost as though the ground expelled him, he was on the surface, lying face up. “What happened to your clothes?” Sookie whispered almost to herself, but she didn’t wait for an answer. She moved so she was kneeling beside him. She leaned down and kissed each of his eyes and then his mouth and he reached up, still weak, to lay his fingers against her cheek.

“Älskade?” he rasped.

“Let’s get him inside and into the shower,” Pam interrupted. Charles stepped forward and helped Eric to his feet. The Viking staggered and Owen moved to his other side, grabbed his arm, and slung it around his own neck.

“What about Karin?” Sookie looked toward the ground.

“She’s coming,” Pam assured Sookie, and then wrapping her arm around her sister, Pam steered her toward the house ahead of Eric and the guards. “Come on now and get that bathtub filling; warm water, not hot. I’ll help lift him upstairs and while things are filling you should warm up a half dozen bottles of blood. He’ll be hungry and it’ll help him. I’ll be giving him blood and if you’re up to it, you should, too.”

“Of course,” Sookie stammered. Sookie could see Eric was not entirely himself and she realized
there was more to this spending time in the ground for a vampire than she had been told. While
Sookie wondered what she was missing, she also got the sense that this was not the time. ‘But you
better believe I’m getting some answers once things settle down!’ she promised herself.

Sookie ran up the stairs and threw open the doors to the bathroom. She turned on the water and made
sure the temperature felt right before heading down the back stairs to the kitchen. As she opened
bottles and shuttled them through the microwave she listened to the sounds of Eric being half carried,
half dragged up the three flights of stairs. ‘We need to move,’ Sookie thought. ‘We need to live
somewhere that works for us,’ and she found her breath catching in her throat, but the telepath
wouldn’t give in to her emotions. There were much harder discussions to be had and if she lost her
steel now she wouldn’t have what she would need later. Taking a deep breath, Sookie recapped and
shook each bottle, eliminating any hot spots, and then headed back up the stairs to her waiting
husband.

When she walked into the bathroom, Charles and Owen had already left. Eric was standing in the
shower stall. Pam was naked and standing behind him, supporting him as the water sprayed over
him, washing away the dirt. “I’ll do that,” Sookie said calmly. Without a thought about modesty or
being embarrassed in front of Pam, Sookie set down the bottles and slipped from her clothes. She
stepped into the shower and nudged Pam, “Go ahead,” she told her. “I can handle this. If I need you,
I’ll call.”

“He’s steady,” Pam told her, “but I think there’s some lingering vertigo. He’s still having trouble
talking,” and then she turned, picked up her clothes, and left, leaving the door open.

Sookie slid in behind Eric and wrapped one hand around his waist and then slid another over his
beautiful backside. She laid her cheek against his back and she could hear him chuckling, the noise
rumbling in his chest. “Love my butt,” he rasped.

“Love you,” she whispered and wrapping both her arms around him, Sookie turned her head to kiss
his back and hugged him as tight as she could.

‘Sookie,” he called her after a minute and he untwined her hands to pull her around to the front of
him. Sookie made sure her best smile was in place and she gifted him with it. She reached for the
soap and worked up a lather between her hands. Slowly she began to wash him, every part of him.
“Do you remember?” he rasped.

“Yes,” she smiled. “Of course I do.” Sookie was sure Eric was talking about their first time when he
didn’t know who he was and he joined her in the shower. He was smiling and although it was more
lopsided than usual, it was a good smile. Sookie scrubbed at Eric’s chest, then followed the happy
trail of hair that led down to his navel. When she started to slide her hand down further Eric placed
his hand over hers, and Sookie stilled. She could feel his vulnerability, but there was also a vague
disorientation. “I know!” Sookie said more brightly than she felt, “Let’s get in the bathtub.”

Reaching around him, she turned off the water, and then taking his hand back in hers, she led him,
dripping wet, across the room to the bathtub. While in past Eric was the one to get in first, pulling
Sookie against him, tonight was different. Sookie stepped down into the water and then, taking both
his hands, helped him to step down and then settle into the water. Their tub was made for a man as
large as Eric so he was able to stretch out enough that his head rested on her shoulder. Wrapping her
arms and legs around him, Sookie kissed the side of his head. “I’ve got you,” she whispered. Sookie
glanced over and then reached to take the knife from the shelf beside them. Sookie sliced her wrist,
not deep, but enough to provide blood. When she held it out before him, Eric took her arm in both
hands and brought it to his mouth. He lapped and suckled at the blood that flowed and Sookie could
feel the tiny points of his fangs that were starting to regrow. ‘Baby fangs,’ she thought and she felt
the sudden clench in her throat of sorrows she knew she would need to share with him soon.

“Sookie?” She had startled him. She could see his eyes were becoming clearer, but they still held a lost quality as Eric slowly emerged from his dormancy.

“It’s nothing,” she assured him. “Drink, Eric,” and she held her wrist before him again and stroked his hair as he lapped her blood with his cool tongue.

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While Pam helped Eric into the house, Heidi waited at the side of the grave for Karin. It took several more minutes before Karin’s hand emerged. She came from the earth more slowly. Like her Maker, Karin was naked. Heidi threw the blanket she had waiting around her Chief. “I offer you my blood,” the tracker told her, tilting her head to allow access. Karin didn’t hesitate. She struck and drank several mouthfuls before withdrawing.

By the time Karin finished Pam had returned. “How are you?” Pam asked.

“He was very damaged,” Karin nodded. “If the magic here wasn’t so strong I think we would both be finally dead.”

“He drained you?” It was the risk a vampire took, taking one so severely damaged into the ground.

“He struggled. He was pure instinct and little else,” Karin shuddered.

“Come on,” Pam glanced around her. There were some things best said in privacy, “Let’s get you into a warm shower. I would be pleased if you would allow me to care for you.” Karin nodded, and then turned to Heidi.

“Thank you for being the first to welcome me back,” Karin told the tracker. “It is a kindness and a favor I won’t forget.” Pam nodded as well before steering her sister toward the guesthouse. Heidi bowed and then picked up the shovel. She would bury different scents and use rocks to hide the burial spot. If others suspected Eric was less than perfect they would come looking for it.

As Pam and Karin walked down the path that led to the guesthouse beyond the line of trees, Bubba approached them. “Well hey, Miss Karin!” Bubba was wearing jeans and a yellow shirt that resembled one he had worn in a movie when he was famous. As Pam continued to walk them past the vampire, Bubba’s face became worried, “Miss Karin? Why do you smell like Mr. Eric? You know he belongs to Miss Sookie now. It’s not right you should smell that way!”

“It was an accident,” Pam told him quickly. “It’s not what it seems. Eric and Miss Sookie are together in the main house. Everything’s fine.”

Bubba looked confused as he trailed after them, then after a minute he said, “Well, I guess that’s all right then. Maybe I’ll head over to that house and see if they want something.”

Pam didn’t look at Karin as she helped her into the bathroom. There was no large tub here, but the shower stall was wide and easily fit them both. Pam turned the water on as warm as it would go and once she had stripped, stepped in behind her sister, and wrapped her in a hug. “You sure you’re okay?” she asked.

“Heidi’s blood helped,” Karin answered, and Pam offered her own wrist, which Karin accepted. When Karin finished drinking, Pam helped her wash first her body and then her hair.

“Wishing I was Thomas?” Pam teased her.
“Yes,” Karin replied without a hint of amusement.

“He’ll be here for the Sheriff’s meeting,” Pam told her. “Maybe it’s time to get things settled before anything else happens.”

“I hate that word,” Karin sniffed, “Settled.” Karin lifted her arms to allow Pam to dry her. “Still, it doesn’t feel quite so poison in my mouth anymore.” Karin found a robe to wrap around herself. “Is Sookie going to be ready for the Sheriff’s meeting?”

Pam was shaking a bottle of blood, “Yes. She’s different, stronger. She’s talked with Mustapha and he’ll impersonate Eric. He’ll drive out here using the back way so no one sees him. Charles will drive them both over to Fangtasia. We thought that if people see the car and see the couple together it will go a long way toward getting the rumors to stop.”

“The way she can do that; change people’s appearances is eerie,” Karin shuddered. “I trust Sookie, but there is something too Fae about this. Still…”

“Still it’s a masquerade that could save us all,” Pam sniffed.

“The child is dead?” Karin changed the subject.

“Yes,” Pam replied. “We buried her while you were in the ground.”

“It will be terrible when he finds out,” and Karin looked at Pam. “You can feel him now. His emotions are raw. He is like a newborn. I know it will pass, but we should be prepared,” and then Karin smiled. “I’m glad you’re here, Pam.”

“Sisters!” Pam told her.

“Sisters,” Karin answered.

Lafayette

The cream envelope sat on the desk, the heavy wax seal weighing down the flap. The bond was so heavy the tension in the paper pulled against that weight, and Thierry tapped the wax twice with his finger watching it bounce. The note was from Misha. “Do you still have a Master worth your loyalty?” One sentence only, written in the New York King’s textbook perfect penmanship on heavy cardstock, one question awaiting Thierry’s answer.

‘As if you were ever worthy of my loyalty,’ Thierry sneered, his finger tapping against the wax seal again. Upstairs his travel coffin was being readied. When he attended the Sheriff’s meeting in a few days he would stay in a hotel in Shreveport. Indira invited him to stay with her, but he wasn’t interested in the scrutiny sharing close quarters would invite.

He had received no invitation to stay in the guest house at Bon Temps, but in view of the news about the King’s child, Thierry wasn’t surprised. The French Sheriff found himself troubled by the idea that his King, any vampire, would be involved in creating an actual baby. There was something distasteful about it, and yet, Thierry couldn’t help remembering the look that had crossed Eric Northman’s face when he saw that toy rabbit on their recent trip to Minnesota. The Viking had placed the toy in his lap and stroked it the entire flight home. He had a bemused expression on his face as he stared out the window.

Thierry had not taken offense at being ignored. The Sheriff’s relationship with the King was healing slowly, but Thierry knew Eric would continue to punish him for a while longer. Thierry also knew the King’s preoccupation on the plane had nothing to do with punishment. Eric Northman was
happy and Thierry knew the Viking well enough to recognize it. Now the reason for the toy was gone.

In his brief human life Thierry had only thought about children in terms of hoping he didn’t have any bastards that would come back to haunt him. During his much longer vampire life he had never felt the pull to create progeny, yet Thierry found he felt sad for his King and the Queen.

‘Do you still have a Master worth your loyalty?’ Misha’s question had nothing to do with Eric Northman’s values or integrity. This question was far more straight-forward and invasive than any sent before. There was no way to interpret this as other than a request for Thierry to spy for New York. ‘I will wait until I get to Shreveport to form an answer,’ Thierry thought. He realized he was hoping that Thalia would be attending the Sheriff’s meeting, and that surprised him.

Thierry started to mentally tick off those he would expect to see at Fangtasia. Rubio Hermosa would attend. It was being hosted by Indira. Karin the Slaughterer would be there and Maxwell Lee was traveling up from New Orleans. ‘Stop pretending!’ he scolded himself. ‘Acknowledge it. They will also be there.’ ‘They’ were Thomas and Nabila. The reports he received detailing the growing relationship between his great friend and former lover were regular. After one particularly descriptive email, Thierry wondered if Thomas knew of his spying and had paid off the informant to paint a picture guaranteed to infuriate his brother. Thierry couldn’t think of the two of them together without growling. He blamed Karin for not claiming Thomas as she should have. He blamed Misha for being the kind of bastard that required demonstrations of loyalty. He blamed Nabila for not trusting him enough to know he would never hurt her without a reason. He blamed Thomas for not being enough of a friend to not touch what had been handled by his friend. Mostly, he blamed himself.

‘If you were truly clever,’ he told himself, ‘she would be here, by your side now and you would be scheming to take New York together.’ “But you are not clever!” he said out loud, “Which is why you need Thalia to help you form your response!”

“Sheriff?” Thierry’s dayman asked from the door.

“Nothing,” Thierry replied. “Let me know when the van arrives. It’s time this play entered its next act.”

Jackson

Thalia sat on the corner chair in the bedroom of Bill Compton’s quarters behind the main house in Jackson. It was clean and everything was set just so. For anyone who knew Bill Compton that wasn’t surprising. For a vampire born during the time of the Civil War, he had been surprisingly fussy. The clothes in the closet were all hanging in an understandable order. The shoes were perfectly aligned. Items in drawers were folded and then folded again. Still, there was something about the space that wasn’t right. Perhaps it was the lack of dust after more than a week. Perhaps it was the way the bed was almost too perfectly made. Compton would have used the bed to pack. There should have been a crease or two.

Thalia walked back to the guard room in the main house. “You are sure there were no visitors?” she asked the young Were at the desk.

“No during my shifts,” he replied. Thalia glanced around the room. When she had been here supervising the guards this area was kept organized, surfaces were clean, and trash never accumulated. In the months she had been gone it was clear that the discipline she had worked so hard to instill had slipped.

“Bring up the film on both corners of the garage and the back gate,” she snarled. The guard’s hands
shook as he glanced her way. She knew he was hoping she hadn’t seen it, so she dropped fang, letting him know she had. The footage started to play. Thalia increased the speed and then stepped it up again. She watched people she could identify run/walk back and forth across the screen, and then on the footage from two days ago, an unfamiliar face appeared. Thalia leaned forward, stabbing the button that froze the feed. “Who is that?” she asked, pointing at the dark-haired vampire.

“I… I don’t know,” the guard was stammering.

“Who was on duty during this time?” and Thalia pointed to the date and time stamp on the screen. Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed the clipboard. She wasn’t surprised to see the name of the Were who was trembling in the seat in front of her.

“Well, Mr. Gates, it would appear you should know this vampire’s name.” Thalia pushed the call button and waited.

The supervisor entered the room in a rush, annoyance on his face, but as soon as he saw Thalia he stiffened and then bowed. “Thalia! I was not aware you were here visiting,” and he bowed again.

“I don’t require your permission,” Thalia snapped. She turned back to the screen, “This guard was on duty when this person entered the grounds. He was in the buildings, including Compton’s quarters and he left without anyone challenging him.” Thalia turned back to see the supervisor turning pale. “Who is this?” She didn’t need to wait for the answer. She could see the supervisor didn’t recognize him either.

“You realize I will be reporting this to the King?” Thalia snarled. “An unidentified vampire has breached the King’s grounds. He has entered the King’s buildings. He was not detected, much less challenged! I will be making recommendations, and the first is that neither of you will ever work here again.” The supervisor’s mouth opened and closed like a grounded fish. “I will recommend that a vampire be hired to oversee security. When I was here this would not have happened! It is clear to me that when the Kings are away their security is gone! You were hired for your expertise! You were hired for your loyalty! I find neither! If it were up to me, I would end you both now!” Thalia was rewarded by the warm smell of urine. She was pretty sure it was the man seated at the console.

“But it is not up to me. It is up to the King and your Packmaster, but know this! I will be back and if I don’t find improvement when I return, if either of you are here I won’t wait for your Packmaster’s permission, or the Kings’. I’ll take matters into my own hands and you will both be the example. Do you understand?” The Were at the console was silently crying, so Thalia poked the supervisor who jumped, “Get me copies of that,” and she pointed at the unidentified vampire’s image. “Make sure they aren’t grainy!” she added.

When the Were at the console continued to snivel, she lost her temper, “Get out!” she shouted at him, “Get out!” and she aimed a kick as he ran past her. Thalia held her breath so she wouldn’t have to smell the man’s foul odor. Although she inspired it, Thalia found she didn’t like the smell of fear. She studied the video again, moving the frames ahead second by second. “Who are you?” she asked.

She left that night, traveling swiftly. It was late and she would be lucky to make it to Bon Temps before sunrise. She could have asked Indira for a place to go to ground, but she knew there was a Sheriff’s meeting being called. Although Thalia was no longer officially working for Eric Northman, her name remained on the email distribution list so she knew others would be headed there crowding Indira’s rooms. Besides, the person she really needed to see would be staying at his wife’s ancestral home in that crappy backwater hole twenty minutes away from Fangtasia. Of course, now the home was more of a McMansion care of Sookie’s interfering Fae relatives. Thalia thought again of that night in Nebraska and the vision Niall, Prince of the Sky Fae, showed her in his basin of water under the stars. She thought about what she had seen in Rhodes and the film that showed both Eric and
Sookie on the red carpet that night. ‘I should have been there,’ she thought, and then giving a mental shake, she depressed the gas pedal and drove faster.

Thalia pulled up to the house and was surprised she wasn’t immediately challenged, but then Heidi stepped out onto the porch. Thalia nodded. It seemed unlikely, but it was possible there was sufficient surveillance in place now. Maybe they caught a video of her face before she approached. “You knew it was me?” she asked.

“No,” Sookie answered. She walked out onto the dark porch. She was in a robe, her hair damp. “We didn’t know you were coming. It’s been a while.”

“If I was a stranger to you, why weren’t your guards waiting for me when I exited the car? I could have emerged fighting!” Thalia challenged.

“There are wards here,” Sookie’s voice took on a hard quality Thalia didn’t hear often. “If you had meant us harm you would have been prevented from coming anywhere close.” Sookie crossed her arms, “So, why are you here?”

“I have been investigating the bombing,” Thalia started to walk toward the porch, but there was something in the way Sookie was standing that made her stop. “I came to talk with the North Man about my findings…”

“You can talk with Eric at tomorrow’s rising,” Sookie said. There was a finality to the way she said it.

“This is important…” Thalia started

“Well, I’m telling you how it is, so you’re just going to have to accept that!” Sookie was angry and then she directed her anger at Thalia, “Where were you? You told me you cared for him and you abandoned him? What was more important than making sure he was safe? That what he cared for was safe?”

Karin was beside Thalia now. She touched the warrior’s arm, “Pam and I are in the guesthouse. Come and join us. It will be sunrise soon.”

Thalia turned back to look at Sookie. The telepath was wiping tears from her face and without another word Sookie turned and walked back into her dark house, shutting the door behind her.

“Come,” Karin gestured toward the lit building Thalia could just see through the trees.

“What happened?” Thalia asked.

“My Maker grieves for the child he made with his Queen,” Karin replied.

“Was the Viking injured as well?” Thalia asked.

“We live in interesting times,” Karin replied and together they walked down the path.
Chapter 25 - Dodging Shoals

Bon Temps

When Sookie walked back into the house, she noticed her hands were shaking. She had stood up to Thalia! She had yelled at the fierce vampire, and Thalia had backed down. Sookie realized if she hadn’t been so exhausted when she walked out onto the porch, she would never have had the nerve to do it. It was only now as she leaned against the door that she remembered to be afraid. This had been a night for the books, although Sookie was sure it was a book she would never wish to read again.

There were no lights on but the telepath found she didn’t need them. Eric was quiet upstairs now. He had gone back into a kind of downtime about an hour ago when they returned from the cemetery. It would be sunrise soon, and she would wrap him in her arms so he could lay his head back in her lap and be comforted as he slipped into his day death. Sunrise would allow him to find the peace of oblivion, but for Sookie there would be no rest. She would slip from their bedroom to meet the sun’s rays, allowing the light to feed her skin. At some point, she would try to squeeze in a nap because tonight she needed to make an appearance with Mustapha masquerading as Eric at Fangtasia. They would need to fool both the public and the remaining Sheriffs. The word needed to travel far and wide that Eric Northman and his Queen were strong, healthy, and still in charge. There was a noise upstairs. “I’m coming,” Sookie said, and taking a deep breath, she straightened her spine, and headed toward the stairs.

As she climbed she felt how tired she was. It was a bone-deep tired, the kind that went beyond muscle, and went straight through to her soul. She thought about Gran. There had been days Sookie had seen this kind of tired in her Gran’s eyes, but, bless her, Adele Stackhouse would manage to turn her lips up into a smile and make her granddaughter’s life easier. ‘I understand it now,’ she said to her Grandmother in her head. ‘Thank you, Gran. Thank you for showing me the way.’ Finding her smile, Sookie quickened the pace that would take her to her husband.

8 hours earlier…

It was nearing sunset of the second night. Eric had risen yesterday and Sookie was sure he would be more himself. She called Charles and Owen to the front porch and said, “I need you to talk with Pam and Karin when they rise. He needs to hear about the baby and I don’t know how he’ll take it. I want to tell him. I don’t want him finding out some other way.”

Charles nodded. He glanced at Owen, “Don’t worry about it. They come through the front entrance of the guesthouse unless there’s something special going on. We’ll catch them before they head over.”

“I’ll stay on the other side of the yard,” Owen added. “Bubba’s been staying at the Compton place. I
should be able to grab him before he gets too close,” and then he looked more closely at Sookie.
“How are you holding up? He didn’t really seem himself last night.”

“He was better just before sunrise,” Sookie replied. She wasn’t sure how much she could say, or
even wanted to say about the past twenty-four hours, even with people she trusted as much as their
guards. Pam had told her that being buried at a time like this was a kind of reboot for vampires.
Sookie now had a better understanding of what that meant.

When she had wrapped Eric in her arms in the tub after his rising from the ground, she had a moment
when he looked at her and she saw the lost vampire who had shown up on her road so many years
before. He had that same bemused expression and although he had moments when he knew who she
was, it became clear he wasn’t entirely certain who she was to him. She could feel he was comforted
by being held and when the water cooled, Sookie drained some and filled the tub again. Earlier,
when she stood behind him in the shower he had talked with her. He seemed to understand who he
was, but in the time it took to walk to the bath, he seemed to have taken a huge step back.

As he looked around them now, sometimes with purpose, sometimes with surprise, she realized he
had become deeply disoriented. This Eric was weaker, more vulnerable than the Eric who was
spelled by witches. When he was cursed, Eric didn’t know who he was although he still understood
his place and strength as a vampire. This Eric was different. This Eric seemed to be confused by his
impulses. He was fascinated by the look and feel of water running through his fingers in one minute,
then trying to surge forward when there was a sound outside. When he splashed water on the floor,
he apologized. This Eric was so different than the confident, assured Eric she loved.

Taking a washcloth, Sookie used it to squeeze warm water to run down his back. He sighed and
stretched back a little, tilting his head against her shoulder, but when he opened his eyes to see her,
he looked confused and that cut through her like a knife. Thankfully as one hour passed, and then
another, Sookie could see that Eric was becoming more present and she thought he would return to
where he had been when he came out of the ground, but it didn’t happen. It was like being on the
sidelines, waiting for certain connections in his head to find each other again and then, slowly, reknit.
‘I wonder if this was how you were after Rhodes the first time,’ she thought. She felt guilty thinking
back on those days. She knew that both Eric and Pam had spent time in a basement somewhere,
recovering from the aftermath of the explosion. Sookie only knew when Eric returned to his duties
that time because he contacted her. Even though they were bonded then, she never tried to see him
while he was hurt.

When the water cooled a second time, Sookie said, “Come on, then. Let’s go climb in bed and I can
rub your head.”

“That would be nice,” this Eric who seemed to know her and then didn’t rasped. The bond between
them was fuzzy. After she helped him dry off, she took him by the hand and helped him limp to their
bed. “Will you get in bed with me?” he asked her. His eyes were hopeful and it made Sookie’s heart
clench.

“Of course I will,” she smiled. “Wait here.” She walked to the small dresser and pulled out her
nightshirt. Once she pulled it over her head, she opened her eyes to find his face was very close to
hers.

“Do you want me to wear one of those?” he asked.

“Only if you want to,” and Sookie waited. He seemed to consider it, and then a strange look came
over his face as if he was trying to remember something. He reached out and placed his hand over
her breast, then met her eyes.
“No,” he told her. “I am comfortable like this.” He let his hand drop and looked away. Sookie could see his confusion, so she deliberately smiled, climbed up on the bed, and propped her back against the headboard before holding out her hand to him. He looked wary for a moment, then stepped forward and climbed on the bed on his own. Without another word, he curled himself on his side and laid his head on her lap.

“There,” she said, stroking his hair, “Isn’t this nice?”

“Who are you to me?” he asked and, in that moment, Sookie thought she would lose her resolve. It was hard, putting a stranglehold on her emotions, but she did it.

“I am your wife, Eric. I’m Sookie.” When he didn’t say anything, she asked, “Would you like me to tell you our story?” His head nodded under her hand and so she began, “I don’t know a lot about where you came from, but I know it was from somewhere in Sweden…”

Over the course of the night Sookie recounted everything she knew about Eric and Karin and Pam. She answered his questions when she could and told him when she didn’t know. At one point, she took a break to go downstairs to get herself a soda and him a bottle of blood. When she came back upstairs, his expression was clearer somehow. “I remember now, the part of about Thalia,” he told her. “I remember it!” Sookie nodded, and, climbing back on the bed, she resumed her story.

When she told him about the death of his Maker, Eric said, “I miss him, but I’m glad he is finally dead.” It was the most he had said about Appius Livius Ocella in a long time. She told him about Felipe de Castro, and she was just starting to talk about Freyda when he pulled back the sheets. He ran his fingers down the scars on her legs, the ones she still carried from her torture with Neave and Lochlan. “I have marks, too,” he said, and then he raised himself so he could show her the dimples on his chest and leg.

“The difference is yours will fill in. Mine never will,” Sookie shrugged. “Guess you’re the lucky one.”

“I’m the lucky one because I’m married to you,” he said earnestly, and Sookie could see that Eric was finally connecting thoughts that included her.

“Makes two of us,” she smiled and leaned forward to kiss him.

“I can’t make love to you,” he was solemn. “My parts are not working,” and he looked distressed.

“Well, you give it another night or two and you’ll be good as new,” Sookie assured him.

As daylight approached, Eric had become even more himself. He remembered his time as Sheriff and his time as King. He remembered they were married and, although he wasn’t too clear about their pledging or the past few months, Sookie was confident that Eric would continue to heal and heal fully, restoring the vampire she knew.

Exhausted, she slept beside him for most of the morning. In late afternoon she got up long enough to eat and stand in the sun. She called Mustapha to confirm their plans for the Sheriff’s meeting.

When they finished, Sookie called Amy Ludwig and asked about Eric’s condition and progress. The doctor listened as Sookie described how Eric had been almost himself and then regressed. “I haven’t heard of any vampire coming out of the ground with his head all together!” the doctor snapped. “They go back to their beginning state and it takes a few days for them to reclaim their personalities. If he was almost normal when he emerged, the only thing I can think is being in that Fae-soaked ground really helped him.”
“But it didn’t last,” Sookie added.

“He’ll be fine,” Doctor Ludwig said dismissively. “Just be patient!”

As the sun started to set, she called the guards. She had no doubt Eric would rise remembering more. He might even remember everything that happened before the explosion. When he did, he would reach out for their child, and she would need to tell him. Sookie knew that in the last few weeks Eric had grown very attached. He would speak to her belly and his joy in their daughter was almost a physical presence. Sookie didn’t know how he’d take the news, but she knew he would grieve and she wanted him, wanted them, to have privacy and space to do that.

“I can feel him,” she glanced away from Charles and Owen. “I must go!”

When she entered their chamber, Sookie crawled up onto the bed and snuggled beside him just as Eric’s eyes opened. He looked so much better. His skin was filled out with muscle that had been his at the time he was made vampire. His teeth were still growing, but his jaw looked more defined. “I am glad you are here, Sookie,” he said in a voice that was almost his own.

“Back at ya,” his wife smiled and leaned forward to kiss the end of his nose. As she leaned back, smoothing her hand over his cheek, she could see his skin carried the gray pallor of silver poisoning. “Would you like some blood?” she offered and shifted to rise over him.

“You are well?” he smiled, and his hand likewise rose to tweak a strand of her hair and then tuck it behind her ear. “And are you well?” he asked and before Sookie could stop him, he laid his hand lower on her belly. Sookie tried not to flinch. The swell of her belly remained, although it was only a hollow promise now. Doctor Ludwig assured her that in time everything would move back into place. Eric’s eyes locked with hers and his mouth tilted down, “What has happened?” he asked and without waiting or asking, he was in her head.

“Eric!” she protested and then she didn’t. Sookie relaxed and gave him what he wished. She relived every moment of the explosion. She remembered waking up beneath him and how he looked. She relived the horror of Doctor Ludwig’s hospital and the race to save him, and she let him feel her despair when she heard the ground being shoveled in to cover both he and Karin.

“Sookie?” She raised her eyes to his and she could see the question he needed to ask, and how afraid he was to know the answer.

“Are you ready?” and she waited for him to nod. Red tears were already streaking his face when she remembered the terrible day. She didn’t remember all of it. She purposely skipped to her return home, and when she remembered sealing their daughter’s coffin, Eric’s voice caught. He made a sound that was at first a hiccup, and then the sound transformed into a loud, broken moan. Burying his face in her lap, Eric Northman wept. It wasn’t the weeping of a man. It was the broken cries of a child and the sound of it broke Sookie’s heart all over again.

In the guesthouse, both Karin and Pam felt the impact of their Maker’s grief like a punch to the gut. “He knows!” Pam gasped.

“No shit!” Karin gasped as well. “Good thing he freed us. Imagine if we were closely bonded!”

“I hope Sookie’s okay,” Pam glanced in the direction of the main house.

“He would never hurt her,” Karin shrugged before leaning forward as another wave of guilt and pain washed over them. When the swirl of emotion ebbed, Karin said, “I think I blame him for our
“What troubles?” Pam exhaled and sat up a little straighter.

“Our inexplicable urge to mate,” Karin hissed. “He is so happy with his little Princess that I think he pushes it through to us.”

“You are really blaming our Maker for Thomas?” Pam laughed.

“No, but how else do you explain Misha?” Karin smirked until she caught Pam’s expression. Pam was not looking amused.

“I don’t want to explain him,” Pam’s tone was sharp. “I’m happy. I like him. Maybe more.”

“Shit, Pam!” Karin sat back. “He’s trouble! You have to know that! Thalia doesn’t trust him, and I’ve heard Thierry tell stories that made my hair stand on end! Are you sure?”

Pam opened her mouth, but before she could reply, Bubba walked into the parlor. “That sound Mr. Eric is making is just breaking my heart!” he announced. “I just about gave up when we buried that little girl, but hearing him cry that way? I can’t stay. I’m going to take me a walk over near Maxine’s. I heard they have cats hanging around that dumpster out back.” Bubba looked again toward the main house, “It’s enough to make you want to lie down and cry,” and he started to hum the song that went with the words.

After he left, Karin said, “Do you think we should follow him?”

“And eat cats?” Pam grimaced.

“No!” Karin retorted, “No, make sure he doesn’t find any trouble.”

“He’s Bubba!” Pam shook her head. “No one bothers him!”

“Well, I wish a couple cats would fix my worries!” Karin gasped. The emotions that rolled over them were less sharp than before, but managing and blocking still took some concentration. Makers, even new Makers, tended to muffle their stronger emotions, and in other circumstances what Eric was sending to them might be considered cruel, but both women understood. In his re-emerging state, he was probably unaware of the effect he was having on those around him. If Pam and Karin were to physically move farther away the impact would lessen, but, with things as they were, neither woman suggested it.

After a minute, Pam said, “You know Thierry’s motives aren’t exactly pure. He has got to be jealous about Nabila. I was there in Boston. Thierry treated her badly. It could be he’s just blaming Misha for his own bad behavior.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Karin shrugged. “He does want her back and he knows he has no chance, but he has a lot of background with Misha. Did you know Misha killed Thierry’s Maker?” Pam’s startled look was Karin’s answer. “Thomas told me Thierry adored her. Misha thought he was doing Thierry a favor. Cut her head off right in front of him.”

“There has got to be more to it,” Pam said steadily. “Misha is smart and he thinks ahead. He is not the best at explaining his motivations, but he does have reasons for what he does.”

“Thierry holds a grudge,” Karin told her sister, “and if you tell Misha that, it will probably mean that Thierry ends up finally dead.”
“Misha admires Thierry,” Pam was shaking her head, “I think he’d like to see Thierry return and take up some role in New York. I don’t think he has any idea Thierry’s angry with him. I know they talk from time to time. You trust Thierry?”

“Thomas does,” Karin nodded. “So do I. I can see you don’t want to hear this, Pam, but what do you really know about Misha? You haven’t known him all that long…”

“I don’t want to talk about this right now,” Pam shook her head. “Our Maker’s grief is making it hard for me to think.” Pam gave Karin a direct look, “I’ve agreed to live with him, Karin. I’ve agreed to be his companion. He counts me his Queen in all things.”

“Fuck a Zombie!” Karin hissed. After a minute, Karin nodded, “Okay, Queen Bee, I get it. Does this mean I have to genuflect when you come into the room?”

“Yes, and kiss my hand,” Pam laughed, then more seriously she said, “Thank you, Karin.”

“I worry about you, Pam,” Karin told her. “I worry about you a lot.”

“Stop,” Sookie leaned over, alternately kissing and stroking his hair, “It isn’t your fault. If anyone is to blame, it’s me. You told me not to go. You didn’t want me traveling, but I wouldn’t listen. I just…” and her voice caught as she thought about how happy she’d been to have pulled off something she thought would surprise and delight him.

“I was delighted to see you, Lover,” he told her, and she realized he had pulled her thought from her head. Eric kept his gaze fastened at some point across the room and Sookie realized he was looking toward his office. After a moment he sighed, and Sookie could almost feel the edge to it, the sorrow that was rolling from him. “I was surprised to see you, but then I realized what Compton was saying, what it meant. I was more afraid than I have ever been in either of my existences.”

“We survived, Eric, you and I. We survived because of you,” Sookie didn’t look at him. She found she, too, was looking at the door to the office. She started to think about it, and then she caught herself and clamped down on her emotions again. ‘Don’t!’ she commanded herself. ‘Think about it tomorrow.’

Eric rolled in her lap so he could look up at her, “You have been doing that, haven’t you, Sookie?” When she didn’t answer, he captured her hand and tugged until she looked at him. “You have been the strong one, like your hero.”

“My hero?” she asked. She couldn’t think who he meant.

For some reason, Sookie laughed. It wasn’t a pretty laugh and Sookie could hear the edge of hysteria in her voice. Eric grabbed her hand and squeezed until she looked back at him. His eyes were dark, “Thank you, Älskade,” he said solemnly, forcing her to respond.

“For what, Eric?” she stammered, but just saying it, and the way he was looking at her, made her feel as if she was on solid ground again.

“For insisting that our daughter have a proper burial.” He pulled her hand to his lips and then sat up. He looked better, although his skin was still gray. Watching her, he positioned himself so his back was against the headboard, and then, carefully, he pulled her until she was the one being held. When she laid her head against his chest Sookie realized that in giving comfort, Eric was himself comforted. Holding her in this way made him feel better about his own state.

As she was thinking about this Eric said, “In my day she would have been taken into the woods and left. Even the blanket that wrapped her would have been removed. We believed since the Gods had seen fit to leave her incomplete, she should be returned to them.”

“I couldn’t just leave her!” Sookie found she was grateful to be within the circle of his arms and she felt herself relax for the first time in days. “I had to bring her home,” she whispered against his chest.

“It was the right thing, Min Hustru,” he murmured the words against her head. After a minute, he said, “Did you give her a name?” Sookie couldn’t answer. She just shook her head. Eric tensed a little, and then she felt him nodding above her, “Then we will fix that. She should have a strong name, one that lets the Gods know she is claimed by her family. It will help my ancestors to find her and give her a place among them.”

“What was your mother’s name?” Sookie closed her eyes, listening to the sound his words made within his silent chest. It surprised her that in all this time she had never asked about either of his human parents. Somehow she now thought of Appius as his parent, and that made her sad.

“Gerda,” his voice was steady.

“Then that’s what we should call her,” Sookie told him. “Is that okay?”

“Gerda,” he nodded. “She should be named for her closest female relative in the underworld.” After another minute, he said, “It is your tradition to give a child a second name. I would like that second name to be yours. You are so strong and it will make her strong, too. Will you agree?”

Sookie nodded, “Sure, Gerda Sookie Northman. It’s a good name.”

Sookie could feel his satisfaction. She wasn’t surprised when he asked, “Can you show me where she rests?”

“I put her right next to Gran,” Sookie told him, wiping the tears from her face.

“Then come, Sookie,” and Eric pulled her with him to the side of the bed. “We will go and tell our daughter her name.” He looked out the window for a moment and Sookie got the impression he was communicating with someone. He glanced down at her and gave her a faint smile. When Eric stood and stepped toward the closet, he immediately staggered. Sookie jumped from the bed to catch and steady him. Together they walked to the closet. They picked out clothes and helped each other dress, and then, hooking her shoulder under his arm, Sookie walked at his side down all the stairs until they reached their front door.

Sookie knew Karin and Pam were waiting for them on the front porch.
Eric stopped and made an effort to straighten himself. “Karin,” he said to his oldest, “I am in your debt.”

Karin stepped forward and then into her Maker’s open arms, “I am grateful for this life you have given me,” she replied. “What I gave is only a small part of the debt I owe you.”

“You owe me nothing,” Eric assured her, “It is I who am grateful.”

“I grieve with you,” Pam said from where she stood.

Eric looked over Karin’s head at his other progeny, “Thank you for sharing your blood to heal Sookie. Thank you for helping her to…” and he stopped. His throat was working and a red tear fell from his eye.

“Are you going there now?” Pam asked. No one needed to explain where ‘there’ was. They all knew. When Eric nodded, Pam walked up beside him and together with Karin, they stood on both sides of him, helping him to walk. Sookie fell in behind them and Charles walked with them as well.

The ground was uneven and the walk long enough that Sookie knew she wouldn’t have been able to support Eric the whole way. Her husband was a large man and the silver weakness in his limbs made it hard for him to go very far on his own. When they arrived at Gran’s grave, Karin and Pam lowered Eric onto the bench. Pam stepped forward, pointing to the place where the daisies had been turned back. “She rests there.”

“Had she lived in my time as a human she would have been placed on my lap before all in the great hall,” Eric said, looking at the spot Pam pointed out. “I would have proclaimed her name before the people and she would have become one of us.” He started to stand, and then reached out to Karin for help. Leaning on her, he walked to the gravesite and raised his wrist to his mouth, but his fangs were still too small to puncture his skin. Pam noticed and produced a small knife from somewhere. Eric accepted it and drew it across the palm of his hand. He turned his head to look at Sookie as his blood dropped onto the ground. “This is Gerda Sookie Northman. She is of my blood and the blood of my house.” He licked the wound, sealing it, and then offered the blade to Sookie. Stepping forward, Sookie drew the blade across her own palm and holding it out, allowed her blood to drip to the ground. After a minute, Eric took her hand, licked her palm, and then took the knife from her and licked the blade clean as well.

They turned and, together with Karin’s help, maneuvered to get Eric back to the bench. “I saw her box,” he told Sookie. “Did you give her anything else, things to take with her?” Sookie remembered watching documentaries about Viking burials and how the bodies were found surrounded by things they would need in the underworld. She figured that was what Eric was talking about.

“I put her bunny with her,” Sookie told him as she sank down on the bench beside him. She took his hand between both of hers and held tight.

“That is good,” Eric replied. “Children should have toys,” and then he slipped into downtime.

Karin and Pam became still and together they sat or stood, silent in their thoughts for almost an hour. It was late and Sookie didn’t need a watch to know the sun was coming. “We should get back,” she said out loud. Karin and Pam both nodded and moved to both sides of Eric. They helped him stand and they slowly walked back toward the main house. Charles went ahead, opening doors, and clearing a path for them. When Eric was back upstairs, Karin, Pam, and Sookie went outside to stand on the porch.

Charles came out of the house after a few minutes and handed Sookie a plate with a sandwich and a
glass of milk. He gave her a look and continued off the porch. “Thanks,” Sookie said weakly in his wake.

“Sit down and eat something,” Pam told her.

Heidi stepped forward from the direction of the guesthouse. “I have handed over patrol of the grounds to the Weres,” she announced. Mustapha’s Pack guarded the Bon Temps house during daylight hours. “All is quiet.”

“It won’t be tomorrow,” Karin sighed. She looked at Sookie, “Are you sure you are ready for Fangtasia? There will be questions. You must make it look like there is nothing wrong, that all is well.”

“I’ve announced the news about the baby,” Sookie sniffed, taking a bite of the sandwich and then laying it back on the plate. “If we look a little off, people will think it’s that. The invitations are out and we can’t delay. Every day he’s not seen fuels more speculation. I saw something on the Internet earlier today that said reports of Eric still being around were a hoax.”

“Sookie’s right,” Pam nodded. “The sooner people see him, the better. Mustapha knows what to do?”

“He better,” Sookie growled. “If he hams it up or goes all Blade on me, I swear I’ll summon my own blade and kill him dead!” and then she softened, “I don’t mean that! He’s doing us a big favor. He knows what’s at stake. He’ll do good.”

“Are you sure we can’t be honest with the Sheriffs?” Karin asked. It wasn’t the first time. The decision to keep the news of Eric’s condition to a small group meant they would not be telling many of the Sheriffs. It was a decision that didn’t sit well with Karin. These were vampires sworn to Eric Northman’s service. Karin felt if they were being asked to risk their lives defending him, they deserved honesty.

“Eric’s told me stories of spies, even among Sheriffs. There are some I trust, Indira, for one, but I just don’t know the others well enough to trust them with his life. There’s a saying where I come from, ‘Ignorance is bliss.’ If they don’t know, they won’t be burdened with hiding it.” Sookie glanced back at the house, “He’s so much better. He remembers everything now, but you see what the silver has done.”

Pam nodded, “It will take awhile for the silver to flush from him. Weeks. Maybe longer.”

“He is much better than he should be!” Karin shook her head. “It feels like magic.”

“I think it’s this place,” Sookie nodded. “I think it’s all the Fae magic in the ground and the air around here. I was told that if I was ever injured, if I could get back here I would regenerate. I think it works for vampires, too.” Sookie set down her plate and leaned forward, “I want to take him home to New Orleans. I think we’ll be able to protect him better there and I know it will be easier for him to move around, but I want to let him get as much benefit as he can by being here, too.”

Karin agreed, “The Palace is more secure. After Fangtasia we should make a plan.”

Unexpectedly, Sookie yawned. It just burst from her and she laughed uneasily, “I’d better head inside before my face just splits apart.”

“I’ll stay here with Eric tomorrow night,” Pam announced. “It will give us time to talk. I am returning to New York the night following the Sheriff’s meeting.”
“Not Minnesota?” Sookie asked.

“No,” Pam told her, and found a small smile crept across her face as she thought of her King’s warm eyes and funny gap-toothed smile, “New York is my home now.”

“Oh,” Sookie said. The telepath looked as though she would say something else, but then seemed to think again. “Well, all right then,” she smiled, and walked back into the house thinking her evening was over, but then Thalia arrived.

As Sookie settled next to Eric and settled her arms around him, he whispered, “It is better Thalia has come. You will see.”

Sookie wondered if he had heard what she said to Thalia but before she could ask him, he fell into his day death. ‘Yup,’ she thought, snuggling in and closing her eyes, ‘Tomorrow is another day.’

Shreveport

“Stop looking at the door like that,” Indira laughed. “You’ll know when they get here.”

Thierry almost snapped back but he caught himself, schooling his face into his courtier’s smile, “Like everyone here, I am most anxious to see our King and Queen. The reports have been alarming. It will set my fears at rest to see them.”

“You know that’s not who you’re looking for,” Indira laughed. “If I was a cruel woman, I would have them walk in the back door just so they could see how much they’ve bothered you.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Thierry rocked back on his heels, plastering his most polite smile under his cold eyes.

“Of course you don’t!” Indira laughed louder and walked away.

“Your informants were not discrete,” Rubio walked up beside him. Thierry hadn’t had much interaction with this Sheriff. He was someone the French Sheriff considered ‘home grown.’ Rubio hadn’t served any other monarch but Eric Northman. He was a vampire who moved here and was given his position through promotion, although some said because he was the only one left standing.

“Then everyone…”

“Yes,” Rubio nodded, “We all know you’ve been watching them. Even they know you’ve been watching them. If it’s any consolation, Nabila’s furious. If she didn’t care for you, she wouldn’t be so bothered.”

“And how would you know?” It slipped out before Thierry could stop himself.

“Because I nest with a woman and she understands these things. You should know I’ll help you in any way I can. I have money riding on you,” and Rubio flashed him a smile and a thumbs up. Thierry wasn’t sure whether he was comforted or appalled. As he glanced around the room, it seemed everyone was watching him with some interest and he felt a level of discomfort he hadn’t in quite some time. Fortunately, Thalia chose that moment to walk in.

While they weren’t exactly friends, Thierry did feel they had reached an understanding with each other. “I need to speak with you as soon as the official part of the evening is over,” she hissed. Thierry assumed she meant the welcome they would extend to Eric and Sookie. When he finished nodding, Thierry looked up to see Thomas and Nabila staring at him. Thomas looked amused, but Nabila was looking at him in a way that should have dropped him where he stood. Her lip curled and
he was hard-pressed not to laugh. They moved as Maxwell Lee walked through the door behind them. The tall, elegant vampire hadn’t changed much. He looked around him and Thierry thought he was hoping to see Pam.

Karin walked in the door next and without having to be told, the Sheriffs stepped forward assembling in a semi-circle. Sookie came through the door and behind her was the King. Thierry bowed along with his peers, but there was something about this that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He found he was glancing up to really look at Eric Northman. While the Viking appeared as he should, nodded as he should, there was something different, something Thierry couldn’t quite put his finger on. From his position, he glanced beside him to see Thalia was doing the same thing.

The silence stretched, and Thierry began to wonder if they were being punished when the King finally said, “Rise!” He half-bowed again, looked at his Queen, and said, “Thank you for coming. I was at Rhodes and while I am as you see, my voice was damaged. I have asked my Queen to speak for me,” and he seemed to step back.

Sookie was staring up at him and when he made that shuffling move, she took his hand, as if to hold him in place. “Thank you for coming on such short notice,” the telepath told them. “You have all heard the rumors, and while we can’t go into all the details of how we were able to escape Rhodes, we did. You also know we weren’t exactly uninjured.” Thierry thought she was alluding to the loss of their child. The announcement had come from the both of them. It was formal and asked that during this time of mourning that people respect their privacy. It had caused some talk in the vampire community. There were documents explaining how the couple had achieved their unusual state. Jane, the vampire in charge of the research hospital, had published a paper on the topic so they understood the connection between Northman and the child his wife had been carrying. The general consensus among vampires was that the loss was a good thing given the implications of a successful birth of this type to a vampire would cause difficulties.

“We are a successful kingdom. We are rich, richer than we’ve ever been. The work you and your Areas have done in promoting the vampires here and their businesses as well as those ventures that help to fund all of us, like the wind turbines and gas extraction, not to mention the port in New Orleans, are making us the envy of our neighbors. But jealousy can be a dangerous thing.” As Sookie drew a breath, those around him were nodding. Thierry heard that when the last takeover came here, all the Sheriffs except Eric Northman had been killed. There were other vampires who were spared as long as they agreed to become spies and they were sent away. Then there were those like Indira, Maxwell, and Rubio who lived under the rule of their new King, hoping from night to night that they would survive.

“When the rogues were crossing our kingdom, causing trouble between us and the humans, we had patrols. Karin tells me that in the past few months we’ve started to turn our attention to other things.”

“The rogues have stopped, Lady,” Rubio confirmed.

“I would…” and Sookie glanced up at the King who was smiling at all of them, “We would ask that you bring the patrols back for a little while longer. Watch for strangers. If there is trouble coming, it would be soon, particularly if someone thought we were weak right now,” and she glanced at Eric again. Thierry thought he saw her tug at the King’s hand, and the North Man frowned and then looked down at her.

Karin stepped forward, “The King and Queen will be traveling back to New Orleans in the next week. It is our capital and it will be easier to coordinate things from there.” She nodded at Maxwell Lee, “We will rely on you, Sheriff Lee, to make sure all is ready for our coming.”
“When do you think you’ll be traveling?” Thomas asked.

“Following the next Assizes,” Sookie replied, and then looking at Rubio, said, “It’s in your Area, right?”

“We will be ready,” Rubio was all smiles.

“Thank you for allowing us to delay your opening tonight,” Sookie said to Indira. “We don’t have anything more for now, but we’ll stay for awhile if that’s okay?”

“Thank you,” the King repeated. Northman was looking at Indira, and Thierry almost thought that his uneasiness about the King might be his own imagination. After all, they had been close to the explosion. They had lost this child they made. They were worried now about a takeover and although they both looked sound, the King admitted he had suffered some deficit. The couple was moving toward their customary booth and the King’s movements appeared as they always did. He moved like a warrior.

Thalia reappeared at his side. She held a photograph in her hand, “Do you know this vampire?” Thierry found himself looking at Misha’s Second.

“Yes, that’s Carlo,” the French vampire nodded. “He belongs to New York,” and then Thierry frowned. “You saw him here?”

“I wish I had,” Thalia shook her head, “It might have been his King checking on Pam. No, this was taken in Jackson at the palace of Russell Edgington. He was in Compton’s quarters. I think he was looking for something, or hiding something.”

“Was he captured?” Thierry asked. He wasn’t surprised when Thalia hissed, shaking her head and complaining of the guards’ incompetence. He was sure if Carlo was being held he would have heard of it already from Misha. “Do you know where he was headed?” he asked when Thalia finished.

“Not exactly, but North.” She glanced around the room, “Why would he be there?”

“You can’t turn on the television without seeing some tribute to Bill Compton,” Thierry smirked. “That Vampires First group is being blamed for everything. They are pointing at Compton as the voice of the modern, enlightened vampire.”

“He was no enlightened vampire!” Thalia snapped. “He was a weasel that was headed for a short drop on a sharp stake.”

“It doesn’t matter who he really was,” Thierry shrugged. “Bill Compton is the martyr that our own people are using to build a case for further cooperation.”

Thalia nodded, “There is no talking with the Kings about him,” she agreed. Bartlett Crowe and Russell Edgington were rallying others to end intolerance between humans and vampires. They turned their new vampire investigators to the task of rooting out Vampires First and challenged their human counterparts to join in the hunt by rooting out their own extremists. Those vampire consultants who had been working independently for human law enforcement agencies, like the FBI and Homeland Security, announced they were now working exclusively with the Kings’ new organization. The Kings, in turn, offered the human agencies the opportunity to continue using the vampire consultants, but under new contracts and for a price. It was a gutsy move, and one Thalia saw as being a first step toward controlling what information would be shared with human authorities in future. It seemed Bartlett Crowe had learned a lesson from the treatment he received from humans in his kingdom when the rogues put him under suspicion. Crowe would place a price tag on his
friendship and not rely on the friendliness of humans in future.

“I was not aware of a link between Compton and Misha,” Thierry mused. “They were both in Boston, but I never saw them interact.” Thierry reviewed every memory he had of that time. They would have been together at the movie. Misha had appeared with Pamela. Pamela knew Bill. Thierry shook his head, “No, I don’t think there was any opportunity for them to form some sort of connection.” He glanced around before saying, “I also have something I wish to show you,” and he handed Thalia the card he had received.

Thalia held it in her hand for a long moment, studying the words. “Have you received a similar request in past?” she asked mildly.

Thierry was not fooled, “No, he has never before asked me to spy since I left New York.”

Thalia nodded, “What will you answer?”

“That my Master is among us and my fealty is his,” Thierry didn’t hesitate.

“I will tell Pam,” Thalia nodded. “She should know Misha’s Second was close. She has agreed to be his, did you know?”

Thierry’s eyes widened, “I am not surprised Misha asked,” he replied. “I am surprised she agreed.”

“She knows what she sees,” Thalia looked away. “The North Man taught her to be wary of rumors, not making up her mind until she had facts. This,” and Thalia held up the photo, “is a fact. It is nothing substantial, but it is worth investigation. She will see that.”

“If Misha has decided he needs her by his side, we are all in danger,” Thierry suddenly felt gloomy. He glanced across the room where Nabila was standing too close to Thomas. They were smiling and talking in an animated way with Rubio Hermosa. The only thing that made him feel better was seeing the feral look on Karin’s face as she also watched the couple.

“Then perhaps it is time you decided to do something about this fate of yours.” It was an interesting statement and Thierry turned to look at Thalia. She was looking at him in a sharp way. She glanced over toward Nabila and Thomas, and then a knowing smile crept over her face, “How are you going to advance your cause sitting here, little Sheriff? You think mooning over her is going to convince her you will make things right?”

“What did you have in mind?” Thierry asked.

“I will travel to hunt this one down,” Thalia said, waving Carlos’ photograph, “I will follow the trail and see where it leads. There is something that we can’t see, something that connects these misfortunes, and I want to find it. I think I know where the path will lead. So do you.”


“I would need to abandon my duty,” and Thierry glanced at the corner booth where the King and his Queen were holding court.

“Resign. I will tell them you’ll be working with me. The North Man will understand,” Thalia assured him.

“I’ll consider it,” he said noncommittally. He couldn’t help glancing at Nabila again and Thalia
followed his look.

“Stop fretting,” Thalia scoffed. “She isn’t going anywhere! Karin holds your friend by the short hairs. Nabila will be alone soon enough, wondering where her fate will take her. If you are able to clear her name, she’ll be grateful.”

“You think he was behind her disgrace, too?” Thierry asked. There were days he wondered if he was being paranoid, connecting so many troubles back to the New York King, but it appeared Thalia agreed with him.

“Why don’t we find out?” and Thalia flashed him one of her rare smiles.

Bon Temps

“Maude was so pleased. He ceded Sanctum to her and she has her people up there working with Barbara to make it ready. There will be a place for those who need healing to go,” Pam smiled. The conversation with her Maker had drifted from business to her recent time in Boston and New York. She talked of her new ventures with Felipe de Castro, and somehow she realized she had spent the past half hour talking almost exclusively of the New York King. “I can feel your concern,” she said, trying to head off the growing disquiet she was receiving from her Maker. “I’m not a child. I’m keeping my eyes open.”

“Are you?” Eric growled. On some level he knew he was grieving and that was making him less tolerant, but it was clear that Pam was not being cautious. She was enamored of this King, but not able to be open about it. That told him that she didn’t fully trust Misha on some level. “You know he is powerful. You know that he is capable of violence…”

“So are you!” Pam snapped, and then she glanced away, “We are vampire. It is who we are,” she added.

“You should remain here,” Eric nodded. “Distance may help you see better.”

“I’m heading back tomorrow,” Pam announced.

“I could command you.” Eric knew as soon as he said it he had made a mistake.

“You have freed me!” Pam protested. “You tell me you respect my choices, but then when it comes to who I would bring into my life, you throw doubt. You doubted Miriam, and now you doubt Misha.”

“I didn’t doubt Miriam,” Eric told her, “She was human and desperate to live. You wished her. She would have been your progeny. It would not have ended well.”

“And there you go again,” Pam shrugged. “How do you know? Everyone said that you would never succeed with Sookie, but here you are. Sometimes what people assume is not right. Sometimes those improbable things are the right things.”

“You will return to him?” and Pam could tell he was asking her a different question.

Holding her head up, Pam said what she should have from the beginning, “I have agreed to be his companion, his mate,” and when Eric hissed, she said, “We aren’t bonded, but I won’t rule it out in time.”

“What kind of mate could he be to you?” Eric’s voice was angry. He felt his own loss and his heart ached at the thought of Pam having to experience loss. “He is not worthy of you. You are…..”
“I made this decision,” Pam was becoming angry, too. “This was my choice! He is charming and funny. He understands my background and we fit together. You don’t know!”

“I know this is a bad decision,” Eric snarled. “You are playing with fire and you could get yourself burned.”

“I thought you would be happy for me,” Pam’s tone turned cold. “I thought you could find it within you to support me as I have supported you. There were many decisions you made over the years that I didn’t agree with. You left me in the end to live in the mess you left, and I did. I thrived without any guidance from you! I saved your Queen. I have taken the jobs you have offered and stood beside and behind you, and this is my thanks?”

“I would protect you!” Eric protested.

“From what? Your jealousy? Your inability to see me with anyone but yourself?” It was a hard accusation, but one that was not unusual between a Maker and his progeny. “You have Sookie. Karin and I are your progeny. We have been your daughters, your lovers, your sisters, and your friends over years and years and in one fell swoop, we are kicked down a notch forever by someone who is not of your blood. We’ve accepted it. Maybe it’s time you accepted that we deserve the chance to find the same thing.”

Eric knew he was not doing well. Had he been thinking more clearly, he would have asked Pam to return to talk when he was more calm, less distracted by the memory of the small grave that held a child he hadn’t realized he loved with all his heart. Instead he said, “I can’t accept someone like that for you!”

“Then I don’t think I have anything more to say,” Pam shrugged. She stood up and walked outside. Eric heard her call to Bubba and then he heard her car start.

‘I hope I am wrong,’ he thought, but every instinct told him he was not.
Chapter 26 - The Warning Bell

Chapter Notes

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Nautical Note: There are places where rocks reach up from the ocean floor, great pinnacles that are a landmark to the fish under the water, but represent hazards to fishermen and great ships. These pinnacles are often marked with a tall buoy that has a bell so that even in the fog a sailor will know that there is something below the surface that could present a problem.

Shreveport

Sookie and Mustapha, disguised as Eric, left for Bon Temps. They had been on display in the corner booth at Fangtasia for over an hour being carefully watched by both vampires and humans. There was a stream of well-wishers who came close, offering condolences and assuring the couple everyone was happy they were back. For his part, “Eric” didn’t say much. He nodded and then looked away. Sookie was polite, but as the night continued, she looked more and more frazzled until they finally rose and made their way to the door.

Karin walked out with them, but then she returned to the club. Thalia was sitting on her chair at the end of the bar, and she elbowed Thierry who was standing next to her. “Watch this.”

Across the dance floor, Karin walked up to Thomas and Nabila. Rubio had been speaking with the couple but when the War Chief approached, he nodded and backed away. Thierry noticed Rubio didn’t retreat far. It seemed everyone was interested in what would be said next and since they all had vampire hearing, there was little chance of missing any part of it.

“What I have to say to you is personal,” Karin growled, and then shot a cold look at Nabila. Nabila smiled that Cheshire Cat smile of hers and Thierry had a moment when he thought Karin would spring at her.

“Chief,” Thomas bowed slightly. “It is always pleasant to see you. How may I be of service?”

Across the dance floor, Karin walked up to Thomas and Nabila. Rubio had been speaking with the couple but when the War Chief approached, he nodded and backed away. Thierry noticed Rubio didn’t retreat far. It seemed everyone was interested in what would be said next and since they all had vampire hearing, there was little chance of missing any part of it.

“The words on the surface were polite, but Nabila used her slightly superior tone and Thierry could see Karin bristle. Without a backward glance, the elegant vampire glided slowly away toward the back of the club, telling all of them how unconcerned she was about Karin the Slaughterer.

“Do you think we could go outside?” Karin asked Thomas once Nabila was gone.

Thomas shook his head, “No, I think I’m done accommodating you for the moment,” and he tilted his head, letting her know he was waiting.
Thierry thought Karin was grinding her teeth. “You said when I meant it I should call you,” Karin spit out. When Thomas didn’t respond, Karin stood a little straighter, and knowing every vampire would hear her, said, “I do miss you. I didn’t want to call to tell you. I wanted to tell you to your face, and I am here. I miss you at every rising and I miss you as the sun sets. You are in my mind in all my hours and my life is dust because you are not by my side.”

A smile played at the corners of Thomas’ mouth as he watched Karin grind out the words. She seemed to bite them off and spit them out, making clear her reluctance to admit these things about herself in a crowded place. When she finished and stood before him trying to look defiant, he said, “And what do you think I should do about this?”

“I think you should accept my apology and let me come home,” Karin replied, and she held her chin a little higher.

Thomas laughed, and even Thierry could see the confusion in Karin’s eyes, “Well,” Thomas said when he finished, “When you apologize, I’ll think about it!” The Arkansas Sheriff shook his head, “You are a puzzle!” he told Karin, and then he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving the War Chief open-mouthed in the middle of Fangtasia.

From beside his elbow, Thalia said, “You pay good money to get that kind of theater in other places.”

“I suppose,” Thierry agreed. He suspected if Nabila would ever consider speaking with him again, the humiliation he would endure would be much worse.

“I will head out to the Bon Temps house tonight,” Thalia drew Thierry back from the problem of Thomas and Nabila. “I will let the North Man know you are coming with me. You should prepare. I will leave within days. It would be best if you were ready to come with me at once.”

“I have things in Lafayette that need to be put In place,” Thierry protested. “There are on-going operations that can’t be abandoned.”

“Then reach out to Jane,” Thalia snarled. “She was your counterpart when this began. She is wasting her time in a lab coat. She was a Sheriff. Convince her to be a Sheriff again.”

“That is my King’s decision,” Thierry said automatically.

“It is our job to bring our King solutions to his problems,” Thalia countered. “Jane is a perfectly acceptable substitute for you. You have twenty-four hours,” and Thierry found himself trying to recall when he had actually agreed to go with the small vampire holding her own court on the bar stool beside him. “And while you’re at it,” she continued, “Go make peace with your friend, Thomas.” When Thierry didn’t say anything, Thalia added, “It is likely you won’t return from our errand, Frenchman. This is your quest and when the time comes, I won’t hesitate to push you forward. New York is older than you. I expect to bring back a pinch of your dust for your friend.”

“Your concern is heart-warming,” Thierry allowed the sarcasm to drip from his words.

“You wish to be a King, then think like a King. Thomas is a strong vampire who will likely be made King himself someday. He could prove a valuable ally. If, by some miracle, you do survive, you will want friends in many places. You have known him a long time. He holds your secrets…don’t deny it. Make things right between you before you leave to seek your true death.” It was the longest and best speech Thalia had made to him, and Thierry found he was touched by her concern. With a stiff bow, he headed in the direction that Thomas had taken.
Thalia pulled out her phone and texted Eric Northman. She thought about texting Sookie, then decided against it. The telepath had been angry last night and Thalia recognized her own feelings of guilt in the annoyance she felt toward the Viking’s wife.

Thalia glanced again in the direction the French Sheriff had taken. He wouldn’t be a bad traveling companion. In the time it took her to reach into her pocket for her phone, a group of humans had wandered too close, edging around her, and trying to act nonchalant. They were attempting to take selfies that would feature her in the photograph. Thalia supposed it was an attempt to make it appear they were all friends and ‘hanging out’ together. With a snap, Thalia’s fangs descended, and hopping from the bar stool, she snarled, shoved, and moved in one swift progression. She heard the distinct sound a phone screen made when it shattered. It was very satisfying.

Bon Temps

“I thought it went well,” Sookie told Eric. Mustapha was once more himself and he was nursing a tumbler of their finest Scotch over ice. “Well, aside from a couple things,” and she turned toward the Packmaster. “You can’t leave them bowing so long. You have to leave them just long enough to remind them of their place, but not so long that it feels as if they’ve done something wrong.”

Mustapha chuckled, “I’ll remember that. It just felt so good to see those smug sons of bitches with their asses in the air, groveling.”

“They are my smug bitches,” Eric’s lip lifted on one side, “Treat them accordingly.”

“I know we’re in mourning,” Sookie continued, “but Eric still interacts with people. The silent treatment and eye tracking from side to side is not something I can easily cover.”

“What do you think anyone noticed?” Warren asked. It was the first time Sookie had seen Mustapha’s mate in a long time. He had been waiting for them when they pulled up in front of the house in Bon Temps.

“They’re vampires,” Sookie shrugged. “They notice everything.”

“And forget nothing,” Eric added. “The Assizes is next week. It may be that I will be ready to assume my place by then.” Eric could feel Sookie’s concern heavily laced with skepticism. His physical injuries were healing quickly, but there was a lingering weakness from the silver that made his moving around difficult. They both knew that Sookie could cover a limp, but if he staggered or fell it would be seen.

Warren reached over and poked Mustapha, which prompted the Packmaster to say, “I’m sure that’s probably how it’s going to happen, but maybe I should practice with you just in case.”

There was a sound and Eric retrieved his phone. He was using his uninjured hand, but since it was not the hand he used most often, he fumbled it. Sookie leaned forward, and Eric stopped her with a swift look. She was trying hard, too hard, and it was starting to annoy him. “Thalia is coming,” he told them.

“Well, that’s our cue to leave,” Mustapha announced. “I’m serious, Eric. I’ll come out here tomorrow night and we can go over your list of small talk topics. You’re a pain in the ass, but you’re the pain in the ass I know. I’d miss you if anything happened to you.”

Warren stood as well and then, unexpectedly, hugged the vampire. Sookie could feel Eric’s astonishment and if she hadn’t been so surprised, she would have laughed out loud. “I’m very sorry for your loss,” he told Eric, and then he nodded to Sookie as well.
Sookie walked them out and when she returned, said, “Well, I think I’ll head upstairs and straighten up some things. We could use some clean sheets and the bathroom looks like a hurricane hit it.”

“Why are you avoiding Thalia, Lover?” Eric lifted his eyebrow, letting Sookie know she could tell him, or he’d just step into her head and take the answer for himself.

“I know I told you you’re welcome to stroll through my thoughts anytime, but you were really hurt at the time and I think it’s pretty low of you to hold me to that promise now,” Sookie snarled.

“A promise is a promise, Åskade,” he replied.

“Fine!” and Sookie crossed her arms over her chest. “She should have been with us, Eric! She has watched over you and guarded you as long as I’ve known you and when you most needed her, she took off with no explanation. I can’t help thinking that if she’d been here where she belonged…”

“Thalia owes me nothing, Sookie,” Eric held up his hand to interrupt her. “I owe her everything. She is with me because it pleases her. I have no claim on her. None.” Eric looked away and then sat up a little straighter, holding his hand out to Sookie, and bringing her into his lap when she stepped close. “I don’t know what Thalia saw in me. I was not a promising vampire when Appius first took me. I… I wept a great deal. I had been a chief’s son. My life did not seem the life I wished at the time, but when I realized what had been lost to me, before I understood the gift that this life is, I wished for final death often.”

Sookie could feel her husband settle beneath her in that way he did when he told stories of his life long ago. “Appius knew this, of course, and he used it to try and break me. He was a hard master. There was nothing too humiliating, too painful as he punished me for my lack of gratitude. Sometimes he believed I was using my grief to resist him and that attracted him. When that happened it was worse, but eventually I learned to enjoy the process, and that made him enjoy it less.” Sookie didn’t want to imagine what Eric was telling her and she bit her lips, trying not to think of the hell his life must have been.

“But you are so happy as a vampire now,” she whispered.

“Yes, that is true,” he told her. “Thalia didn’t teach me that joy, but she showed me that not all vampires were monsters. She took pity on me. She gambled with Appius and she forced him to make my treatment one of the stakes. She won me for jobs, and then she won me for training. She cheated. She is a skilled cheater,” and Eric laughed. “The first time she found me too damaged to fulfill the wager Appius owed her, she took it out of the Old Roman. She crippled him for weeks. I was never so grateful.”

“Why did she do that?” Sookie asked.

“She decided she liked me,” Eric shrugged. “Over time, she decided she liked me more. I’ve asked her, but she’s never given me a better explanation.”

“You’ve been together a long time,” Sookie said.

“Yes, long enough that I trust that Thalia has a reason for her actions. Don’t forget, Lover, she is the one who took you to Russell Edgington. She saved your life. It is one more thing on the long bill that I owe her.” Eric squeezed her a little, “You are my wife, Sookie. My debts are your debts.”

“What are you asking, Eric?” Sookie could feel it. He was working up to something he thought would make her mad.
“I am asking you to apologize to her, Lover,” he held her tight, anticipating she would try to break from his arms.

Sookie felt the quick spike of temper and then she thought of what Eric had told her. She thought of her own experience with the small vampire, everything Thalia had done and allowed. “Of course I will,” Sookie nodded.

When Thalia pulled up at the house, she found Sookie waiting for her on the front porch, and her mouth thinned to a flat line. Thalia didn’t want to have to hurt the telepath, but she was not going to be denied access to the North Man. She opened her mouth to tell Sookie to move aside, but then Sookie did the unexpected. The telepath bowed, her hands at her side, and from her position facing the floor, she said, “I ask your pardon, Thalia. I had no right to question you. I can only say that my grief and the strain of the past few days… well… I’m ashamed of myself and I hope you can forgive me.”

It seemed so out of character that it took Thalia a half a minute to respond. She was on the porch by then. “I understand,” she told Sookie. “There is no need to bow to me. You’re a Queen, his Queen. Just take me to him.” To give her credit, Sookie straightened up and didn’t try any of her human touching. She turned and led the way to the large room that ran along the back of the house. Eric was sitting in a large armchair near the fireplace. Thalia could see his weakness they all recognized the moment she realized the vampire she’d seen a few hours ago at Fangtasia was not this man. She turned back to Sookie, who had stopped at the door, “You’re using all your Fae tricks these days, I see.”


When Thalia declined, the telepath turned as if to leave, but Thalia said, “You should stay. You are standing at his side now. What I have to say are things you need to hear, too.” Once Sookie settled on the couch nearest Eric, Thalia announced her plans to leave again.

“But why?” Sookie couldn’t help the outburst. She glanced at Eric, then moderating her voice, she said, “I am so worried that others will figure out what we’re doing, just like you did. If we can’t fool people, Eric will be in danger, and there are so few of us to watch out for him.”

Thalia leveled a cold look in Sookie’s direction, and Eric said, “Sometimes the best defense is a strong offense, Lover.” He turned back to Thalia, “What do you know?”

Thalia brought out the photograph of Carlos, “I know this is the New York King’s second. He was in Jackson days ago. The guards there allowed him to get into the compound. He was in Bill Compton’s room, although I can’t tell why.”

“Compton was the bomber,” Eric said.

“You’re sure?” Thalia hissed, “The investigation is pointing toward the Vampires First movement.”

“I was there,” Eric reminded her. “He had the trigger in his pocket. He meant to kill me.” Sookie made a noise. Thalia knew he was sending his mate comfort, but his expression didn’t change. “He has had any number of opportunities to end me in the past. I don’t understand why he chose this place and this way, unless I wasn’t his only target. I am sure he was waiting for me.”

“You have seen the news stories,” Thalia said. It wasn’t a question.

“No one will believe me without proof,” Eric nodded. “Compton has become the people’s vampire. Even Edgington and Crowe seem willing to make him untouchable.”
“Someone should know the truth!” Sookie said.

“Sometimes truth is what others say it is,” Eric answered. He glanced again at the photo on the table. “Why is New York involved? I know Bill did it, and he,” and Eric pointed toward Carlos, “it would seem he knows, too. How?”

“The only way I can see is that New York was involved,” Thalia nodded. “Carlos was only there for a few hours and then he headed north. There are too many things that seem to have a whiff of New York. I wanted to tell Pam…”

“She’s left,” Eric interrupted. “She will be returning to him, to Misha, tomorrow.” When Thalia’s eyebrows pulled together, he said, “She is now his companion.”

“Surely she would not betray you!” Thalia hissed.

“No, I do not believe she will,” Eric replied, “But she believes herself attached to him. She spoke of bonding. She carries his blood, I smelled it in her. I have to assume he carries hers as well.”

Sookie sat up straighter and her mouth turned down. Eric could hear her thoughts and answered them, “I do not believe she would say or do anything to cause us harm, but if she has a blood tie, it will be difficult for her. Misha will know if she’s hiding secrets. If he is not as she believes, he will use that against her.”

“You can read her mind?” Thalia smiled. “Another talent!” and for a minute Sookie saw a look on Thalia’s face that reminded her of Gran every time Sookie managed to bring home a good report card and in that moment, the relationship between her husband and Thalia made sense. Thalia nodded, “I believe the answers we seek are outside our kingdom. I will track this Carlos, and then I want to finish my work in tracking the source of the rogues. I believe I will find a common thread. There is more,” and she waited for Eric to nod. “I am taking Thierry with me.”

“It leaves my western frontier open,” Eric told her.

“Jane can step in. There are those who know I stayed in Lafayette. Jane has had experience working the energy business. It is plausible. No one doubts my loyalty to you. We will say we are working at your request to track down Vampires First and purge them from our ranks. We will say your grief at the loss of your mate’s child is behind your enthusiasm for our hunt.”

“Only a healthy vampire, a vengeful vampire, would send out hunting parties,” Eric nodded. “It could help cement the illusion.”

“I don’t like it,” Sookie worried.

“We are telling people it is business as usual here,” Eric assured her. “It must appear that way as soon as possible. There are those who know I had a disagreement with Thierry;” and Eric could feel Sookie’s question. He hadn’t told her of his discussion and subsequent punishment of his Sheriff. “It was a matter of discipline,” he told her. “That, along with my inviting his estranged lover into my territory, would provide a plausible explanation for his seeking ways to win my approval.” Eric nodded toward Thalia, “When will you leave?”

“At tomorrow’s rising we will travel to Lafayette. It would be best if Jane was with us. I know she is not technically yours anymore but…”

“I will call her,” Eric nodded. Jane was one of the handful who knew the truth and Eric was certain she would do what he asked.
“Will you be able to reinforce the wards here?” Thalia asked Sookie. “They are strong, but it would best if they were refreshed.”

“Of course,” Sookie mumbled. Eric could feel his wife’s sadness. He could see the image of their lost child float through her thoughts, and he also felt her brutal suppression in the next moment. It was difficult, this sorrow. It intruded on their thoughts at odd moments, and the Viking found that sharing Sookie’s thoughts made it both more painful and more comforting at the same time.

“I am sorry for your loss, North Man,” Thalia startled him from his reverie. Eric found he couldn’t say the words so he nodded. As Thalia left, she thought about the pain she had seen on both their faces, how even their posture seemed to reflect the heavy weight they carried. ‘I might have changed that,’ Thalia thought and she felt guilty again at having been persuaded by Niall. ‘I will have to kill that Fae someday,’ she thought and the words felt as if they had the ring of prophecy.

Shreveport

Karin recognized Thomas’ car. She wasn’t sure where he was, but she knew that now she had a plan. Indira made a point of sidling up earlier to let her know Nabila would be staying with her this evening. “She asked if I had room for her. She didn’t mention Thomas, and I didn’t extend my invitation to include him.” Karin had stood woodenly until Indira pushed at her a little, “Go find him!” she hissed.

Karin felt ridiculous. She faced danger on a regular basis. She tracked and killed creatures for a living. She was often in places and among people who meant her harm, but the thought of confronting this vampire made her hands shake. The thought of telling him her feelings and accepting what would follow terrified her. She wasn’t sure what it was that was so frightening. She didn’t think he’d reject her, not really. She knew she was happy to be with him, but still she found she looked longingly at the door, thinking of all the errands and small jobs she could be doing instead.

Wrapping her fingers into tight fists, Karin forced herself to walk toward his car and then, with a quick nod, she positioned herself near the driver’s door and went into downtime, determined to wait him out.

As it turned out, several hours passed before she heard him say, “Are you waiting to mug me and steal my car?” Thomas was walking toward her from the opposite side of the parking lot. She wasn’t sure where he’d been all this time, but she knew it wasn’t Fangtasia.

“No,” Karin snapped, then rolled her eyes as she pulled in her temper. “No,” she repeated in a nicer tone, “I’ve come to apologize.”

“Oh,” Thomas looked bored. He reached into his pocket for his key fob. “Well, apology accepted. There, now you’ve finished your chore. You can go back to Bon Temps or wherever you’re staying.”

Karin could see this wasn’t going well. He wasn’t going to cut her any consideration, and so she did the only thing she could think to do. It was silly, but she hoped it would impress him with her sincerity. Keeping her eyes on his, she sank to her knees in front of him. He initially looked annoyed, but when she persisted, silently begging him with her eyes, he started to look uncomfortable. “Look, Karin, you don’t need to…” and Karin leaned over to place her forehead on his foot.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. She was happy she couldn’t see his expression. She closed her eyes and started talking. “I am sorry for everything I said. I’m sorry for running. I’m sorry for leaving you not knowing where you stood with me. I’m sorry for being a coward, because that’s what I am when it
comes to you. You scare me more than anything in all my existence, because I have no defense against you."

“You don’t need to be afraid of me…” his voice was softer now.

“But I am. What I feel for you is too much. I know if I let myself do this, I will never be the same again. I will want you to have everything.”

He shifted and his fingers hooked under her chin to lift her face toward him. Thomas sank to his knees, too, and his lips curved up in that way that showed just the hint of cruel self-satisfaction that she found so sexy. “Would that be so bad, Scary Monster? Trusting me?”

In spite of herself, Karin smiled. It had been a long time since he had used his pet name for her. “Not bad,” she stammered. “Terrifying…” and Thomas grabbed her hair and pulled her forward, capturing her lips. It was a punishing kiss, a demanding kiss. He slanted his head and forced her to open to him. He used his grip on her hair to pull her into him, but as the kiss progressed, his movements softened. He loosened his fist, and allowed his fingers to drift over her cheek, and then her jawline and Karin leaned in then, opening her eyes so she could watch him watching her.

He backed away, and when she swayed toward him, he placed his hand on her shoulder to hold her in place, not touching him. Keeping his eyes on hers, he rose to his feet. “It’s time to make a decision, Karin.”

Karin knew this was it, her moment, so she held up her hand, “I have,” she told him, and when he walked her around to the passenger side of the car and opened the door, she shut down the voice that screamed at her to run. This was Thomas. If he shattered her into a million pieces, it would be worth it.

“Where are we going?” she asked him.

“Arkansas,” he told her.

“I can’t!” she exclaimed.

Thomas’ face twisted into an angry mask and he pulled over, “Get out!” he snarled.

“No!” Karin snarled back, “There’s a reason!”

“There always is with you,” he said, and his voice was sad now. “Really, Karin. I don’t think this is going to work. It would be best if you just got out. I’m so far north we won’t see each other often. When things are more settled, I’ll see about going back to Kentucky. I don’t know what I was thinking, this was always impossible.”

“Don’t say that!” she cried out, “Please!” She looked at the woods that surrounded them and the moonlight streaming through the trees. “Just do me one favor, just one. Walk with me. Let me tell you what’s going on.”

Whether it was the tone of her pleading or the tear that fell down her cheek, Thomas nodded. Karin took his hand and led him into the woods. She stopped in a clearing where the moon shone all around them, and she stepped toward him. “I can’t tell you with words what you are asking,” she said. “It’s not my secret to tell, but I can let you feel what I feel for you,” and she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close. “Bond with me,” she said.

She felt him stiffen within her embrace, “Karin, that is a great deal to ask. You’re sure? There is no going back.”
“I should have said yes when you asked me before. I was a fool,” she told him. Watching him, she extended her fangs and pierced her tongue with them. Thomas’ eyes darkened. The smell of her blood was sharp and coppery and with a growl, Thomas stepped forward and claimed her mouth, drawing on her tongue. When she pierced his tongue as well, he groaned. He pulled his head back and opened his mouth, drawing in the scent of the air, his fangs displayed for her. Keeping her eyes on his, she pulled her hair to the side, and tilted her head.

“Karin,” he groaned, and his voice sounded like a prayer as he struck. They couldn’t rip the clothes from each other fast enough. He was on her, and she knew she scratched him, ripping the cloth of his pants when fumbling with the button took too long. He almost fucked her through her panties, then figured out what was in his way. When they recovered themselves, their bodies streaked with dirt and the rags of their clothing hanging haphazardly from arms and legs, they started to laugh. “That had all the finesse of a back alley brawl,” he laughed quietly, licking her neck.

“I know we can do better,” she told him, and she drew her fingernail across her shoulder blade, causing a bright flow to run down her body toward her breast. “Ready for round two?”

Bon Temps

Sookie sat on the hay bale watching Owen sprinkle more straw on the barn floor. Sookie had texted Jason and Michele the first day she woke in Bon Temps, telling them that the boys shouldn’t come out to care for the horses anymore. It was now over a week since either horse had been ridden, but Sookie was in no shape to do it. With the reduced number of guards, they couldn’t spare any of them either. Sookie reconciled herself to tethering the animals out near the cemetery. There was good grass and shade, and although it wasn’t real exercise, it got the horses out of their stalls. “I don’t know why I agreed to take horses on,” she moaned.

“You might have thought the old Prince would give you a magic barn with self-cleaning stalls and automatic feeders,” Owen teased.

“Grandfather doesn’t seem to know the meaning of the word ‘practical,’” Sookie smiled back.

It was near lunch. Owen headed to the guest house to take a shower and Sookie reminded him she’d have lunch ready for both he and Charles.

Charles was across the way at Bill Compton’s house. While technically they had no business being there, it made all of them uneasy, having the vacant dwelling so close. So far, no one official had been around, opening doors over there, and Sookie didn’t feel right asking the Bellefleurs or Vicks about it. She had mentioned to Eric that if the heirs decided to sell, she would be interested in buying the place. “I can’t imagine any of them would want to move out here. They have big, nice houses right in town and their kids’ friends are all there. They’ll want fair value, but, to tell you the truth, I just want to tear the place down and know I don’t have to worry about any more neighbors.”

Eric agreed, but then said, “When Mr. Cataliades comes, we should ask him to monitor any legal interest in the property.” There was something in the way Eric said it that gave Sookie the impression there was something he wasn’t saying.

“It’s not fair!” she had exclaimed. “I know you’re not telling the whole truth, but I have no way of finding out. Meanwhile, my brain is naked as a jaybird around you and there’s not a darned thing I can do about it!” Eric had teased her about getting her other kinds of naked and they laughed. It was a small gift, this ability to laugh around each other again. Sookie glanced up the stairs toward their bed chamber. Every day that passed showed more improvement, but it wasn’t fast enough.

The telepath was in the kitchen when Owen opened the front door. “Company coming,” he
Sookie wiped her hands and walked out onto the front porch. “Jason!” she said out loud. She could recognize her brother’s pickup from across town. Jason might be a respectable family man, but he still had Southern male flare. The magenta flames detailed over the hood and sides of every vehicle he owned made sure he was recognized wherever he went. Michele, his wife, just smiled about it, and Sookie figured, in the end, it wasn’t really her business. For all their relationship was good, Sookie was sure this visit was not going to be pleasant. It was in the way the truck barreled down the road and the hard way he cut the wheel into the driveway. When he swung out of the truck door, the set of his mouth told her she was right.

“What the fuck, Sook?” he growled. He stopped at the edge of the driveway and stood with his hands on his hips, a mirror image of her own stance. “Folks said you were out here! I told them if you were really here you’d call us, let us know you were all right. And here you stand, bold as brass!” He shook his head, “Guess that’s all kin means to you. Leave us worrying, not knowing. Michele’s been wracking her brain, trying to figure out what she did that made you decide to cut us off!”

Sookie’s posture softened, “It ain’t like that, Jason. It ain’t like that at all. Come on in out of the dust. I just made some lunch. Charles and Owen are here, and as soon as I get them set up, we can talk.” When her brother didn’t move right away, Sookie said, “I’m sorry. I should have called you myself, it’s just…” and a tear spilled down her cheek.

Jason’s expression softened, too, and he walked up and onto the porch. He looked at her for a moment, then opened his arms. Sookie stepped into his embrace and it felt so good, the comfort of her brother’s arms. “I’m sorry about the baby, Sis,” he said above her.

“Me, too,” Sookie whispered. It took a moment to pull herself together, but, when she did, she stepped back and led the way into the house. As they walked toward the back of the house, Sookie started to think through what she could tell Jason and what she couldn’t. She thought about Eric upstairs and the dangers they faced, and how being human made Jason and his family both vulnerable and a vulnerability.

Owen met them. He must have heard their conversation because he had a bag with wrapped food in hand. “Charles and I will eat over at the guesthouse. Don’t forget, Mr. C is supposed to be here today,” and he nodded at Jason, “Nice to see you, Jason. Horses are missing your boys.”

“Guess that duty’s falling your way,” Jason nodded back. Sookie shook her head, once more impressed with the shorthand of male conversation.

Once in the kitchen, she poured them both glasses of sweet tea. Jason sat up at the island and Sookie made chicken salad sandwiches with fruit salad on the side. Jason waited until she climbed into the seat next to him before saying, “Why didn’t you call, Sook?”

Sookie pushed fruit around the plate with her fork, “I’m not sure how to explain,” she said. “There’s things I want to tell you, but there’s things I can’t.”

“Things about what happened up there in Rhodes?” Jason asked. When she nodded, he asked, “Is Eric still, well, you know, living?”

“Yes,” and Sookie smiled. “He’s good. He’s fine.”

“Folks are saying he’s finally dead and the fella showing up around town is a look-alike. Folks are saying there’s no way Eric could have been in Rhodes and then disappeared like that if he wasn’t
finally dead.” Jason gave Sookie a hard look. “If he’s really gone and you’re in danger, Sis, you know I’ll do anything in my power to help you.”

Sookie leaned over and laid her head against Jason’s shoulder, and he wrapped his arm around her. It was like when they were children and she’d had a bad day at school. He’d wrap an arm around her and the world seemed better. “I brought him here,” she told her brother. “It was a Fae thing. I wished him here and he was.”

“No shit?” he whistled beside her. “Guess those fucking fairies were good for something after all, huh?” Then, after a minute, he said, “So, that dude showing up at Fangtasia is really Eric?”

Sookie thought about how she was about to lie to her brother, but there was too much at stake, so she said, “Yes, it’s really him,” and then she added, “We were the lucky ones. Most of the other vampires there were not.”

Sookie sat up and smiled up at Jason, watching his face, and feeling both relieved and guilty that he so easily accepted what she told him. “So you were there, too?” he asked, putting the pieces together. “Is that what happened to the baby?”

Sookie nodded, “The impact was too much. I buried her near Gran. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t,” Jason smiled a little, “I think Gran would be happy to have her great-grandbaby real close,” and with his words Sookie’s eyes welled up. Jason wrapped her up again and they just sat there in silence for a while. When Sookie nodded, Jason sat back again. “Now, I may be a simple country boy, but I can tell there’s something more going on here. You in trouble?”

“There’s always trouble with vampires,” Sookie shrugged. “We’re kind of waiting for me to heal up, truth be told. Once I’m better, we’ll be heading to New Orleans and hope the rumors of Eric being gone quiet down.”

“You think other vampires are going to come and try to take over?” Jason asked.

“Jeez, I don’t know why I assume you don’t know about this stuff!” Sookie grinned. “Yeah, this kind of thing can get takeovers started. So far we haven’t seen or heard anything. We’re out and about a little, as much as I can be, and hoping that takes care of it. Pictures of us are showing up on Internet and we’ll both be at the upcoming Assizes, but you know how rumors are. I guess it’ll just take time.”

“What can I do?” Jason asked.

“Well, tell Michele that I miss her, for one thing,” Sookie smiled. “It’s nothing to do with you. We’re just sad and laying low. We’ll get more social soon, really,” and then Sookie added, “and if you do see or hear of anything strange, let us know.”

“You got it,” Jason assured her, and he gave her that crazy, confident wink that said everything was right with the world.

As they walked back outside, Sookie said, “Something else. I’m going to have money transferred into your account, enough to take you and the whole family away somewhere.” Jason came up short and opened his mouth, but Sookie tugged on his shirt. “It’s run away money, Jason. Folks know who you are. If someone does come for Eric and me, it could get ugly. I want you to have the ability to drop everything and get out of town. These folks aren’t like some drug cartel, they won’t chase you. Stuff like this happens fast and it’ll all blow over in a week. The trick is not being here when it happens.”
The look Jason gave her was long and hard. Without saying a word, he pulled her against him and kissed her forehead, “I love you, Sis.”

“Love you, too, Jase,” she answered, and she kept the smile on her face until he was well down the driveway, wheeling toward his family and home.

XXXxxx

“So, she looks good, then?” Michele asked.

“She’s tired and pretty sad, but yeah. She looks better than I expected,” Jason handed over the cash to the woman at the register. The family had just finished eating at Maxine’s. The place was jumping and the food had been good.

Michael Eric squirmed in Michele’s arms and Bit headed for the door. “I’ll wait by the truck!” he called.

“Go keep an eye on your brother,” Michele huffed at JC, their oldest. With an eye roll, the teenager headed outside. “You think I should give her a call?” Michele asked.

The bill was settled and Jason held the door for his wife, “Don’t see it would do any harm,” he looked over at her, then stopped. Michele was standing stock still, looking toward the parking lot. Jason turned and he felt his heart stutter.

There were two vampires Jason had never seen before standing in the open space between the cars. One was squatting and he had Bit sitting awkwardly on his knee. The vampire was saying something to Bit, his face very close to the child’s. JC was standing a few feet away, and Jason didn’t need to be told that both his boys were afraid. Pasting a smile on his face, Jason walked down the stairs, hoping he didn’t look as frightened as he felt, “Hey there, that’s my boy you have your hands on!” he called out.

With a fluid movement, the vampire rose, releasing Bit who ran to JC. Both boys turned and walked quickly toward their parents. Jason kept walking until he was past his sons and close enough to speak politely. “I don’t recognize you fellas,” he said. “You new around here?”

“Yes,” the one who had been holding Bit smiled coldly, “We are friends of the Northmans. You know them, don’t you?”

“Yes,” the one who had been holding Bit smiled coldly, “We are friends of the Northmans. You know them, don’t you?”

“Sure I do!” Jason smiled his best cracker smile, “Most folks here do. They live over yonder,” and he gave a vague wave of the hand. “I’m sorry, though,” he continued, keeping his polite going, “I didn’t catch your names.”

“I’m Luca,” the lead one replied, “and this,” he gestured at the second vampire behind him, “is Juan. We heard about Bon Temps when we saw the Northmans at Fangtasia and thought we’d come to check it out.” Jason smiled broadly as if this made all kinds of sense. It was a warm night, and both vampires were wearing suits and ties. Even if they didn’t react to temperature, there was no way these two were interested in ‘checking out’ a backwoods Louisiana town.

“Well, if I see them I’ll tell them I saw you!” Jason said, pasting his most gap-toothed, open-faced, slightly stupid look in place. They stood there for a long moment, the vampires looking at him, and Jason just grinning back. Jason wondered if they knew who he was and how far he’d get if he tried to run, but then the one named Luca bowed, and they disappeared into the trees. Jason let go the breath he didn’t know he was holding, and he bustled toward his truck. Michele had already managed to get everyone inside and the engine was running. “Holy Shit!” Jason exclaimed.
“Holy shit!” Bit echoed from the backseat, and it was a sign of the shock they all felt that no one reprimanded him.

Jason glanced at Michele, and then reached over to take her hand. The feel of her skin against his helped to slow the gallop of his blood. “Can you do me a favor?” he asked, “Can you text Sookie while I drive us home?”

Bon Temps

“It’s no doubt they’re scouts,” Eric nodded. “It doesn’t mean anything. It just means they are checking things out for themselves.”

“They approached my family!” Sookie reminded him.

“But Jason confirmed they didn’t seem to recognize his connection to you,” Mr. Cataliades was using his reasonable voice. The demon attorney showed up this afternoon. He apologized for his absence and offered condolences, and the condolences of all those in Nebraska. He explained he had been tied up, arranging the transition of several of the Prince’s research facilities from start-up operations into established ventures, and he apologized for the suitcase full of papers he carried that would need Sookie’s attention. At first, Sookie was angry at the intrusion of these regular world matters into their lives, but, after the first hour, she found she had missed the feeling of normalcy she gained when examining balance sheets and talking over projections.

When Eric started to rise, she left the attorney with tea and a plate of cookies, and headed upstairs. Eric looked even better and his fangs had grown to a point that he could use them to feed from her. The other part of their rising still wasn’t working and, while he was more than willing to make her feel wonderful, Sookie wasn’t sure she was ready yet. Sookie couldn’t explain it, but she worried that if she felt good it would betray the memory of their lost child. It was foolish and Eric told her as much, but she insisted. “I’ll tell you what,” she shrugged, “When you’re ready, I’ll be ready too,” and he had stroked her face and nodded, his eyes sad.

Once they were downstairs, Mr. Cataliades pulled out the larger part of the business documents. When the attorney and Sookie took a break to eat dinner, Eric excused himself. There was a computer set up in the family room so Eric didn’t have to go up any stairs to access his terminal.

Sookie knew what he’d find there since she’d read the reports earlier. There was news from Thalia. She and Thierry would be leaving the territory to travel north later tonight. There was also a message from Karin. She and Thomas had returned north to Arkansas together. The way Eric’s progeny explained things made sense. If trouble was coming, the relatively wide-open borders of Arkansas were a good approach. If the two of them worked hard, they could get better patrols in place, but they needed to be there to make sure it happened. It left Sookie feeling strangely vulnerable.

When Eric returned to the table, his face was solemn. There was more news from New Orleans. Maxwell Lee emailed to let them know the number of Witnesses around the palace had increased. What was more, the FBI had come calling again and there was renewed talk of a warrant. Emil Touissant, the New Orleans Packmaster, sent word that there were strangers in town asking questions, including vampires whom no one recognized. It was Max’s feeling that the palace was now under constant surveillance. Eric no sooner finished recounting this information than they received the text from Michele.

“I don’t like this, Eric,” Sookie shook her head. “We hardly have anyone around here right now. If we need to fight, who can we call? Sure, there are local vampires, folks who owe their Sheriffs loyalty, but at the end of the day, what warriors can you call to your side?”
“It may not come to that, Lover,” he smiled. “Assizes is in a few days. It is another opportunity for people to see me,” and he glanced down. “Perhaps I should attend myself? Mustapha has done well, but he is not me. If I were to show myself…”

“I can hide a lot, Eric,” Sookie gave him a stern look. “but I’m not a magician. Your legs are better, you’re stronger, but the only thing that will restore your ability to move is time. You know what Amy said. The silver took its toll and, for whatever reason, it’s your ability to walk where the weakness focused.”

“Sookie is right,” the attorney nodded. “Your subterfuge will work or not. You have made some progress in changing minds, but all it will take is one mistake to lose everything you’ve gained. An Assizes is by definition an emotional setting. There will be a great deal of attention focused on the judges. It is better to keep to the plan.”

“Which brings us back to who we have around us,” Sookie nodded. “Karin and Thomas have headed north. Thalia and Thierry are gone, and Jane is getting ready to head out the Lafayette. Pam is in New York, which leaves us Bubba, Heidi, and the folks at Fangtasia.”

Eric nodded before glancing over, “And Nabila,” he added.


Eric chuckled, “You don’t think she’ll fight for us?” he asked.

“I don’t think she has any particular loyalty, no,” Sookie replied. “And I don’t blame her.”

Mr. Cataliades gave Sookie a stern look, “The former Queen would surely have faced final death or worse. You offered her sanctuary. She owes you both a blood debt. I believe it is customary to ask her, but it would be unthinkable if she declined.”

Sookie found she didn’t like the sound of it, but, after a moment, nodded, “Fine. Nabila, too. But who else?”

“We have many allies now,” Eric reminded her. “The Packs owe us allegiance and we have the support of the witches.”

“It’s one thing to say they’ll show up. It’s another to actually do it,” Sookie said dryly. “I’d feel a heck of a lot better if I knew the Fae were around, ready to ride in and save the day.”

Mr. Cataliades shook his head, “I am sorry to say that I don’t believe that will be the case. The Prince may intervene to save you, Sookie, but he would see a takeover as a vampire matter. There is no compelling reason for his becoming involved.”

“But Eric is my husband!” Sookie protested.

“The contract between us is clear, Min Hustru,” Eric’s laugh was not happy. “Without a blood tie between our families the alliance will not be triggered.”

Sookie looked at Eric. She couldn’t say the words. The ripples in their lives caused by the death of their child seemed to never end. “We’ll be all right,” she said instead.

“Yes, Älskade,” Eric smiled, taking her hand. “All will be right.”
Chapter 27 - Battening Hatches

New York

Pam walked through the New York airport concourse headed for baggage claim. While she and Misha had texted each other during her stay in Shreveport, she realized the closer she got to the terminal exit doors, the more nervous she felt. She remembered how Misha tried to stop her from leaving New York and the cold way he had behaved when she was going out the door. She hadn’t detected that anger in the words he sent her. He asked when she would return and texted that he missed her. When they actually spoke to each other over the phone that one time, their conversation was warm, and Pam found her initial doubts about the King transforming into doubts about those who doubted Misha.

But now Pam’s doubts had returned. What if she was wrong and Misha was everything others warned her about? She almost changed her mind. She could duck out another exit or book a flight back to Minnesota. She didn’t have to walk through those doors and return to him. Pam sat down on the long row of chairs that lined the airport hallway. This was so unlike her. She was a confident, successful vampire. She made fortunes and won battles. Why was she feeling this way? She recalled Karin blaming their sire for influencing them, and dismissed it just as quickly as nonsense.

“You’re afraid!” Pam said out loud. “He makes you nervous!” and that basic fact astounded her. In all her many years, Pam could never remember one of her interests affecting her so deeply, and, standing up, she grabbed the handle of her suitcase, held her head high, and walked more quickly toward the exit.

Her eyes automatically scanned the waiting drivers with their signs looking for Andrew’s quiet face. He was taller than she, so she scaled her line of vision to where she expected to see him. She couldn’t help feeling a sharp sense of disappointment when she didn’t find him. Pam was looking away to locate her phone when, from the corner of her eye, she caught sight of her name on a sign. The driver was shorter and he held the sign in front of his face. She made fortunes and won battles. Why was she feeling this way? She recalled Karin blaming their sire for influencing them, and dismissed it just as quickly as nonsense.

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“I thought you didn’t like to run your own errands,” she smiled, biting her lips together.

“I missed you so much I couldn’t wait one more minute,” he answered. Seemingly from nowhere, Andrew was there. He took the coat from her arm and the bag handle from her hand. He looped her handbag over his shoulder and he murmured his own welcome, but Pam couldn’t take her eyes from Misha.

The King held out his hand for hers and when she gave it, he kissed its back like a true courtier. Pam pulled away, and then reached over to remove the cap from his head. She smoothed his hair back into place and he nodded once. “Are you ready to come home?” he asked. Pam’s smile was his
answer, and threading her hand through his arm, Misha guided Pam to the limo that awaited them just outside.

Inside the seating area, a bud vase held two yellow roses. Misha was looking out his window, giving her space. He laid his hand palm up on the bench between them, and, after a minute, Pam placed her hand in his. “I did not believe I could be so lonely,” he said, not looking in her direction. “I worried that you would never return. Even in the terminal, I wondered if I would watch the people leaving your flight and only then realize you had left me. It is a strange feeling, knowing I am no longer complete without another.” Pam glanced at him. She could see his dark eyes reflected in the window glass and knew he was looking at her reflection as well.

“I thought about running,” she acknowledged. “What I feel for you makes me uncomfortable.”

At her admission, Misha squeezed her hand and, for the first time since they were in the car, he looked at her in a way that made her feel warm, “Two porcupines,” he smiled, and then he became serious, “I am sorry I was short with you, Zolotse. I should not have questioned your need to leave. All is resolved now? Your Maker is healthy? He is out of danger?”

Pam thought that for a moment the King’s eyes seemed too interested, but then she nodded, “False alarm. He was in Rhodes, but when the trouble started, Sookie transported them both back to Shreveport. Fae thing.”

“She has those powers?” he smiled, but the smile didn’t seem to reach his eyes. “Your Maker is most fortunate in his choice of mate!” and then rubbing his thumb across her knuckles, he said, “As am I.”

Andrew pulled up to the curb of the brownstone and within moments, the front door was open and it was as though Pam was walking into her own small palace. The lights were warm and the soft glow of luxury felt welcoming. “Perhaps some blood?” Misha gestured toward the stairs and Pam preceded him to the living room.

“How are other things?” Pam asked. “Carlo still shielding your right?”

“Ahh!” Misha sighed, “I am afraid Carlo has proven a disappointment.”

“Oh?” Pam asked, “What happened?”

“He was betraying me,” Misha shook his head. “I’m not sure what happened, but he was involved with Bill Compton in some way. I know what the reporters are saying about the explosion in Rhodes, but I think the writer was involved,” and Misha handed her the glass. “Perhaps you heard something about that in Shreveport? Rumors?”

“No,” Pam replied, “Nothing about Bill.”

Misha nodded, “I only recently found out about this. It seems Carlo and Bill met in Boston at the last Summit. You should know I am indulgent with those I love. It is a failing,” and he waved his hand. “And I did love him, Zolotse! He has been with me many years. I never would have suspected him!”

“Do you know what was he doing with Compton?” Pam settled on the couch beside him.

Misha ran his finger along her upper arm, “No, not entirely,” he told her. “I am having him hunted. He won’t escape me for long, and then I hope we learn the entire story. It makes me wonder if there were other things he was doing that would reflect badly on me and cause me embarrassment.”

“I never liked Bill Compton,” Pam sighed. “He was a liar. If he was part of the bombing, he should share in the blame, and not be made into some hero. They are talking about erecting a statue for him
“I couldn’t imagine that would sit well with your Maker or his mate,” and Misha leaned toward her, “After all, there was history between them.”

“Some,” Pam frowned, “but I think it was more in Bill’s imagination than anywhere else.”

“Of course!” the King smiled, but Pam was sure she felt a swift moment of disappointment through their tie. “Of course, I feel the fool,” he sighed as well. “I paid Carlo well and it would appear he used my generosity to create problems for me, but how selfish I am! You have just returned from comforting your Maker. Such a hardship, to lose a child. It’s not like losing progeny, of course, but to have your mate suffer an upset like this when you are yourself healing from injury is terrible.”

“It was difficult for both of them,” Pam acknowledged. She maintained her smile as the faint trace of triumph trickled through her. Realizing how her words might have been interpreted, she clarified, “They were both very attached to the idea of having a biological child.”

“A novelty, and most unusual. I understand there are other mixed species couples who are willing to have these small children to provide them a different sense of family.” Misha was nodding now, and the wisps of emotion and feeling coming through their tie seemed to sync with his words. “But, of course, you are fatigued. What would you like to do on your first evening home, my Pamela? Music? Perhaps the book you were enjoying? It is on the tableside upstairs where you left it. I can get it for you.” He sat back and sent her something through their tie that felt like adoration and it was all she had not to purr for him. “Forgive me my enthusiasm, my golden girl. Having you here makes my life complete,” and Pam found her doubts seemed to melt away. She stopped worrying about the odd moments or later, when Andrew asked twice about her Maker. She was home.

Bon Temps

Sightings of strange vampires were reported sporadically throughout the week. Sookie pulled out the old Compton vampire database and looked up the two names Jason told her about, but with no luck. It was possible Luca and Juan had been made since the database’s last update, or that those names weren’t theirs at all. Sookie looked at the edition date on the splash page, allowing the corny graveyard music to play through the speakers. It was sobering to realize there was no one now who would keep the database current.

The memorial services in Rhodes were televised and held at night. Sookie and Eric had both watched it, if only to see the Kings. Bartlett and Russell looked good. Russell gave the eulogy for Bill. After only a few minutes, Eric growled and left the room. Sookie found herself smiling and turned off the television. “I don’t want to see it either,” she said out loud.

Eric came back carrying a bottle of blood, “I’m not sure I would wish to tell them at this point.” Sookie knew her husband was talking about telling Russell and Bartlett that Bill Compton was the bomber. The media, the Kings, everyone seemed convinced now that it was Vampires First that had been behind the tragedy and that Bill Compton was an innocent victim in all this. For Eric and Sookie, who knew differently, it was frustrating. “We have no proof,” Eric shrugged, “and even if Thalia should find something, I’m not sure what would be gained by revealing him for what he was.”

“Except the truth!” Sookie told him. “You know, sometimes people need to know how things really are!”

“Do they?” and Eric peeled the label of his bottle with his fingernail. “In this case, the cruel, bigoted vampires were the villains and they were punished with their own device. The famous vampire who
wrote about romance was the hapless victim, allowing humans to see this as something other than hunting them.” His lip lifted on the one side as he said, “It is the storybook ending and everyone sleeps at night.”

“But it’s not fair!” Sookie said the words carefully, her hands on her hips. “It’s not right!”

“Whoever told you that life was fair, Lover?” Eric replied, and Sookie could feel the sadness they shared. After a minute, he said, “If Compton had lived it would be different. I would have ended him for us, for what we lost. But he is gone and there is no one left of his blood. His sister, Judith, is estranged from him and he rejected her. There is no one to give me vengeance.” He glanced at the dark television, “The Kings have made Compton their cause. They loved the idea of him, and they are making a mark with humans by standing on the story they have created. If I were to reveal him now, it would only hurt them. Better to let it go.”

“I don’t know if I can do that,” Sookie replied. “I got a text asking me to contribute to the nightflowering garden the Descendants of the Glorious Dead are going to build near the town park in Bill’s honor. I don’t think I’ll be able to walk past it without spitting!”

Eric found himself grinning. It was a gift, the return of their ability to smile. There were still moments when the tragedy sat heavy on them. Sookie tried to keep her crying to daytime and far enough away that she was pretty sure no one could hear her, but, like her body, being in this place seemed to be healing her heart as well. Eric mourned, too, but in his pragmatic way, he seemed able to compartmentalize it. If he did grieve openly now, he did it when she was sleeping. There were still those moments when they caught each other’s eye and knew, but laughter was returning, and they were both benefiting from it.

They talked about New Orleans. Retreating there was no longer an option. While the wide-open areas around the Bon Temps house made Sookie feel insecure at times, she did trust the wards. To return to New Orleans would invite more scrutiny, and not just the vampire kind.

The reports they received from Maxwell Lee seemed to have taken a more sinister turn. The FBI had started questioning those who worked in the palace. According to more than one source, the agents were tracking down former palace employees as well. Most of the questions were about Meg and her interactions with both Eric and Sookie, but they were asking other questions, too, about who had lived in the palace and how long. “You think they know about the donors?” Sookie asked Eric.

“I don’t think so,” he’d told her. “If they did, the questions would be more direct.” Still, Sookie could feel that Eric was worried about what was happening, and that, along with the growing sense that they were being stalked, was making them both edgy.

The vampire ‘stalking’ reports hadn’t increased, but neither had they stopped.

Rubio Hermosa reported encountering a vampire coming out of Mississippi. Rubio didn’t give the vampire’s name, but he did confirm he wasn’t part of Russell Edgington’s kingdom. When Rubio questioned the stranger more closely, he declared himself as one of Sybil’s. The Alabama Queen neither claimed nor denied he was hers, and Rubio released the vampire rather than take the chance.

Karin and Thomas reported strange vampires in Arkansas as well. As the days passed and more reports were received, Sookie allowed her frustration with Karin to boil over. “She’s your War Chief! She should never have gone so far away!” she pointed out when Eric defended his progeny’s actions.

“Lover, Karin is finding problems and reporting them,” Eric countered. “Arkansas is still a wide open territory. I have not replaced the open Sheriff’s position in the southern part of that state.”
Thomas has done a credible job with the problem I handed him, but he needs assistance to build the
defenses. Karin did the right thing. Having the two of them there will make the job of building
border security go faster, and Karin’s presence will encourage local vampires to join. I have no doubt
with the number of reports we are receiving, there are scouts who have not been detected simply
because we don’t have enough vampires to see them.” Sookie understood from her days managing
the restaurant the strain that occurred when an operation was understaffed. When things were good
in the kingdom, it was easy to ignore some of the obvious deficits, like the open Sheriff position in
Arkansas. Now that they seemed to be drifting closer to a crisis, the lack of people in key positions
was emerging as a larger liability.

“Do you intend to send Jane to Lafayette now?” Sookie challenged. It was a decision Eric held off
making, primarily because Sookie had argued so hard against it. The telepath pointed out that their
western border was already patrolled by both Stan Davis and Sandy Seacrest’s people. While Stan
could be slippery, he was someone who could be trusted not to stage a takeover, and Sandy was
someone both Sookie and Eric trusted as a friend.

Eric sighed, “You are like a dog with a bone, Lover. No, I will keep Jane here with us for now. I
have asked my Sheriffs for recommendations to fill the open positions from those within their ranks.
Uncertain times are bad times to ask other monarchs for recommendations. It is too tempting to send
someone whose loyalties are divided,” and Sookie realized he was telling her the others would feel
compelled to send spies.

Mustapha came by regularly, and Sookie and the Packmaster (wearing his Eric face) had made
another social appearance at Fangtasia. As they were getting ready to leave that night, Mustapha had
asked whether it made sense for Sookie to position someone in the Bon Temps house to look like
Eric, and have Eric himself spend the evening at the Compton house.

“If anyone figures out what we’re doing, they’d know to come out here while you’re least
defended,” the Packmaster pointed out to Eric. “If you left Bubba or Owen here as a decoy…”

“What you are suggesting is unworthy!” Eric interrupted.

“What I’m suggesting is that both those fellows can swing a blade. Without your balance, you’d be
an easy target to take down.”

Sookie begged, but Eric was unmoved. Instead, he had Jane come to the house to stay with them.
Jane was still wary of Sookie, and the way the newly-reinstated Sheriff would move to place more
distance between herself and Sookie provided Eric a new form of annoying entertainment.

They did go over to Bill Compton’s house one night to see what Charles had found during his
investigation. Sookie stood in the room off the kitchen surrounded by her photographs. She took her
time walking from wall to wall. She paused at some images, trying to figure out where she’d been
when they were taken. It was some relief to see there were no photos that were too new, but when
she reached the wall where Bill had begun to remove her eyes, she couldn’t suppress the shudder
that ran through her.

“I want them all taken down,” Eric said. He stood at the doorway and refused to walk inside.

“And I want them burned,” Sookie added. “Every single one.” She looked at Eric, “I want to buy
this house, Eric, and all the land. Let’s ask Desmond to make it a top priority. He can feel out Portia
and Andy. I don’t care what he says, that we loved Bill, and we want to turn this into some kind of
memorial, or that we’re wealthy oil folks from Texas. I want this place, and when I get it…” she
looked at the photos again, “I’m getting a bulldozer and I’m going to grind it into the dirt!”
“I’d pay to watch that, Lover,” Eric told her. When she turned toward him, he opened his arms to her, and together they walked slowly back to their own house, making a stop at the bench in the cemetery along the way.

Every night, Sookie posted pictures and sent general social messaging, thanking the community for their outpouring of sympathy and making announcements. Eric handled correspondence and communicated with his Sheriffs. They received requests from various news sources for interviews. Most wanted to talk about Rhodes, but Sookie was reluctant to respond to any of them. “I never thought I’d say it, but I think I’m missing Twy,” she mentioned to both Eric and Mr. Cataliades at dinner that night. “I wonder what happened to her. I hope she wasn’t killed in Rhodes!”

“I’m surprised you don’t know,” the attorney replied. “She is Bartlett Crowe’s child now. I thought he would have told you.”

Sookie was shocked and turned toward Eric. “It is my fault, Älskade,” Eric told her. When Sookie looked confused, he continued, “As Clan Chief, I have been lax in keeping up my contacts with my fellow monarchs.” Sookie knew Eric had not been spending as many hours at his computer or on his phone. She supposed in part it was because he was still recovering. Eric made an effort not to appear weakened, but healing took something out of any creature, and vampires were no different. But Sookie knew that physical recovery was not the real reason her husband had kept his correspondence to a minimum. Sookie knew Eric hadn’t called the other monarchs or those outside the kingdom because he didn’t want to be reminded, as they knew friends would, of what had been lost.

Eric nodded, and Sookie could feel his resolve. “It is time to start moving forward.” They found themselves looking at each other across the table. She held out her hand and he smiled, taking it. “It is time,” he said again as much to himself as to her.

Of course, the weakness in his legs made an immediate, full return to the world around them impossible, but Eric got on the phone later than evening, spending hours talking with friends and spreading the story that Sookie’s Fae powers had been the cause of their miraculous reprieve from the devastation of Rhodes.

Doctor Ludwig had been out to the house to see them several times. She declared Sookie fully cured and Eric well on his way. “The silver poisoning is receding. Of course you would heal faster if Karin or Pam were here to give you their blood, but between your wife and this place, you are making a miraculous recovery. Your hand should not be anywhere near this stage of regeneration and you are already feeding. I wouldn’t have thought it possible. As for your movement, I suspect you’ll wake up one day, dancing around as if it never happened.” When Eric groused about not having a more specific timeframe, the Doctor laughed and said, “That’s gratitude for you! Last time I give you good news, vampire! I tell you you’re the head of the class and you bitch about the view!”

It was the night of the Assizes. Mr. Cataliades was there for dinner, and they were talking about probate and how long it would take before anything could be decided about Bill’s assets. No will had been found so far, which surprised Sookie. “Bill was the most fastidious person I know,” she said. “Making out a will is not the kind of detail he would have ignored.” They agreed that Mr. Cataliades should have investigators search for the document. “As much as I hate spending one penny on that son of a bitch, I don’t want that house sitting vacant either,” Sookie growled. They stood up from the table and retreated into the family room.

“I have some Tawny Port that arrived today,” Sookie mentioned to the attorney, “I seem to recall you saying you like it.”

“You are most kind,” the demon bowed. “And before I forget, I have a gift for you as well.” He leaned over and opened his large attorney’s briefcase, extracting what looked like a wine bottle
wrapped in iridescent cloth. Handing it to Sookie, he remained standing, his eyes watchful. When Sookie unwrapped it, Mr. Cataliades said, “A gift from Nebraska. It’s mead.”

“Oh!” Sookie smiled, and then she blushed. When Eric and Sookie had been in Nebraska for their Fae joining, there had been a great deal of mead consumed. Eric had been especially fond of it, asking Sookie to drink so he could suck the taste from her. Sookie remembered the drunken euphoria she felt and how little hangover she’d had each morning. It had been mead that fueled their joinings, and each had been memorable. “Thank you,” Sookie stammered, aware her face was blushing, “We both liked it. This is very kind of you.”

“You should put it somewhere we can find it, Lover,” Eric was standing beside her, and he leaned down to nuzzle her ear. They hadn’t made love since the explosion. In some part, they hadn’t found much to inspire them, but mostly they were recovering from injuries. Eric had lost his sac. Sookie was aware it had regenerated, but she also knew things down there hadn’t quite sorted themselves out yet. As Eric stood next to her, sending her a quick burst of lust, and she got the impression that might have changed.

“Now quit it!” she grinned, and pushed against Eric’s chest before stepping away to fix Desmond a plate of cookies. ‘Things are looking up,’ she thought as she headed back toward the family room, and then she blushed again when she thought of her words.

Monroe

“You stand in the Assizes of the King! Come forward those with business here and be judged!” Rubio Hermosa intoned the formal opening to the monthly Court. The docket was light tonight. There were only three serious matters and several minor ones. Mustapha was doing well. His entrance and his posture on the throne were perfect. Sookie sat on the throne beside him. She was nervous for no reason and found she was struggling not to show it.

The first matter was a business dispute. The allegation was that a price had been set and when it came time to pay, the buyer refused to honor the agreed-upon price. The buyer argued that the merchandise was not as represented. This should have been a minor matter, but the two vampires began to bicker. Sookie knew if it had been Eric on the throne he would have thrown his head back and roared. It wasn’t something he was required to do often. Sookie had only seen it once, and the display, along with his extended fangs, had restored order. Unfortunately, it was not a behavior that had been discussed with Mustapha. Instead of handling it himself, the Packmaster growled and turned to Rubio, “Sheriff! Restore order in my Court!” he barked. Sookie made the words and sounds more compatible with a vampire, but it sounded false to her ears. Sookie was relieved to see only a few quick glances, most seeming to accept Mustapha’s actions, and things moved forward.

The other problem came later in the night. The issue before the Court involved a vampire who had made a nuisance of herself. She had fed from several male humans and then been caught glamouring them. One male was underage and the human parents had made a fuss. The vampire had been arrested and ordered to perform community service since she, herself, had been barely legal when she was turned. Of course, that turning had happened over a hundred years ago when things were different, but her youthful appearance had been enough to earn her the Court’s leniency. The problem arose when she refused. She told the humans she wouldn’t grovel to them and she called in her Maker. Now that Maker was standing in Assizes, demanding that the humans accept cash in lieu of hours spent in a soup kitchen. It was a classic case of culture clash and Sookie was sure Eric would have known the right thing to do, but she was stumped and so was Mustapha. Mustapha called a recess, claiming the need to consult with his expert on human justice. They retreated to the small office Rubio had set aside and texted first Eric, and then Mr. Cataliades.
It didn’t take long to get the answer. Mustapha and Sookie emerged to pronounce that since the vampire had violated human law and been foolish enough to be arrested by humans, she would have to serve the human sentence. Her Maker would be required to pay restitution by way of a scholarship fund for the under-aged human involved in the incident. There was some grumbling, and Sookie used it as an opportunity to stand up beside Mustapha and snarl, “Enough! The King has spoken!” There was no further protest and it ended the business for the night, but Sookie was sure she saw murmuring and more than one sidelong look.

As they retrieved their jackets from the back, Rubio said, “I thought it went well.”

“Me, too,” Mustapha almost sounded too relieved. Sookie made a point of leaning against Mustapha, and smiling into his face to continue the illusion, but her sense of uneasiness grew.

When they were in the car and headed back to Bon Temps, Mustapha said, “Please tell me that’s the last time I have to pretend I’m him. This being vampire is harder than it looks.”

Sookie was too nervous to make small talk or joke. “We don’t have any more appearances we should need to make,” she confirmed. “I’m just hoping that we’ve done enough to stop the rumor mill from churning out any more stories.

Mustapha pulled out his phone. “Sorry,” he said and punched in a few numbers. He turned toward the window, and Sookie got the impression he was handling Pack business. The rest of the ride Sookie stared out the window, going over every face she hadn’t recognized and look sent her way. She texted Rubio a couple times, asking about the identities of some of those she had seen. He confirmed there was at least one vampire in the assembled crowd he hadn’t known. When they pulled up to the rendezvous spot outside Shreveport, Sookie was relieved. She really wanted to speak with Eric, but she wasn’t going to make that call with Mustapha in the car.

Warren was waiting, and Sookie took a few minutes to ask after him and thank Mustapha again, and then they were back in the car and headed toward Bon Temps. Sookie fished out her phone and pressed ‘1’, which called Eric.

“Lover,” he purred, “How were things this evening?” Sookie filled him in on the proceedings. He asked several questions about posture and eye contact, particularly after the last hearing. “I think you are reading too much into it,” he assured her when Sookie told him how concerned she felt. “Still,” he continued, “there is often a fair amount of chatter on the networks after these hearings. I will sign in and see what is being said. How far out are you?”

“I know we talked about this, but I’d really like to call in more support,” Sookie told Eric.

“And who would that be?” Eric asked her. “Mustapha and Emil will lend up support, but they are reluctant to become too deeply embroiled in something like this. They need to live here. Regardless of the direction this goes, they will look to work with the King here.”

“In other words, they won’t care who sits on the throne,” Sookie said bitterly.

“Don’t judge them harshly. Both Packmasters would come and fight for us. What they won’t do is commit their Packs. Think, Lover. They have children and businesses. If they pick the wrong side they can’t leave.”

“Fine,” Sookie replied. “Why don’t I call Niall? He could care less about living anywhere. I am his granddaughter…”

“Sookie, we’ve talked about this. He won’t want to get pulled into this. He doesn’t run the same
risks as the Weres, but he has fewer people, too. I hear you are nervous. Come home and we’ll talk more."

Sookie hung up and stared out the window, and then, setting her jaw she hit the buttons that would call Niall.

“You have reached the office of Niall Brigant…” said a familiar, mechanized voice.

“Shit!” Sookie snapped, “I can’t believe he has voice mail! What kind of fairy Prince has voice mail?” When the beep sounded, Sookie said, “Grandfather, this is Sookie. I’m hoping you’ll call me back. Eric and I could use your help. If you can call me?”

When she hung up, she saw Charles looking at her in the rear view mirror. “What?” she asked. “It’s not like Eric told me not to!”

Charles shook his head and put his eyes back on the road, “But you know he wouldn’t like it,” the Were said.

“Who asked you?” Sookie grumbled and settled back against the cushions for the rest of the ride home.

XXxxxx

When they pulled up into the driveway Jane was standing on the front porch. “My Queen,” the new Sheriff said and bowed. She was looking like the cat that ate the canary, and Sookie wondered what was going on.

“How are you doing?” Sookie replied politely.

“I’m fine, and I’ll be in the guesthouse if you need me,” Jane smirked, and as she passed Sookie, she said, “which you won’t!”

Frowning, Sookie walked in the house and called out, “Eric?”

“I’m upstairs, Lover,” he called from somewhere upstairs and Sookie headed up toward their bed chamber. As she stepped out on the landing of the top floor, she saw the room was lit with candles. There were flowers from the rose bushes outside in bowls on the furniture. “Do you need a bath?” Eric asked, stepping out of the bathroom. “I have one ready for you.”

“Someone’s feeling a lot better,” Sookie grinned, and then she bit her lip as he sauntered toward her. He used that strutting step he had sometimes where his head turned just a bit and his hips rolled in loose-jointed grace. He stopped when he stood behind her, and then waited just long enough for her to draw in a shaky breath before he placed his hands on her shoulders.

Eric’s head dipped down, and he nuzzled and then kissed the side of her neck, and Sookie found herself tilting her head to allow him greater access. “I’ve missed you,” he whispered against her skin. He used that strutting step he had sometimes where his head turned just a bit and his hips rolled in loose-jointed grace. He stopped when he stood behind her, and then waited just long enough for her to draw in a shaky breath before he placed his hands on her shoulders. Eric’s head dipped down, and he nuzzled and then kissed the side of her neck, and Sookie found herself tilting her head to allow him greater access. “I’ve missed you,” he whispered against her skin. He moved his fingers to the base of her neck and rubbed and stretched, pulling the tension from her muscles. She leaned back into him, and he slipped his fingertips down her sides, ghosting over her until he could lift the edge of her shirt. “Raise your arms, Älskade.” Sookie closed her eyes, and her shirt was gone, replaced by Eric’s arms wrapping around her. He flexed his knees in back of her so they could spoon when he pulled her against him, her backside pressed against him in a way that let her knew he was feeling much better. With a flick of his fingers, her hair was flipped forward, and he licked and nibbled the column of her neck again, and then he was gone. Sookie started to fall backward, but he was in front of her, her hands in his and instead of her falling, he pulled her forward and toward the bathroom.
The tub was full and there were rose petals floating on the water. Eric smiled down at her, “Will you undress me, Sookie?” he asked and he held his hands out at his side to make her job easier.

He was wearing one of his black button-down shirts and Sookie started at the bottom. After each button, she smoothed her hands up his body until she found the next button. Open, stroke, pause, open. Eric was watching her with hooded eyes, and Sookie found her own breathing was starting to sound as if she’d run up the stairs a couple of times. When she reached for the button on his pants, he sucked in his stomach just enough to allow her fingers to slide under his waistband. She couldn’t resist it, the slow dip, sliding her fingers lower until he hissed as her fingertips brushed against his hard length. When she pulled the zipper down, his cock sprang forward. He pulled away from her and slowly turned around. With strong, sure movements, he pulled his jeans from over his hips and then leaned over, allowing them to fall down his long legs. He leaned against the wall as he stepped from them and Sookie groaned, watching the muscles of his perfect butt flex and shift. Without looking at her, Eric stepped into the bath and settled himself with his back against the far end.

“Would you strip for me?” he asked her.

Shooting him a grin, Sookie reached up and hooked the straps of her bra, letting them fall down her arms. Holding his eyes with her own, she unfastened her own pants and unzipped them, allowing the sides to fall open, revealing black lace.

“That’s what you wore to my Assizes?” he asked. “Black lace? Knowing I wouldn’t be there?” Eric was stroking himself as he watched her, a slow smile smoldering on his lips. “Which black lace panties are those, Lover? The boy shorts?” Sookie turned around and, repeating his shimmy, lowered her pants to reveal the T-strap of a thong. ”I may have to inspect your clothing more closely before we go out to these affairs,” Eric chided her, but Sookie wasn’t fooled. She knew he approved. She reached behind her and unlatched her bra strap, then turned around, still holding the bra cups in place. With a saucy smile, she pulled it from her, allowing her breasts to come free.

“There is wine in the bedroom,” Eric told her, “I want you to pour yourself a glass and come back to me,” and he gestured toward the door. The mead had been opened and it was on the nightstand next to the bed. There were two glasses and Sookie filled one with the golden liquor.

When she walked back into the bathroom, he was laying back, his arms hooked over both sides of the tub. “You sure you’re up to this?” Sookie giggled. “We got pretty busy the last time we played with this stuff!”

“Why don’t you try it and tell me if it is as you remember, Lover,” Eric asked her, “and then come to me. I want to taste it on your tongue.”

Sookie felt a warm blush heat her body as she walked toward him, sipping the wine. The pure honey taste of the mead subtly scented with spices hit the back of her throat, adding to the growing heat within her. Setting the glass on the high edge of the tub behind Eric’s head, Sookie leaned back to pull her panties down her legs using her thumbs. She rubbed her thighs together, making sure the juncture of her legs was close enough to his face so that he could scent her, and when his eyes darkened, she leaned over, picked up the glass in one hand, and held her other hand out to him. Eric took Sookie’s hand, allowing her to use him as balance as she stepped down into the tub. Keeping a firm grasp on his hand, Sookie lowered herself to her knees, straddling his thighs. She leaned forward, folding his length up between them. Making sure he was watching her, she sipped the mead a third time, and then leaned forward to kiss him.

“Sookie,” he gasped, capturing her lips. As she opened her mouth he darted forward his tongue, licking her own, massaging the inside of her mouth. He explored her, then pulled at her lower lip until she offered her own tongue again and he captured it, sucking and moaning as he tasted honey.
wine. ‘Again,’” he gasped, and she took another mouthful of mead. When he pulled back a second time, Sookie kissed his forehead, smoothing her fingers through his hair. Leaning back, she tipped most of the contents of the cup, allowing the wine to spill over her breasts. When he moved toward her, she grabbed his hair and pulled his head back. She looked at him, his hunger for her. The way Eric’s eyes burned, the set of his jaw, told Sookie she was beautiful and desired, and it was enough. Leaning back again, she released her hold on his hair and Eric’s arms snaked around her, pulling her close. She could feel his fangs as he suckled first one breast, and then the other. His erection was pulsing between them and when he raised his eyes to her again, wild and feral, she placed her hand on his shoulder, pushed up, and then lowered herself, using her other hand to position him so he could slide into her.

Eric was breathing, drawing in the scent of her, and then exhaling so he could bring her scent within him again. He grasped her waist, helping her to move up and down, but it was a difficult position, and Sookie started to falter as her thighs became fatigued.

“We must exercise more,” Eric grinned and then, his expression turning more serious, he reached behind him for the glass of wine. He tipped what was left on her breasts again and as he suckled, he shifted forward, lifting her with him until her back was against the other end of the tub. With a smooth movement, he rose and stepped from the tub, striding out of the bathroom, dripping water like some sea God. He was back in a moment, the cup in his hand.

“Now, I think it is my turn to exercise, Lover” he told her. With a cocky smile, he sipped wine into his mouth and holding it, stepped into the tub, kneeling in front of her. He leaned over and captured her mouth, pouring the liquor into her from his own lips while he ran his hands up the outsides of her thighs. While he plundered her mouth, he shifted his hands so he could open her to him. When she groaned, arching her back, Eric tipped her hips forward, and he was within her. At this angle, Eric was able to push deep and Sookie felt every inch as he slid within her. “You are very tight, Lover,” he growled. “I do not wish to hurt you.”

“You won’t!” Sookie answered, and then leaned forward to bite his lip, drawing blood. With a snarl, Eric pulled back and then rocked forward, snapping his hips into the movement. He repeated it, angling up so that he dragged over that place within her that made her toes curl. “Oh, you know me too well!” she gasped and was rewarded by his low chuckle.

“We’ll see whether I’ve forgotten anything important,” he teased, and then proceeded to demonstrate there was nothing wrong with his memory of her anatomy. He played her skillfully. When Sookie needed his gentleness, he soothed her. When she needed his strength, he flexed within her, bringing her hands to hold onto his butt, creating more leverage for them both. When she felt the coil within her tighten, and her breath started coming in squeaks and hisses, he pulled her knee up and out, and he moved so powerfully the water splashed from the tub onto the floor. At the right moment, he feathered his fingers between them, pulling her orgasm from her in a long, loud wail. She felt the moment he swelled within her and he ground out words she didn’t recognize. For a long time, he held her against him, pushing into her again and again, whispering her name until he dropped his forehead on her shoulder.

“I love you, Eric,” she whispered as she stroked his back.

“I am yours,” he told her, and she knew it was true.

As the water cooled, Eric stood, and offered his hand. He helped her step from the bath, and then handed her a towel. They dried each other, but with every swipe of the towel, their movements became less about drying and more about playing. “You are spending a great deal of time attending to that part of me,” he teased as she rubbed and massaged the Gracious Plenty. Sookie answered by
reaching under him to stroke his sac, and then she flicked his growing hardness with her finger.

“You’d better run!” he warned her and Sookie obliged, running for the bed, laughing, and then struggling when he tackled her onto her back in the middle of the mattress. Securing her hands over her head, holding her wrists easily with one big hand, Eric stretched over her. The grin softened as he looked over her face and then her body. Sookie felt a trace of sadness from him. She had heard that sorrow could drive some couples apart, but, in this moment, she understood it was something that further cemented them together.

“Make love to me, Eric?” she asked him.

He smiled, and holding her eyes, he smoothed his hands down her arms, following his hands with his lips. Rocking back on his heels, he leaned over for the wine and filled the cup once more.

“Indulge me, Lover. Make me drunk with you.”

They played then, painting parts with sticky fingers, and then licking each other clean. They drank from each other’s bodies until Sookie’s head was spinning and the world became the four corners of the bed. His hands defined her, stroking her limbs, and making her new. She worshipped him, running teeth and lips over the hard planes and ropes of Eric’s muscle. “You are a beautiful man,” she whispered as she traced the hollows of his hips.

“I am your beautiful man, min hustru,” he purred. He sat back against the backboard of that bed and drew her to him. “Ride me, my Valkyrie!” and Sookie eagerly joined him. Together they moved, slow, deliberate, building the sensation for each other, stroke by stroke, gasp by gasp. Eric’s large hand cupped Sookie’s face, and then his eyes closed. Sookie threw her head back, and somehow it wasn’t their bed in the house in Bon Temps anymore. They were back in Nebraska and it was the night of their joining. Their bodies were painted in runes and they were in the clearing surrounded by the stones. Sookie was kneeling in thick moss and somewhere close by she could hear water falling and rushing over rocks. The sounds of night birds and peepers surrounded them, and the smell of earth, moist and rich was in her nose. She opened her eyes and overhead the stars wheeled in a black sky. She was part of the infinity of the moon, and the night, and as she came, crying out her joy, a voice within her shouted, ‘Yes!’

Las Vegas

“I read your report,” Felipe gestured impatiently to the young man who knelt between his legs, letting him know he was moving too quickly, and then turned his attention back to Angie. His progeny was calling him from Boston. Angie had gone out East to meet with Pam and check on their investments, but now it was clear she had been busy doing other things as well.

“Read the media sites. People are convinced this is all a ruse. Whoever, or whatever, Sookie is parading around, it’s not Eric Northman. My spies tell me he is alive. He’s been spotted at the house out in the woods. The house itself has changed from the last time, but the location is the same. The Viking my spy saw limped. The one that has shown itself at Fangtasia and the Assizes didn’t.”

“A takeover is not just an injured vampire,” Felipe scolded her. “He is ambulatory. Even damaged, a moving vampire, and we’re talking about Eric Northman, the Viking will not be an easy mark.”

“There is more,” Angie’s voice took on that hint of whine Felipe found annoying. “Half his force is out of the state. Thalia is north and she’s taken the French Sheriff, Misha’s former lieutenant with her.”

“Thalia is gone?” Felipe sat forward, more interested. He flicked the cheek of the man sucking him and gestured he should leave. The man gave the King a look of disappointment, which didn’t fool
Felipe for a moment. This particular human was very talented, but he was also looking for more than providing a service for a fee. They all wanted something, these humans. When the door shut behind the human, Felipe said, “Who does he have around him?”

Angie detailed counts and locations. She provided details on each of the Sheriffs, their retinues, and then outlined her plan. “What made you think about this?” Felipe asked when she was done.

“You were robbed of the kingdom,” Angie replied. “It is only right you should have the territory back now that it’s a money maker. I want to do this and I hope if I am successful, you will reward me by allowing me to act at Regent there in your name.”

Felipe thought about it. He was fond of Angie. She had proven herself resourceful and entertaining over the many years they had been together. She wasn’t exactly innovative, or particularly adept at making money, but she was an inventive and resourceful fighter. She had shown initiative in scouting out this opportunity and that was something new. For a moment, he wondered if the idea was truly hers, then dismissed the idea that she would lie to him. She might exaggerate, but she had never concealed anything from him in past.

“You may use my people,” he told her. “But this is your action. I won’t come to your rescue if you run into trouble.”

“You won’t regret it!” he could hear the triumph in her voice, and he had a sudden premonition that he would regret it in many ways.
Oklahoma City

Thalia woke in the palace of Sandy Seacrest. Thierry’s travel coffin was beside her own and it was closed but that wasn’t surprising. Thalia was older than most of the vampires she encountered which meant she rose earlier. The room was designed for vampires. While there was a bed, there were no windows. A small counter to one side held a refrigerator, a microwave and a small sink. Thalia stretched, enjoying the way her joints popped as they floated back into place. With a swift movement she was out of her coffin and striding out the door. When Eric had been here in Oklahoma City as Freyda’s consort, Thalia had avoided the place. It wasn’t that she was at odds with the Viking, but the thought of watching him boot licking and toady for the former Queen was distasteful. His position as consort was respectable, even honored, but Thalia still found it difficult the see the vampire she was fond of in a position of service to one she despised.

Thalia found she could stomach Sandy Seacrest. The vampire carried the appearance of the older woman she was when she was turned but there was nothing worn out or tired about her. Sandy was smart even if she was a little dry. The Oklahoma Queen was most relaxed when she was talking about her businesses, a topic Thalia found boring in the extreme. Even the Viking could cause Thalia to look for the exit when he got started on facts and figures. Thalia supposed that was what formed the friendship between the North Man and Sandy; the light that would come to their eyes when they spoke of tangible assets and manipulating the margin. The accumulation of wealth was honorable, more than honorable for vampires, but it held only passing interest for Thalia. Money came. It sat in great stacks in vaults in Switzerland and the Caymans in her name. It was yet another thing that stole attention from the business of survival, which as far as Thalia was concerned was the only business that mattered.

The decision to come to Oklahoma City was made following a conversation Thalia had with the Kings. Russell told Thalia that of all the neighboring kingdoms, Sandy’s was most likely to have the type of computer spy she needed. “Sandy understands the benefits of corporate espionage,” the Mississippi King told her. “She’s spent more money on her systems than most of us put together at this point.”

Russell then went on to tell Thalia about decisions that were being made that would support the rapidly expanding vampire police force. “This will replace the Sheriffs?” Thalia was concerned.

“No,” Russell had assured her. “This will be another resource for kingdom Sheriffs. We want at least...
one of these task forces in every territory. They will be aligned with the human police force and will be available to them.”

“To help?” Thalia was skeptical and didn’t bother to hide it.

“To help in many ways,” Russell stated, confirming the purpose of the vampire police would be to control as much as to aid. “We need to be ahead of things. We can’t afford to be the last to know and then find ourselves being washed away with the garbage like we were in Rhodes. Humans need us and we should see that as the opportunity it is.”

“And who will these new enforcers report to?” Thalia asked the question that every vampire would ask. This was starting to sound like something that would supersede the Clan Chiefs and that would cause trouble. “There will be some that will say you are creating this force to set yourself above us,” Thalia challenged.

Russell laughed, “That is the last thing we intend,” the King told her. “Bartlett and I have had our fill of politics. It will be a long time before either of us wants to get back into the unpleasantness that’s required. In fact, our purpose in this is just the opposite. We intend to offer the force to the Ancient Pythoness,” Russell told her. They had talked of other things then, but Thalia couldn’t stop thinking about the Pythoness’ silence through the upheavals that had rocked their world. She seemed to have withdrawn from them. Who could say whether she would accept this newly-made army and if she didn’t, who would take control of them?

All these thoughts continued to swirl through Thalia’s head as she walked into the corridor of the Oklahoma palace. Thalia drew in a deep breath and she caught it, the faint whiff of humans. Following her nose, she soon found herself in the public area where there were humans and Weres moving through the rooms. “Donors?” Thalia asked, and a tall man led the way. There were two humans in the feeding room. Thalia thought they might be students. The female wore a bored expression but she was pretty and sweet smelling. The male was the more eager of the two but his face was oily and he had a faintly sour smell. Thinking of Thierry, Thalia chose the female, smiling as she anticipated the Sheriff’s reaction to his remaining meal choice.

Thalia quickly finished, healing the girl of the marks. The human had the slightly dreamy look they got after feeding and she fumbled while gathering her things. The male was picking at something in his ear when Thalia left, and the vampire couldn’t help grinning again.

Sandy had risen and was in her office. She formally greeted Thalia as she entered, “It is good to have you here! I was pleased to hear you would come to me and I hope I can be of service!”

“I am told you have the most complete computer network nearby. You know I am looking to trace someone. You said you have someone who is skilled with these things?”

Sandy smiled thinly, “How politely you put it! You don’t have a reputation for mincing words, Thalia, you can say it. Yes, I have an accomplished hacker who works for me. He’s here to make sure my systems are secure but he’s capable of doing what you need. He’ll join us shortly, but first, how are they?”

“They live,” Thalia shrugged.

When Thalia didn’t offer any more detail, Sandy allowed her polite face to slip. “I am more than happy to do you a favor, Thalia, and I haven’t asked for anything in return. I think you can indulge me with a little more detail. I am a friend to both of them.”

Thalia sniffed, “Thierry doesn’t know the particulars and it is better he doesn’t. The Viking was
injured. Even I don’t know the extent. He appears to have made a miraculous recovery. Fae magic is involved.”

“Niall thinks well of him,” Sandy said slowly.

“Niall thinks well of Niall,” Thalia snarled. “It’s Sookie. She used her own abilities to repair him. Soon it will be clear to all that he is himself again and they will be out of danger.”

“You think someone would try to challenge him?” Sandy’s eyebrows drew together. “I haven’t heard anything…” and then her face became more thoughtful, “But I haven’t looked specifically. I will now.” There was a noise in the hallway and then an older human was at the door. “Ah! Sergei, this is Thalia. Thalia, this is my IT Security Chief. I have told him that you wish to find someone, a vampire. You will need to tell him whom you seek.”

Thalia walked forward with the photograph from Jackson and showed it to the human, “This is Carlo. He was most recently associated with New York,” and Sandy hissed, earning her an impatient glance from Thalia. “He may no longer be in the employ of his King. You may find that he has been branded a traitor.” Thalia didn’t know that for a fact, but it seemed the most likely cover story if there was one to be found. “He was last seen in Jackson, Mississippi. I believe he is traveling North. He would need a car. He will need blood. He will have used credit cards somewhere, his bank, a gas station.”

Sergei’s eyes never left the photo, “It is possible to trace him if he did those things.” He glanced at Sandy who nodded.

‘While you’re digging around, I’d like you to do something else for me, Sergei,” Sandy waited until her employee looked at her. “Check the traffic from my Sheriffs and border patrols. Let me know if there is any mention of foreign vampires, unidentified guests, traveling through the kingdom.”

Sergei was leaving as Thierry arrived. The French vampire was sipping blood from a bottle and Thalia found her lips curved up, “What is it, Sheriff? You decided to forego the donors?” she asked.

Thierry’s eyes flicked to Sandy and he bowed as became a Sheriff greeting a Queen, “I appreciate the offer of your hospitality, my Lady,” he said, his full courtly manners in evidence, “I find that I am trying to mainstream more.”

“The male human was a toad,” Thalia persisted, “which was why I chose the very appealing and lovely girl, but you know what they say. The early bird…”

Sandy laughed, “Why, Thalia, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you tease a vampire as you tease this one, not since the Viking.” She turned to Thierry, “It is delightful to see you again, Thierry. I am making a great deal of money thanks to you. My kingdom is most grateful.”

“I do as I may,” the French vampire answered, his words gentle while his eyes cut at Thalia. “It is always good to be reminded that there are gracious and kind females among our kind.”

Thalia made the short bark that functioned as her laugh, “Good try, little vampire!”

“There will be new donors in about an hour,” Sandy assured him. “Thalia is old. She won’t need to feed again until much later. I’m sure you’ll get your pick this time.”

Thalia flicked him a look that said, ‘don’t count on it,’ but Thierry smiled and nodded again, “I appreciate your consideration.’ He stood straighter and his expression sobered, “The man I saw? He is the expert?”
Sandy nodded, “He’s very good. If your target was on the grid in the past twenty-four hours, Sergei will find him.” Turning to Thalia, the Oklahoma Queen asked, “What really happened in Rhodes? And what does a New York spy in Jackson have to do with you?”

“I don’t know what happened in Rhodes,” Thalia shook her head. “What I am sure of is that Bill Compton was more involved than anyone knows. I think New York was involved as well. That vampire, Carlo, breached Russell Edgington’s palace and only went to Bill Compton’s rooms.”

“Misha does not allow his employees to indulge in pursuing personal business, and Carlo isn’t just his employee. Carlo is his Second and has been for over five years,” Thierry added. “If Carlo was in Jackson, it was because Misha ordered it.”

“So, what would happen if this Carlo was working on his own and was caught? Would Misha disavow him?” Sandy asked, working through the possibilities.

“Probably. It’s possible Carlo was sent because he is of no longer of use to the King,” Thierry told them. “There are many who wish to curry favor with New York. If Misha puts a target on Carlo’s back, there will be those who will seek that favor by bringing the King the fangs of his enemy. Misha has in past sent failing employees on missions from which they don’t return.”

“Why do you think we have so many unsavory vampires in positions of power?” Sandy asked, rolling her eyes.

Thalia shrugged, “Power is a great wheel. It will turn and those who stand above us will fall. All that truly survives is the desire to stand above others. Power is an illusion.”

“You are a philosopher, Thalia,” Thierry grinned. “I didn’t suspect it of you.”

“I am also a wielder of tooth and sword. You know that about me, so watch yourself,” Thalia hissed, as they followed Sandy into the large room that had served as Freyda’s throne room, and then Eric Northman’s after her.

“There was an announcement today from Rhodes. It came while we rested, so you may not have heard it yet,” Sandy told them as they walked. “This group, Vampire First, and one who was part of the Illinois Court, Matthias, were identified as those responsible for the bomb in Rhodes. The official announcement was made by a new combined vampire human task force.” Sandy glanced at Thalia, “If you believe there were others involved, like Bill Compton, it will require hard evidence now and maybe more.”

Thalia nodded, not surprised, “Truth will prevail,” she said briefly. “But first the Kings will issue a call for all vampires to purge their ranks of Vampire First. If they didn’t include it in today’s announcement, they will send it through channels. It’s a promise they’ve made to the humans and they will use it as a reason to station vampire police to every kingdom. These police will report to the ruling Monarch but they will truly answer to their own chief. Russell intends to give them to the Pythoness as a standing army.”

“Surely no one will agree to that,” Sandy’s eyebrows drew together.

“No one wishes to face another Rhodes,” Thalia replied shortly. “The Kings have influence. They have said they will not head this organization themselves. There is a weariness with our internal squabbling. It makes us vulnerable to the humans who hate us. There are many who are saying they will support it.”

There was something in the way Sandy reacted that prompted Thierry to ask, “Do you suspect there
are Vampire First followers within your own borders, Majesty?"

“Not within mine,” Sandy shook her head, “But to the north…”

“Your husband consort,” Thalia growled.

Sandy nodded, “Rafe has not told me that he is a member, but I have my suspicions. He and Gus, the King of Wyoming, are friends and they have similar opinions.”

“You tell me you don’t wish a favor, but I sense you are going to ask for one anyway,” Thalia huffed. “What do you wish of me? Do you want him finally dead?”

“No!” Sandy protested, “No, nothing like that! It did occur to me, though, that we are a short drive from Kansas City. We could visit him. You could share your information from Russell. You could impress upon him the consequences of holding unpopular views…”

“You want him threatened?” Thalia fixed the Queen with her stare.

“Not exactly,” Sandy explained. “It’s just that he’s not always ready to hear the truth. Sometimes he needs to hear it many times, and it helps if he hears it from those who can make an impression…”

“She wants you to use your scary face,” Thierry laughed. “It is an easy favor! Your dear husband may be tempted by strong words but he doesn’t wish to meet his final death. If Thalia showed up on my doorstep and threatened me, I’d change my ways,” and he laughed.

“Exactly,” Sandy shrugged. “He doesn’t fear me, or Stan for that matter. But you?” and she fixed Thalia with a smirking smile. “You are his worst nightmare!”

Sergei was informed to send any information he learned to Kansas City and messages were sent, informing Sandy’s mate that she would be arriving with a special deputation the following evening.

On their next rising a car awaited them. A van carrying travel coffins followed and the three vampires along with a small contingent of guards and servants began the trip to Kansas City. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Thalia groused.

“Now, now,” Thierry grinned, “You’ve invested years of work in building your legend. You should be thrilled! All you have to do is show your face and grown Kings fall to their knees in terror. We could charge money,” and he turned toward Sandy. The two of them fell into a rolling, laughing conversation about the popularity of circuses and freak shows in general and the money-making potential of putting certain supernaturals on display. By the time they reached Kansas City it was well into the night and Thalia was in a foul mood. “That’s the look!” Thierry teased her as they walked toward the doors. “Show him that one and you won’t have to say another word!”

They were escorted to where Rafe awaited them in the public rooms. The King was wearing his lifts and his clothes were more cleverly cut than the last time Thalia had seen him. When he realized who had arrived with his Queen he looked alarmed and his eyes kept darting around him like a mouse looking for a handy hole. Thalia glanced at Sandy and it made her happy to see the Oklahoma Queen embarrassed for her husband. The fact that the Oklahoma Queen looked so uncomfortable told Thalia that Sandy’s instincts were right. Rafe’s reaction was as much fueled by guilt as it was by fear. Thalia began to formulate a plan.

After a minute or so of awkward silence, Rafe got a hold of himself and said, “I welcome you to my kingdom,” but he was still so tongue-tied it sounded more like, “I welyou my kingda.”

“We are grateful for your welcome, Majesty” Thierry acted as if there was nothing out of the
ordinary. He swept into his best bow and said, “We were most pleased to be able to share our news with both you and your mate.”

“My lady Queen brings the most interesting guests,” the Kansas King replied. The tremor in his words was not as noticeable now. “Please tell me, what brings you to this part of the country?” and his eyes flicked over to Thalia again.

Thalia considered letting Rafe stew but then said. “I’m here to deliver news about the initiative against Vampire First,” and then she drilled Rafe with her beadiest stare. Thalia was certain that if he was capable of sweating, Rafe would be soaked.

“What makes you think those sort of vampire would be around here?” Rafe squeaked.

“Because I have heard the kind of proud talk those who hate humans make in this part of the country,” Thalia replied. “I’ve heard sentiments that vampires should be first among all species from you, yourself, Majesty. Of course, I don’t think you would align yourself with criminals like Vampire First, but there may be some, the weak ones, who could misinterpret your pride in your race,” and Thalia waited, rocking back on her heels.

“They are being called criminals?” Rafe asked.

“Branded criminals,” Thalia reinforced. “I anticipate the order to send the vampire police far and wide will come soon. We will be asked to demonstrate our loyalty and willingness to co-habit with humans by purging Vampire First from our ranks.”

“Purge?” Rafe was almost squeaking.

“Silver and stake,” Thalia said steadily, her stare never leaving him. “Of course, as our staunch ally you would be first in leading that effort here in Kansas,” and Thalia allowed the question that was couched within her words to linger.

“Of course, of course!” he stumbled in his enthusiasm to agree. “I am most willing! I would never wish to be seen as harboring criminals…”

“Dangerous criminals,” Thalis reinforced.

“Dangerous criminals,” he nodded, “not in my kingdom!”

“I told Thalia the Kings and humans had nothing to worry about here,” Sandy stood at Rafe’s side, linking her arm through his. “I told her you were both wise and strong. You understand the money and benefits in mainstreaming. You wouldn’t be lured by those who would have us go back into hiding.”

“No! No, indeed!” Rafe was smiling, but no one was fooled.

“So, you will continue your travels and assure the Kings that there is no need for them to send one of their task forces into this part of Zeus?” Sandy asked as though that had been discussed.

“I can see that would be a waste of resources,” Thierry shrugged, but Thalia continued to watch Rafe carefully.

“Since you are such a staunch supporter,” Thalia allowed her voice to moderate just a bit, as though now they could be friends, “I am sure you would be willing to volunteer to host a group, Majesty.” Thalia looked only at Rafe. She could feel Sandy’s sharp eyes on her but she refused to look away. “What could be a better demonstration of your commitment to mainstreaming than being the first in
Zeus to ask for such a contingent?"

It took Rafe a moment before he nodded, “Yes,” he stammered. “Yes, if that is the wish of my Clan Chief I would be willing to host such a group.”

‘Good,’ Thalia thought. She was certain the Kings would applaud the offer which meant Stan Davis would agree as well. The more she watched Rafe, the more convinced Thalia became that this was the smart move.

As they walked down the corridors toward their resting chambers much later, Sandy pulled Thalia aside. “Who will pay for the upkeep of these new spies?” she hissed. Thalia had been aware of Sandy’s annoyance, but it didn’t bother her.

“Why, I would assume the hosting kingdom will pay for the privilege,” but when Sandy’s eye became flatter, Thalia added, “I suspect that these spies will be in a position to offer tithes to the kingdom, though. They are already being asked to serve as consultants to human law enforcement agencies and are charging for their skills. You have several federal agencies within the boundaries of your kingdoms. I suspect the contingent your husband hosts will be a money-maker for you.”

Sandy looked a little less angry, but she still said, “I just wanted you to persuade him, not plant people on top of him.”

“You asked for your husband to be changed into a more prudent vampire. He is incapable of that on his own,” Thalia observed. “By giving him the proper motivation and supervision, I have granted you the favor you requested. If you don’t like the method I used, you will have to be more specific about your requirements next time.”

Sandy opened her mouth and then closed it again. “I expect we’ll hear from Sergei by tomorrow,” Sandy said, not bothering to hide the chill in her voice, “I’m sure as soon as we have your information you will want to be on your way.”

Thalia almost laughed. ‘Be careful what you wish for little Queen,’ she thought as she moved down the corridor toward her resting place.

Bon Temps

The reports of scouts escalated for almost a week and then, more ominously, they stopped. “It could mean that we’ve convinced whoever was watching us that we’re too strong to attack,” Nabila offered. The former Carolinas Queen had remained in Shreveport. She was helping at Fangtasia most evenings and she and Indira were getting along well.

“IT is possible,” Sookie agreed, but her instincts were telling her otherwise. Eric had remained at the house in Bon Temps rather than make the trip to Fangtasia and Sookie decided against taking a decoy. The Viking was better but anyone seeing him would see the limp and his grey pallor. The Viking still tired easily, and his rate of recovery seemed to have slowed.

Jane was staying with Eric while Sookie visited the club. James had been brought up from the Palace and now they rotated so that Owen and Charles had the opportunity to go home to New Orleans and see their families. There were always two of the Were guards in residence at Bon Temps and they spent most of their daytime hours in wolf form, patrolling the grounds. While Sookie trusted the wards that enveloped the house, both she and Eric felt better checking anyway. Heidi patrolled the woods most nights and Bubba stayed in the guesthouse as backup.

Sookie didn’t hear back from her Grandfather but she still wasn’t surprised when Heidi told them she
was pretty sure she’d scented at least one Fae in the woods that surrounded the house. Sookie left another voicemail for Niall, this time asking whether she should be worried, but somehow she knew. It was something within her that assured her that all was well. Sookie couldn’t explain it to Eric, but it gave her confidence. Eric came out onto the porch to meet her and although he was smiling, she could feel there was something troubling him. “What?” she asked.

“Maxwell called,” Eric said, the smile remaining on his face. Sookie ran lightly up the stairs and together they walked into the house. Sookie headed into the kitchen and grabbed a bag of blood, emptying it into a bottle. Eric had fed from her earlier. Sookie wasn’t sure if it was everything catching up with her but she found that over the past several days if Eric fed from her more than once a day she developed a headache. It had never happened before and she figured she’d ask Doctor Ludwig about it the next time she came out to check on Eric’s progress. They had also switched over to real blood rather than True Blood. Without Karin or Pam, the real blood made more of a difference.

Sookie took the bottle from the microwave and gave it a quick shake. When she turned to hand it to Eric she found he was standing almost on top of her. “Okay,” she said, “What’s up?” Eric leaned over her and sniffed. “Do I need a shower?” Sookie pushed against her husband’s chest to back him off her a little. He had an odd expression on his face.

“No,” he said and then he looked a little guilty, “No, you just smell like you brushed against a fairy.”

“Well, if I did they were hiding themselves pretty well,” Sookie shrugged. “What did Maxwell say?”

“It could be nothing,” Eric started, “but he has had two vampires from the palace leave and not return.”

Sookie’s face lost its smile, “When?”

“One last night. One tonight. The one last night is known to have a boyfriend in the City. When he didn’t return, they contacted the friend, but he hadn’t gone there. No one has heard from him. And the other was sent on an errand at first rising. He hasn’t returned and isn’t answering calls.”

“Someone must have seen something.” Sookie’s thoughts were racing. For weeks now the Palace had been closely watched. While there was a possibility there were hostile vampires involved, Sookie was sure the FBI was in the mix. She had considered heading down to New Orleans just so she could do some mind-reading and figure out what the agents knew, but Max and Emil warned against it. They were sure if either she or Eric were to enter the City they would be picked up for some kind of extended questioning. So far no one had shown up in Bon Temps and no official request for an interview had been received. In speaking with Mr. Cataliades, the attorney had counseled to let sleeping dogs lie and that they should stay where they were.

“Emil has his Pack canvassing the city. A request has been put out to our vampires as well,” and Eric sat down on the chair, his face looking drawn as he sipped the blood.

“Are you thinking this is a first attack?” Sookie asked. She didn’t really need to. She could feel his worry through their bond.

“It is a possibility,” he told her. He looked from under his eyebrows, “And if it is, we will be here together as we were in past. How is it that all my most interesting moments are with you?” and there was something in the teasing way he looked at her that headed off any fear Sookie felt.

“What should I do?” Sookie asked.
“I have already put out a warning to all the Sheriffs,” Eric told her. “You will be happy to know Karin offered to come here, but I told her to stay where she is.”

“But why?” Sookie asked.

“If an attack is coming,” Eric said in his reasonable voice, “Karin couldn’t make it here in time. Thomas would not be likely to survive any concentrated attack. They are better as a fighting team.”

“And if she survives, your blood survives too,” Sookie said sadly.

“You have a grim turn of mind, Lover,” Eric grinned at her. “I don’t believe any of us needs to worry about something like that.”

“What about Octavia?” Sookie asked. “She’s down in New Orleans. She could cast something. She might be able to tell us what’s going on.”

Eric’s smile broadened and for the first time, Sookie felt his worry lessen as well, “I always said I had a clever wife,” he told her. He picked his phone from his pocket and pushed the keys. Sookie couldn’t help feeling worried as she watched his movements. He was so much better, but the fluid, graceful Eric still seemed very far away. Eric spoke into the phone and then laid it on the island between them, touching the speaker button.

“Sookie? You there?” Octavia asked.

“I am,” Sookie replied. “How you doing?”

“Never mind about me,” the witch snorted, “How are you doing? I was so sorry to hear about how things went together. I just feel terrible for both of you.”

Eric laid his hand over hers and Sookie could feel it, the shared sorrow that formed its own bond tying them together, “Thank you,” the telepath said and she forced back the rush of feelings.

Eric must have felt it because he squeezed her hand before saying, “We could use your help. There is something happening in New Orleans…”

“Vampires are missing from the palace,” Sookie interrupted. “We don’t know what’s happening down there but it might be the start of a takeover.”

“It is possible that is not the case,” Eric said quickly. “It is possible this is tied to the actions of the FBI. They have been harassing the people at the Palace for weeks. There are questions about Meg, the woman from Silent Witnesses.”

“The one that was with Amelia that night,” Octavia confirmed.

“The Weres are looking for my missing people. With the bombing, it is a time of great uncertainty,” and Eric looked at Sookie.

“There’s been all kinds of stray talk in the City,” Octavia confirmed. “Folks thought for sure you’d be headed down here and I kind of held back, figuring we’d be talking face to face.”

“Mr. Cataliades suggested we stay away,” Sookie told her. “We didn’t want to find ourselves arrested or detained.”

“They’d do that?” Octavia huffed. “Some folks have no manners at all.” There was a sound as if the witch was shifting some things around. “You give me a couple hours and I should be able to get
some information for you. Can I call Maxwell Lee and send someone over to get some personal item for each of the missing vampires? It makes what I’m going to do easier.”

“I’ll clear it,” Eric assured her, “And thank you.”

“Why you thanking me, Majesty?” Octavia snorted. “In case you don’t know, you have an alliance with us now. You stood up for us witches and stopped the killing. There isn’t one of us that wouldn’t go out of their way to support you.” Octavia promised to call soon and the phone disconnected.

“Well, seems you made one hell of an impression,” Sookie sniffed. “Eric Northman, King of the Witches!”

“I pronounce it differently,” he smiled, “And I can count them on one hand.”

Sookie swatted him on the arm saying, “Better watch yourself, Buster!” and she found she felt better. Still, as one hour turned into two, she found she was having trouble concentrating on the movie they were watching. Her eyes kept wandering to the windows. She wondered if even now there were vampires closing in on them.

“Stop it, Älskade,” Eric scolded her. “If there was to be an attack we would have received more reports by now, but it’s quiet.” Still, when Eric’s phone chimed, Sookie jumped.

It was Octavia, and like before, Eric put her on speaker. “Those pricks picked up my person!” Octavia growled. “Can you believe it? Those little pecker heads!”

“The FBI?” Eric asked.

“And whatever local law goons they have working with them, yes!” Octavia was clearly angry.

“So, not vampires?” Sookie asked.

“I’m not sure I would rule it out altogether,” Octavia told them. “I have a strong impression that something was provided to them, something that didn’t give them enough to go after you directly, but enough to get them digging pretty hard. So, somewhere you have yourself an enemy who has dirt on you, but I think you’re going to find that your worries are coming to an end.”

“Why?” Sookie was having a hard time not panicking. If someone had information about the donors, if someone could point the finger, there would be no place they could hide. It wouldn’t matter that this was how supernaturals had functioned since the beginning, it wasn’t acceptable now and Eric would be judged by today’s standards.

“Because they have pissed me off,” Octavia was practically cackling. “I send my gal over there and those goons scared her half to death. Now they’re going to find out what happens when you screw with me and mine, and by the way, that includes the two of you.”

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

“Don’t you worry your little head about it,” Octavia told her, “But let’s just say that evidence that disappears ain’t evidence at all,” and she finished by saying, “I expect your folks will be back home in twenty-four hours.”

“I will owe you a great debt,” Eric told the witch.

“We can never repay the price of blood,” Octavia told him. “Ours is a life debt. It will follow you as long as you exist and there are witches in this world.”
When Octavia hung up, Sookie looked at the phone a long moment. “If that gets out, there are going to be some folks that aren’t going to be very happy.”

“I had not considered the consequences of my intervention on the witches’ behalf. It will cause some gossip,” but then his solemn face was replaced with a cheerful smile, “But now we know it is not as we feared and I believe that our worries with law enforcement are coming to an end.”

“You sure do land sunny-side up, Mr. Northman,” Sookie smirked.

“Perhaps we can find a way to help you do the same, Mrs. Northman,” Eric quipped, but they both knew they were too tired for bedroom exercise. It was everything they had just to make it to the top of the stairs and collapse in their large bed.

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For several nights’ things seemed to be returning to a more normal relaxed state. Learning that the dust-up in New Orleans was associated with the FBI was annoying but in most ways it was a relief. Sookie found herself waking up later and later in the day, but at the same time she was feeling less stressed than she had in weeks. It was as though she had been holding her breath and now she could finally exhale.

When she waited for Eric to rise on that night of the takeover it was a night like any other. There was no advance warning that forces had entered the state in numbers but that was explained later when the trucks full of travel coffins were found.

The first indication that there was trouble came from Rubio Hermosa. They had only come downstairs when they received his call. Rubio told Eric that he and Palomino had been attacked outside of his home. There were several vampires involved and it was only the fact that Rubio had additional security to patrol his grounds following the last alarm that allowed them to overcome their attackers. Rubio didn’t recognize the vampires but their licenses said they were from Nevada.

Sookie and Eric started making calls and sending texts to the other Sheriffs. They called in the vampires and guards in their own guesthouse and briefed them. While Sookie was sure their wards would hold against any hostile invaders she didn’t want to take chances.

The next call came within the hour from Indira. Fangtasia was under siege. Mustapha and Warren were shooting attackers from outside, but it was impossible to tell how many vampires were there. Eric could hear the sounds of battle in the background. There was the sound of breaking glass and the connection ended.

Karin called almost immediately after Indira’s call ended. She and Thomas were fighting a running battle through the woods. The vampires had surrounded their home intent on killing them as they rose. These were older vampires and the party included several Were mercenaries. Had they been successful in breaking into the house, Karin told Eric both she and Thomas would have been finally dead already. “The doors held until we rose. It’s a good thing Thomas is so paranoid,” Karin laughed. “Can you believe he installed metal doors with bars that extend over four feet into the floor? I told him he was an idiot. Now I’m going to have to apologize.” Eric could hear the stress in her voice and he suspected she was injured. “Oops,” she said suddenly, “Have to go,” and Eric heard the sound of growling.

Beside him Sookie sat, her face increasingly grave. Heidi was patrolling outside along with the Were guards. It was Owen and Charles in Bon Temps tonight and Sookie found herself worrying about their families whom she realized she had never met. Bubba positioned himself near the back of the house promising he’d holler if he saw anything. “It will be all right,” Eric told her, and he smiled his
bright, fighting smile, the one where his eyes burned with the light of battle. Sookie wondered how he could look so happy, but he did.

With a quick nod, Eric walked slowly into their family room and lifted his sword from the wall above the fireplace. It was in that moment that Sookie realized they could all die. For a minute Sookie just stood in the doorway, her mouth agape. She wondered what it would feel like to be run through with a sword, and then she grit her teeth, tilted her chin up and stretched her own lips upward. “I know it will be fine!” she told him, but she thought of the Fae sword, and it shimmered in her hand.

They stood around the family room, Sookie, Eric and Jane. Jane had a sword as well and she stepped away from the two of them into some open floor space so she could make some circular movements, loosening her arm and making her sword sing through the air. Eric watched the windows, his phone in his hand. Sookie wondered how he could be so calm but she realized he had gone into a form of downtime she hadn’t seen before. When she started to worry he snapped out of it and looked at her, “What is it Lover? Do you sense something?”

“Nope,” Sookie shrugged, “Just nervous, I guess.”

Eric nodded, checked his phone and then seemed to go into his meditative state again. Sookie tried to relax. She glanced at Eric and then sat down on the couch. She tilted the sword against the couch, then picked it up to make sure it hadn’t marked the floor. ‘Stupid,’ she thought. ‘You’re about to get yourself killed and you’re worrying about the floor.’

After a few minutes she got up and paced. Sookie checked her phone and just when she thought she’d have to say something, Eric moved. “They’re here,” he told her. Jane was immediately on alert and together they all moved toward the porch. There was a funny color out in the woods, like a weird glow and Sookie thought it must be some strong magic fighting the wards. As she looked around she saw movement first from one side and then from another. Vampires she didn’t recognize were stepping out of the woods and facing the house. There were at least five, and then there were ten, and then there were more. As she swept her eyes back and forth she saw one she did know.

“Hello, Angie,” Eric said conversationally. “Come to dance on my table?”

“You always thought you were a cut above, Eric; a little too good for the rest of us.” Angie was smiling in a cruel way as she kept walking forward and two large vampires fell in step behind her.

“Is Daddy bank-rolling your trip this time?” Eric asked.

Angie shrugged, “I consider this a permission/forgiveness situation. What Felipe doesn’t know won’t hurt him but once it’s done, I don’t think he’s going to be handing out punishment.”

“How did you get through the wards?” Sookie asked. She didn’t expect an answer so she was surprised when Angie answered her.

“Witch,” the Nevada vampire shrugged. “Remember when you pointed out the witches in our territory? Well, it wasn’t too hard to figure out who had real juice and then it was just a matter of time. I knew there’d be a reason I’d need to pick up a little talent on the way and there she was.”

“And she was willing?” Sookie asked, angling for more time. It seemed foolish because the longer she spoke the more pale faces seemed to appear along the woods edge. There were so many, twenty vampires at least. Sookie didn’t see Heidi or Bubba. She reached out searching for voids and there were more, but it was impossible to know if they were friends or not.
Angie stopped walking when she reached the bottom of the porch steps. “Sure,” she told Sookie. “When we took her kids she was very willing. It’s funny how quickly people become motivated when their young are on the line,” and then she gave Sookie a cruel smile. “Guess that bomb saved you from finding out, huh?”

Sookie felt the bile rise in her throat. She wanted to kill Angie and she felt her Fae features take over. Sookie couldn’t help but feel pleased to see the vampires behind Angie take a step back. Even Angie’s face tightened for a minute but then she hissed, “Sure, like that means anything. Might as well meet your end in your true form. Not human, not Fae. You are just a reject in the end and when your mate is dust we’ll leave your dead carcass for the dogs to gnaw.”

Beside her, Eric roared and then leaped down. Angie’s sword came up to meet his and the vampires on either side of Angie rushed forward. Jane leaped down into the yard as well, parrying the blade from the vampire on the right. Sookie ran down the stairs toward the vampire on the left. He was facing away from her, working his way around Eric to try and attack his back. Sookie didn’t hesitate. She sliced across his back and the blade made a sizzling sound as it ran through the vampire’s flesh, laying him open as easily as slicing through ripe melon. The vampire howled and spun and Eric’s sword whirled past Sookie’s face. The next thing she knew; the vampire’s head was rolling across the ground. Sookie looked up to see one of the vampires from the woods rushing toward them and she took the stance Tamsin had shown her. As she raised her blade to catch the one descending toward her she thought she could hear the sounds of more fighting. It seemed to be coming from all around her. There was the clang of metal and then Sookie heard the thin sound of a horn. Sookie fell and her sword rolled away from her. The vampire smiled as he stabbed his sword down, intending to pin her to the ground like a bug, but she managed to roll at the last minute. There was a broken blade on the ground and Sookie grabbed it and sat up as quickly as she could. She hadn’t meant to shove it into the vampire, but somehow she did and the vampire fell over, partially falling on her.

Sookie pushed him off and as she did, Jane fell to the ground beside her. Sookie could see Jane was dead. It was in the lifeless look in the vampire’s eyes. Gulping, Sookie thought of her Fae blade again and she felt the familiar hilt in her hand. Pushing herself up, she saw Angie and a vampire she didn’t know. They had Eric pinned against the house. They were both bleeding, but so was Eric. Her husband looked stronger than he had in weeks, but even as she watched, Eric stumbled. “No!” Sookie cried out and Angie’s head turned. It was enough and Eric finished the vampire to his left. Angie growled and launched herself at Eric, her blade running through his shoulder.

“You are mine!” Angie snarled.

“No he’s not!” Sookie snarled back and instead of sweeping her blade high, she ran at Angie and swept her blade low, slicing across Angie’s calves. The Nevada vampire screamed and collapsed to the ground. As Angie scrambled for her blade, Eric stood over her and with a last sweeping motion, sliced her head cleanly from her body.

Sookie scrambled to stand. Eric was swaying and Sookie positioned herself between Eric and the woods, her sword at the ready for whatever came next. What she didn’t expect was the glow of bodies bathed in moonlight walking toward her through her trees. The Fae surrounded her.
A Promise of Wind

Chapter Notes

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Bon Temps

Sookie swayed as she stood, her back to Eric. She held out her sword, determined to meet the next vampire who rushed toward either of them. In her head she could see Eric’s drawn face as he leaned against the house. She had seen Angie’s blade stab his shoulder and the blood that had flowed so freely, but she couldn’t think about that right now. ‘I’m ready,’ she thought, but she wasn’t sure whether she was ready to continue fighting or to die. With the number of pale faces she’d seen in the tree line around their house she figured it was probably both.

As she looked for enemies, she couldn’t make sense of the starlight glow she saw moving through the trees. Shifting from side to side, her eyes flicking to her left and then to her right, she kept waiting for the attack that didn’t come. Instead, the pale faces were gone, replaced by a thin fog that seemed to be lit from within. Sookie could still hear the sounds of fighting as though she were standing right next to it. The sounds of steel against steel rang brightly and there were the grunts and shouts of warriors engaged in battle. She heard it again, the thin, ghostly horn, so light on the air that as soon as the sound stopped, she wondered if she’d imagined it.

“Eric?” she said out loud.

“It seems your relatives have decided to get involved after all,” Eric said from behind her. Although she could feel him, Sookie’s nerves were stretched taut, jittery with the adrenaline surging through her. Eric was pushing her calm, but when he placed his hand on her shoulder she still jumped, her heart almost leaping from her chest. It was enough to jolt her into action.

Turning her head, she asked, “Are you okay?”

“Tis but a flesh wound,” Eric quipped, quoting from Monty Python and the Holy Grail. They had watched the movie many months ago and Eric found it hilarious. He had a tendency to sneak phrases from the film into conversations and he loved it when the reaction was puzzled silence.

Sookie swept her eyes over the tree line one more time, but there was no movement and now, even the weird fog seemed to have dissipated. Deciding it was safe, she took the couple steps toward the house, and leaned her sword against the foundation before reaching for Eric’s shirt, “Let me see,” she bossed.

“I just need blood, Lover,” Eric protested and he pushed her grasping fingers away from him. Sookie noticed he kept watch over her head, his hand never loosening its grip from his sword.

“You think they’ll come again?” she asked.
“No,” Eric replied. “I think it’s finished.”

“Well, fine then,” Sookie sniffed and reached for his shirt again. Eric tried to intercept her hand, but Sookie wasn’t having it. She pushed his hand aside and when he tried to capture her fingers, she slapped at him. Trusting him to guard her back, she pulled at his shirt finally reaching into the hole made by the blade and ripping. “Stop!” Eric hissed. “I can’t keep watch and fend you off. I do believe the immediate danger is over, but we should wait before tending our wounds.”

“Sorry,” Sookie mumbled, “You’re right,” and as she turned aside, she could see Jane lying in the driveway. “It was all so fast,” she said out loud.

“I think we have survived it,” Eric agreed, “but I believe we owe the Prince a great debt.”

As though he heard his name, Niall appeared on the edge of the woods. He walked toward them, his long, pale hair and clothing seemed to float on a breeze they couldn’t feel. He was bathed in light, but that didn’t hide the blood on his long, curved sword nor the dark color that stained his sword arm to the elbow.

“Greetings, Granddaughter,” he smiled at Sookie. Walking directly toward her, he didn’t stop until he had her in his arms and he kissed her lips. It was as though life itself had blown into her, and Sookie felt a new, invigorating energy rush through her veins. Even her hair seemed to lift at the roots, and Sookie noticed how the Prince looked fierce but somehow happier than he usually did. “You are uninjured?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Sookie rocked back a little on her heels. Niall’s eyes were always intriguing, but tonight they seemed to glow with a deep, mysterious green that spoke of dark places and quick water. “But Eric…”

The Prince’s gaze rose to the Viking standing behind her, “Yes, I can see you were struck.” The Prince stepped away from Sookie and then turned toward Eric.

Almost every time Sookie saw her Grandfather touch Eric, it was restricted to shaking hands. On one memorable occasion, shortly after she and Eric were joined in Nebraska, her Grandfather had rather woodenly embraced the vampire but, for the most part, Niall kept his distance. Sookie figured it was because Fae were like catnip to vampires. The scent of Fae blood was like chumming the water in shark alley when vampires were around, and even though Niall was good at cloaking his scent, why would he take chances? But now Niall placed his hands on Eric’s shoulders, and then he pulled the vampire forward. Before Sookie could even think about what she was seeing, her Grandfather kissed Eric full on the mouth, and Sookie could feel Eric’s surprise, which was quickly replaced by the same energy and sense of well-being she had just experienced. “My blessings upon you!” the Prince said brightly, before glancing back toward the woods.

“There are still problems, unrest in other parts of your kingdom, Northman,” Niall said. “My people have had such an enjoyable evening here they are reluctant to stop. Unless you have any objection, we would like to continue our hunt.”

“No,” Eric was watching the Prince carefully, “No objections.” Sookie could feel that Eric was shocked by the Prince’s behavior, but he was holding it back, trying to be polite.

“Wonderful!” the Prince laughed. Turning back to Sookie, he said, “I will return later this evening. I have missed you, Granddaughter! I am so glad you called. Perhaps we could have some tea?”

“Sure,” Sookie shrugged, not exactly sure what to make of any of this. The Prince winked and then his smile turned distinctly feral. Sookie shuddered just a bit as she caught a glimpse of razor teeth and
cruel eyes, lurking just under the handsome façade her Grandfather wore so easily, and then he was gone.

Sookie was about to ask Eric what he made of this development when she saw Owen coming out of the woods, supporting Charles. Charles was limping. “I’ll call Doctor Ludwig,” Eric said quietly, “And Sookie?” he added, “I could use a blood if you could manage it. I am hurting.”

“You can feed from me,” Sookie offered.

Eric smiled, “I fed from you upon rising, Lover. If I feed from you again your head will hurt, which means my head will hurt. Whole blood would be good.”

“I didn’t know you felt that.” Although there was no reason for it, Sookie felt ashamed. Pausing on her way up the porch stairs, she helped Charles to sit down. “I’ll bring you some water,” she said, patting the Were on the shoulder and moving inside.

Grabbing a tray, Sookie warmed up bottles of blood and pulled out bottles of water. ‘Think about the microwave,’ she told herself. ‘Think about filling ice cube trays.’ Second by second, she occupied herself by focusing on small things so she wouldn’t have to think about how she’d almost died or how she’d just killed again. “Maybe Heidi and Bubba are out front,” she said out loud, and the sound of her voice in the empty kitchen felt comforting. When the last bottle was ready, Sookie said, “Well, let’s get on out there,” and walked toward her front door.

The door was wide open now, and the screen door was propped open, too. Sookie glanced at the heaps of empty clothes lying in her front yard and then turned her eyes to Doctor Ludwig who was leaning over Charles’ leg. Looking up, the doctor said, “You weren’t hurt.” She didn’t ask it, she stated it, and Sookie nodded before moving to Owen, who was hunched over on the deck chair.

When Owen started to stand, Sookie shook her head. “You just sit,” she told the guard. “You’ve done enough for one night.” Handing him a water, she moved further down the porch where Heidi and Bubba were sitting on the wicker set. Heidi was rubbing her arm. She took the blood and whispered her thanks. Bubba was a mess, blood crusted on the side of his face. It looked as though Bubba had taken a head wound.

When she offered the once famous vampire warmed blood, he declined, “None for me! I’m feeling a little better now. Some fella was pushing me, and another must have snuck up behind me because the next thing I knew I was on the ground!”

“They were real tricky,” Sookie agreed.

“Real cowards!” Bubba replied hotly. “Should have been willing to fight me man to man and not sneak around to backstab me!”

“Well, we got the drop on them in the end!” Sookie assured him.

“Yup,” Bubba smiled, “We sure did!”

Heidi glanced to the yard. Sookie followed her gaze and realized Jane’s body was now gone. It had crumbled back into dust, her clothes the only reminder of where she fell. “Why don’t I get something to gather her remains,” Sookie said. “Any idea who might wish her dust?”

Heidi shook her head, “Her Maker was gone and I don’t believe she had any brothers or sisters of the blood.”

Doctor Ludwig glanced up from her bandaging, “You’ll want to contact Phoebe Golden,” she told
Sookie. “Phoebe thought the world of Jane. She’ll be real sorry to get this news.”

“Felipe de Castro will pay!” Heidi hissed. The tracker’s face was angry and Sookie could see that anger reflected in the faces of the others.

It was the first time Sookie had really put it together. She looked at Eric who was in the process of dialing his phone. “That’s right, isn’t it?” she said to him. “That slimy son of a bitch tried to take us over again! That bastard!” and all the fear and worry and adrenaline seemed to coalesce into a single bubble of rage. “I swear, Eric! I’m going to fly out there myself and gut that cape-wearing, pencil dick, bug fucker, once and for all!”

Eric laughed and the sound was truly joyful, “And I would pay to watch that, my Lover, but first, let’s make sure our Sheriffs have survived.” Eric glanced around him, taking a moment to look in the eyes of each of their surviving defenders. It was as if he passed each of them a promise, a pledge, and Sookie felt the strength of his leadership. He finished by laying his hand on Charles’ shoulder.

“I’m fine, Majesty,” his guard assured him. Eric nodded and then walked up the remaining porch stairs.

“I’ll come with you,” Sookie told him. Wrapping their arms around each other, they walked into the living room, and sat down on the couch. Sookie realized just touching Eric made her feel better, and she could tell he felt the same.

He was all business as he made his first call. He spoke in his odd, hissing vampire speak. It was fast and low but for some reason she didn’t have trouble following him. He was speaking with Indira. She, Nabila, and a number of others had been pinned inside Fangtasia. The vampires outside had been trying to set the place on fire. Mustapha and Warren had been positioned on a rooftop some distance away, picking off attackers effectively enough that their attackers hadn’t made much progress. Nabila was getting ready to stage a charge out the door to see if they could throw their attackers back when the Fae arrived. One minute there were vampires pounding against the walls and breaking glass, the next minute, there was a loud hissing, and then the screaming started. “I think they were eating them,” Indira told Eric.

Sookie shuddered. She thought Indira might be right.

“The Prince has been busy,” Eric was looking apologetic and Sookie realized he thought she was uncomfortable thinking he was leaving her out.

“Look,” Sookie smiled, “I’m going to get you another blood. Make your calls. I’m going to get outside and see if there’s anything else I can do to help.”

Eric grabbed her hand as she started to rise and pulled her toward him, “You were very good tonight,” he told her, “a true warrior!”

“I’d rather be a true ‘nothing is happening, so let’s wear our jammies and watch Dancing with the Stars’ gal,” Sookie replied. She picked up a wooden box from a side table that had some carving on it and a latch.

“We can be boring tomorrow,” Eric teased her. Sookie touched his cheek and he nodded. She knew he was watching her all the way to the door.

Charles was up and moving when Sookie stepped back outside. “The Fae showed up at Fangtasia,” Sookie told everyone. “Sounds like folks over there are all right.”

“That’s a relief!” Heidi smiled. Together they walked to the pile of clothes that marked where Jane
had fallen. Sookie opened the small box and together they scooped as much dust as they could from
the ground. Heidi sifted until she found Jane’s fangs and added them to the box.

“Thierry and Thomas will be sad to hear of this loss,” Charles said, “Jane was a lot of fun.”

Owen was helping Charles limp toward the guesthouse. “She sure got into some trouble in New
Orleans,” Owen added, and he and Charles exchanged a look.

Sookie offered to go to the guesthouse to help the Weres but they declined. Looking back at Jane’s
remains, Sookie said, “I guess I never knew her all that well. Mostly I knew her from here and she
was pretty focused on the whole research end of things.” Sookie thought about how she hadn’t much
liked the Jane who followed her around with a clipboard and made her feel like a test subject.

“You’ll want to start looking for a replacement for the clinic.” Amy Ludwig had walked over to
stand beside them. When Sookie stood up, the small doctor grabbed the telepath’s wrist. Sookie
figured Amy was timing her pulse. The doctor kept talking, “The reproductive clinic is a real money-
maker, and lots of Weres are depending on it being around. You have a pretty big stake in the place.
I can make inquiries if you’d like.”

“That would be great,” Sookie replied and then she waited for Amy to release her. When Amy kept
holding onto her wrist and frowning, Sookie asked, “Anything wrong?”

“You’re sure you feel all right?” and Amy gave her an odd look.

Sookie snatched back her hand, figuring the palm licking was coming next, “Well, aside from being
pretty shook up, sure. After all, it’s been a busy night. Not every day you have a bunch of vampires
show up, aiming to turn you into shish kabob, and then you get rescued by your very own Fairy
Grandfather. It’s kind of a lot for a country girl to take in.”

“I see your brush with eternity hasn’t improved your manners,” Amy scowled.

“Back at ya!” Sookie gave her best Jason Stackhouse lopsided grin, and then she gulped. It hit her
again how closely they had all come to death and Sookie glanced at the house. It struck her that life
still had a way of feeling mighty short, even for immortals.

“First time I’ve ever heard of the Fae doing something like this,” Heidi shook her head, “First time
I’ve heard of the Fae doing much of anything.”

“It is going to cause some talk,” Doctor Ludwig gave Sookie a direct look.

Sookie couldn’t think about it right now. “Why don’t y’all come on into the house?” Sookie said,
changing the subject, “I think the excitement is over for one night.”

Heidi and Doctor Ludwig started toward the house, but Bubba shook his head. “If it’s all the same to
you, Miss Sookie, I’m going to just sit out here on the porch for a while,” he told her. “I want to look
at the woods and think about how pretty they looked, all lit up like they were.”

Sookie nodded and was heading through the door when a voice called from the tree line, “Look
what I found.” It was Mr. Cataliades. The demon was wearing something that looked like karate
clothes and he was carrying a woman. Sookie moved down the stairs and into the yard to meet him.

“Who is she?” Sookie asked him.

“She is a witch,” the attorney told Sookie. “She was tethered to a tree at the edge of your property.
She’s been knocked around.”
“Well, bring her on inside,” Sookie touched Mr. Cataliades’ arm, “Amy is here. And you?” Sookie looked a little more closely at Mr. C. His outfit under other circumstances would have had her giggling, but it was hard to laugh when you knew you were looking at someone else’s blood. He had a sword, too, but he’d tucked it through his belt and it struck his legs when he walked.

“I escaped unharmed,” the attorney said mildly. “Your attackers were too busy watching in front of them to consider the danger that would come from behind. We took them all by surprise,” and Sookie realized he had come with the Fae. He glanced at Sookie before he started walking up the stairs. “You will want to retrieve and clean your sword before the Prince arrives,” and he glanced at where Fintan’s sword leaned against the house.

Sookie broke off to do as he suggested, then said, “I wonder where Angie found so many vampires. I think I counted fifteen, maybe twenty,” Sookie sniffed.

“There were more,” the demon told her, “and not all were vampires. Angie wasn’t taking chances.”

As they walked inside, Sookie glanced into the living room. Eric had another bottle of blood in front of him. He was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, and his forehead was in his hand. He was intent on his conversation, but Sookie couldn’t feel anything terrible from him so she figured no bad news. Mr. Cataliades carried the witch all the way to the family room and Amy got out of her chair to take a look at her. After a few minutes, the woman moaned and then her eyes opened. She looked around with some panic and Amy said, “Hold your water, magic caster! You’re among friends now.”

“What’s your name?” Sookie asked. She couldn’t imagine Angie had done much smiling so Sookie tried to make sure her own was extra bright. For some reason, the telepath thought about the pile of clothes that had been Angie still lying in the yard.

“Meredith,” the woman whispered. “You’re the telepath they wanted to kill.”

“Sookie Northman,” the telepath nodded, “Yup, still walking.”

“So you won,” Meredith nodded, “My sisters said you would.”

Amy looked at Sookie over the witch’s head, “She’ll be fine,” and the doctor walked into the kitchen and returned with a sandwich and a glass of water, which she set on the table near the witch. “Eat something and you’ll feel more like yourself.”

“I didn’t think you knew how to use a kitchen,” Sookie couldn’t help smiling at the Doctor.

“I have many skills,” Amy sneered, “including knowing when to go, and that’s now!” and with a flash, the doctor was gone.

Sookie felt the pinch of panic and decided being busy was best. There were glasses to fill and blood to be heated. There was hot tea to be made for Mr. Cataliades, and all of a sudden it felt as though the floor fell out from under her. As if he knew, and maybe he did, Eric was behind her. He helped her onto one of the stools and he called Heidi who took things to carry into the family room. Eric poured the hot water into the pot himself and Mr. Cataliades walked in to retrieve his own tray. “I’m sorry,” Sookie mumbled.

“For what?” Eric smiled at her. “For fighting harder than any of us and then taking care of everyone when the battle was over? You are my strength,” he told her, and Sookie heard him say, ‘You are the heart of me.’ It was very clear, though Sookie knew Eric hadn’t said it aloud. She didn’t hear vampires’ thoughts often, but it did happen, particularly during times of great stress, so Sookie didn’t
make much of it. “Do you need to go upstairs and rest?” he asked her.

“No,” Sookie shook her head. “If I go upstairs, I know I’ll just think about things, and that’ll be worse.”

“Then come,” Eric told her and together they joined the others in the family room. Eric took her hand and steered them both to an open armchair. He sat down and pulled Sookie into his lap. It was a public display of affection they didn’t do often, but Sookie was grateful. Even through their clothing, touching him made her feel better. Eric looked around, “Owen and Charles?”

“They went back to the guesthouse,” Heidi told him.

Eric nodded and then he told all of them what he learned. “Karin and Thomas are on their way to join us here. There were a good number of vampires and others who were sent to destroy them. Karin has collected IDs and fangs and they found a large car carrier that was fitted to transport coffins nearby. The vampires crossed state lines during the day looking like cargo. I suspect we will find similar transports near the other Areas.”

“What I don’t understand is how the Fae knew to be here,” Heidi asked.

“The Prince was alerted by the Queen that help was needed,” Mr. Cataliades said smoothly. Sookie stared at him and she thought the attorney looked a little uncomfortable. “He has had watchers in place since you left him your voice mail.”

“Why didn’t he just call me back?” Sookie asked.

“You will need to ask him that question yourself,” Mr. Cataliades replied. He said it in a kindly way but the way he looked away convinced her. There was something else going on and when Niall returned, she was going to figure it out. Turning, she asked “What about Rubio?”

“Rubio and Palomino defeated their enemies at first rising. It was Rubio’s call earlier tonight that alerted all of us all to the danger and I intend to reward him for it,” Eric nodded. “The New Orleans palace was under siege. They had the palace circled and they were killing vampires in the street. There were humans, tourists in the area.” Eric shifted under her, “Max told me that the Fae appeared there. They made no effort to hide themselves and they were filmed by many.”

“They have never wanted to mainstream!” Sookie exclaimed. “They have gone to all kinds of trouble to keep themselves secret. Why would they do this now?” and she looked at Mr. Cataliades.

The attorney didn’t meet her eye, but then he looked as if he’d made a decision, “The Prince will be able to best explain, but I believe Niall was most worried about you. He was distraught over recent events, Rhodes, and your loss.” Eric tightened his arm around her and Sookie leaned back, taking comfort from the feel of his long body beneath her own. “He may feel that he owes you protection and more,” and the attorney glanced away again.

“So, you’re all back then?” Sookie asked.

“I do believe Tamsin will be available to resume lessons, if that’s what you wish,” and Mr. Cataliades smiled tightly.

“I told Max to have a statement made that the events tonight were part of a movie being filmed around the palace,” Eric provided. “He will tell the humans it was a dress rehearsal or a concept piece for some science fiction film. Humans enjoy Hollywood illusions. They will be happy to believe that what they saw was only play-acting.”
“I don’t know,” Sookie shook her head. “Humans in New Orleans believe all kinds of things. They are thrilled to have their Vampire King and they already have their Voodoo Queen. You may find it’s not so easy getting them to give up the idea that there are more Supernaturals around than they knew.”

“That’s Niall’s problem,” Eric said shortly.

“They will say you are the one,” the witch named Meredith said. Everyone looked at her and she continued, “Everyone helps you, don’t they? Were, vampires… you have an alliance with us and now? Even the Fae are willing to pick up their swords for you. Who would ever dare stand against you now?”

“I will call Octavia Fant,” Eric told her. “In the meantime, there is room in our guesthouse for you.”

“I’d like to call my family?” Meredith asked as Heidi helped her to stand. The tracker handed the witch a phone and together they moved toward the door.

“I have some things I need to do as well,” Mr. Cataliades rose and bowed. “But I will be back tomorrow night. I am sure there will be a great deal to discuss.”

When they were alone, Eric said, “I can feel your exhaustion.”

“And I can feel yours,” Sookie answered back. “Of course, yours feels more like you’re just pissed off at the world, but you can’t fool me!” She turned so she was sitting more sideways. She looked up into his face and asked, “You going to call Felipe?”

Eric grinned, “Should I tell him your new names for him?”

“No!” Sookie exclaimed, “I want to do that myself!” They laughed and then Sookie laid her hand over the place Angie had stabbed him. “He probably already knows; don’t you think?”

“He will have felt her fall,” Eric shrugged, “but he isn’t likely to know the outcome. From what I was told every invader sent here is no more. Your relatives are thorough. Felipe’s restitution bill will be costly.”

“He’ll have to pay off Makers?” Sookie frowned.

“If he ordered them to come, then yes, he would owe their Makers payment. There were many vampires here, more than I thought he could command. It is possible some were mercenaries he hired. He wouldn’t owe for them.”

“Well, why don’t we find out?” Sookie asked.

Eric grinned, “You are ready to call him, Lover?”

“Damn straight I am!” and Sookie grinned back.

Eric pulled out his phone and hit a few buttons, then hit the speaker feature so they could both listen to the dial tone. The phone rang several times and Sookie was just resigning herself to leaving a voicemail when Felipe’s familiar voice answered. “Northman? This is not a good time.”

“Why is that, Felipe?” Eric asked. Sookie was surprised. She realized there were several things she expected the Nevada King to say, but this was not one of them.

“Something has happened to my progeny, Angie,” Felipe answered. “I have been trying to contact
her but her phone rolls to voice mail.”

“I’m not surprised,” Eric’s voice was cold. “In fact, if you were to reach her I think you’d find the conversation a bit one-sided.”

“You have seen her?” Felipe sounded anxious, almost pleased, “Did you see what happened? I felt something. I know she was injured.”

“You can cut the crap!” Sookie huffed “You know she came here to take us over, and let me tell you, it didn’t go too well for your side!”

There was a long pause before Felipe said, “She was there? In Louisiana?” His voice sounded strained, almost broken, and Sookie felt a slim thread of doubt begin to form.

“Of course she was here,” Eric didn’t sound as if he shared Sookie’s concerns. “She was standing in my front yard surrounded by more muscle than she could have afforded on her own. It wasn’t her only force. She had people all over my territories, targeting my Sheriffs. I’m sure this all sounds familiar… well, except for the outcome.”

There was another pause and then Felipe said, “I have no reason to doubt what you are telling me, but I had no part in it. Angie told me she was headed to New York. She has been a regular visitor there to oversee the club franchise I co-own with your Pamela and Misha. Is she… is she finally dead?” The Nevada King said the last softly and Sookie found she was starting to believe Felipe de Castro.

“You progeny is no more. Her dust is here,” Eric confirmed.

Felipe made a choking sound and Sookie suddenly spoke up, offering to send him Angie’s fangs. Eric shot her an annoyed look, but Felipe was saying, “Thank you,” and it sounded as if he was crying. Later, thinking about it, Sookie thought it was because her own heart had been so recently broken that she found herself feeling so sympathetic toward the Nevada King. Eric wasn’t having any of it. He squeezed her hand and when she turned to him, her eyes soft, he grimaced, and shook his head.

“You are very convincing,” Eric said sarcastically, “but you forget, I know how this game is played. You deny you know anything about it. You throw all the blame on your wayward progeny which allows you to deny my demands for restitution. In addition, you can then deny any demands from the surviving Makers of those who were led here, and believe me, that bill will be large. You’re a bastard, and I know your darling wouldn’t have done this on her own. Angie just wasn’t that smart!” and Eric finished with a growl.

“I can’t argue about this right now,” Felipe was making a choking noise. He really did sound as if he was devastated, but Sookie could see Eric wasn’t buying it. “I agree with you. She wouldn’t have thought to do something so ambitious without someone pushing her. My Angie wanted more and I know she was frustrated. When she returned from New York the last time I was worried. She was staying with your progeny and the King in their home…” and Sookie could feel Eric’s anger twist, “When Angie came back she was full of ideas and desires. She wanted something of her own and she was no longer happy with handling my many businesses. I did not feel her ready to handle a regency and I told her so. I hate to think…” and there was some sort of shuffling on Felipe’s end before he exclaimed, “Oh, Angie!”

Sookie poked the mute button, “Do you think it’s possible he didn’t know?”

“No,” Eric snarled. “He knew. He may have done it with New York’s knowledge, or he may just be
casting doubt to cause problems between Pamela and myself,” and Eric poked the button to open the line again. “Your progeny was acting unlawfully. She was your responsibility. You can expect to hear from my attorney,” and Eric ended the connection.

Nevada

“So now you know,” the tall, broad-shouldered man said

“Yes,” Felipe nodded. “Go through Angie’s emails and texts. See if you can find anything there that implicates either me or New York, and…” and Felipe stopped himself. He realized he had almost called this new business partner ‘Horst.’ Felipe had been fond of Horst and he found there were still times like this when he missed him. Looking at this newest vampire, Dieter was his name, Felipe realized there was a physical resemblance to Horst. ‘It’s just a coincidence,’ he told himself. ‘The important thing is Dieter’s smart, strong, talented, and I enjoy his company.’

“Should I destroy what I find?” Dieter was asking.

“Anything that points to me, yes. Anything that could point to New York, no. I think it’s time we did a good turn for our friend in the East,” and Felipe smiled.

Dieter left the night-blooming garden and Felipe stretched back on the soft suede chaise. He breathed in the perfume of the blooms and reveled in the fine mist the watering system let out at regular intervals. The water coated his skin and then evaporated in the dry, desert air. The pain he experienced at the moment of Angie’s final death had been less crippling than he expected. He did feel a moment of regret, and then, unexpectedly, he felt a moment of relief. He had made Angie all those many years ago on a whim and when he was a different vampire. Felipe realized that were he faced with the same set of circumstances today, he would probably allow Angie to die rather than turn her. It made thinking about her loss easier. Felipe thought of the men and vampires who now surrounded him. Dieter was fitting in and stepping up nicely. There was a human as well, Carson, who was rising through the ranks in the casino business. Felipe wondered if it was time to create another progeny.

Felipe closed his eyes, clearing his mind, and just existing in the moment. This scheme of Angie’s had been far-fetched, but he had to admire the initiative she took. She had liquidated all her assets to hire her crew. Using car carriers to sneak the vampires across state lines had been unexpectedly clever of her. Had she been successful, Felipe would have reimbursed her, but now there would be no money trail connecting him to what was sounding like a debacle.

Felipe thought of Misha and a growl formed in his throat. Felipe had asked Angie several times, but she never openly acknowledged the New York King’s part in her sudden interest in taking over Louisiana. She didn’t need to. She was his progeny and he knew her better in some ways than she knew herself. It was in the way her eyes cut away from his or her shoulder hitched. That smirking troll had wound Angie up and then sent her toddling along so he could have his Pam freed from the inconvenience of Eric Northman. Felipe trusted that there would be something in the correspondence between them; something that could create that crease of doubt. All he had to do was find that crack and the rest would follow.

Bon Temps

“You should call Thalia,” Sookie said.

Eric’s eyebrow rose, “Why did you think of her first, Lover?”

Sookie remembered the look Thalia had given Eric when she found out the vampire could read her
mind. In that moment, Sookie realized Thalia saw Eric as her own, and it made her feel differently about the small vampire. “I wouldn’t want her hearing about this from someone else,” she told her husband. “She deserves to hear you lived from you.”

Eric tilted his head, and she could see him thinking about whether or not to get his explanation by dipping into her head, but then he decided against it. “Thalia will be with the Kings in Indianapolis. She texted me that she and Thierry were driving there next. They are following New York’s minion. She said the hacker found a photo of him pumping gas in Pennsylvania,” and Eric laughed. “Thalia managed to anger Sandy Seacrest. I received a text from her as well, complaining.” When Sookie looked curious, Eric continued, “From what I can gather Sandy wanted Thalia to browbeat her husband, but Thalia gave them both more than they asked for, and now the Kings are sending a vampire police unit to live in Kansas. I don’t believe Sandy will try to use Thalia again.”

“I can’t imagine anyone thinking they’d be able to pull one over on Thalia,” Sookie shook her head. “You don’t think Sandy will try to get some sort of revenge, do you?”

Eric laughed out loud, “No, Lover. Sandy Seacrest is smart enough to accept the lesson she has learned and be grateful for the experience. Most that try to use Thalia do not survive long.” Eric glanced at his phone again.

“More calls to make?” Sookie asked.

“Many more,” Eric nodded. “There are the Amun monarchs, and then the Packmasters who weren’t here. I still owe Octavia Fant a call and…”

“I’ll tell you what,” Sookie stood up, “I’m getting a bottle of water and another blood for you and we can split it up. You take Amun and I can handle the rest.” Sookie walked into the kitchen. She noticed her hand was shaking just a little. She was tired and starting to get that thin, stressed feeling that came with the aftermath of fear. ‘Hold it together,’ she told herself. ‘Get through the next couple hours and it will all be over.’

Indianapolis

“It seems unbelievable that De Castro would be so stupid!” Russell was shaking his head. “After Rhodes? How would he think a takeover would go unnoticed? The Viking is famous. The people of New Orleans love him!”

Twy nodded, “It’s true. The video of Eric and Sookie taking their Second Line parade through the Old Quarter when they got married is still getting hits and it’s been well over a year. They are arguably the most successful vampire couple in the world.”

Bartlett was smiling indulgently at his progeny. “Isn’t she wonderful?” he asked Thalia again, and then not waiting for an answer, asked, “Where is Thierry? He was here earlier and then he disappeared.”

“Trying to get Nabila to respond,” Thalia shook her head. “He knows she was there. He tells me he has no hope but he’s been frantic since the news started.”

“Look at this,” Twy interrupted. She turned on the television and then hit the buttons that allowed her to bring the image on her notepad onto the large flat screen. They all watched in growing wonder as the video shot by some person in New Orleans showed in clear, high definition a Fae fighting with a vampire. They both wielded swords and they were revealed in all their snarling, feral glory. It was savage and, yet, at the same time, beautiful. Both were masters and their movements looked choreographed.
“This can’t be good,” Bartlett shook his head.

“I never would have thought Niall would allow this,” Thalia couldn’t hide the shock she was feeling. “I am sure he will have the images removed soon. He has that kind of influence.”

“The explanation coming from the New Orleans palace is that this was a movie thing,” Twy told them, her eyes scanning the device in her hands.

“Smart,” Russell said, but none of them could pull their eyes away as the Fae sliced through the vampire. They watched the vampire fall in a quick rush of blood and almost just as quickly turn to dust. The Fae turned toward the person filming and snarled, revealing a mouthful of pointed teeth. The video ended abruptly.

“It’s already had over 70,000 hits and it’s only been up a few hours,” Twy told them.

“They never wanted to mainstream,” Thalia said to no one in particular.

“It would appear something has changed,” Russell observed.

Bon Temps

“You are looking very tired, Sookie, and I am not surprised. I should have waited until tomorrow to come and see you.” Niall was in his cool, light-colored suit again. He had his cane under his hand and his long, white hair was neatly pulled back and secured with a band low on his neck.

Sookie wished she had taken the time to go upstairs and shower now, but she and Eric had been busy making calls and answering emails. They knew it was only a few hours before dawn. Heidi had returned to gather IDs from those in the yard and the piles of clothing were now in garbage bags. Sookie had run outside to collect Angie’s fangs. She figured it wouldn’t hurt to send them to Felipe, either as a keepsake or a warning. She had been rinsing out bottles when she realized there was someone standing near her and she turned to find Niall.

“You are also looking drawn, my boy,” her Grandfather looked kindly at Eric, “But fighting as you did tonight, that is to be expected.” The Prince was sitting in the armchair. Sookie had made tea and it was sitting poured and ready in front of him. There was a lot Sookie wanted to ask, but first she wanted to see her Grandfather drink something she’d made for him. It was a lesson she wasn’t likely to forget.

As if sensing her thoughts, or perhaps he just read them, Niall picked up his cup and holding her eyes with his own, sipped several times. “There!” he said. “And a fine cup of tea it is. Very refreshing for an evening such as this.”

“So,” Sookie bit her lip, “everyone has headed back to Nebraska?”

“Yes,” Niall smiled. “Everyone has returned through the portal. There were a couple of casualties, but it was a wonderful evening, one we will sing about for some time to come.”

“Why did you fight for me?” Eric asked. The Viking’s tone was blunt but Niall just looked amused.

“Because we have a contract,” the Prince replied reasonably. “I am bound to defend you and yours from any enemies, as you are bound to defend me.”

Eric’s eyes narrowed and a low hiss started in his chest. Sookie laid her hand on her husband’s arm, “I guess what we’re wondering is why you decided that our being married was enough.” She reached over to take Eric’s hand in hers before she said, “I mean, if we were still expecting, this
would make more sense. There would be that blood tie and…”

“I am sorry for your recent loss,” the Prince interrupted. “I am sure it was difficult, but you have moved ahead, and I am most pleased for you.”

Sookie felt there was something she was missing, and Eric’s hiss was transforming into a growl. “I don’t think I know what you mean, Grandfather,” Sookie plastered her Crazy Sookie smile in place. She was stressed but it never did to not be polite with the Prince.

“I mean you have replaced that child with another,” the Prince said in his most reasonable tone. “You are already starting to manifest the scent of a mother, Sookie. It is most appealing. I am so pleased for both of you.” The Prince picked up his tea cup again and just before sipping, turned to Eric who was no longer growling, “Surely you noticed?” he asked.

Eric became vampire still beside her. Sookie ran over what the Prince had just said in her head, and then she did it again. Finally, taking a couple of quick breaths, she said, “I don’t mean to be unpleasant, but I think you’re wrong, Grandfather! I assure you we know what’s involved and there’s been no opportunity. Frankly, I’m not sure we’ll try again any time soon. This was…”

Eric moved then, taking her hand before he turned to more fully face the Prince, “She smells more Fae.”

“Of course,” the Prince smiled. “She is carrying. It is common. The smell won’t become any more pronounced than it is now if that’s what you’re worried about. Once Sookie is able to smell it herself, she will be able to isolate it and mask it. I am so pleased for both of you! A magic child. At last!”

What the Prince was saying started to sink in. “I’m pregnant.” Sookie didn’t ask. She felt her stomach fall and she felt nauseous. “How?”

“Well,” the Prince shrugged, “I would assume the usual way,” and he stood up. “I can see I have upset you, and it has been a long night. I will return tomorrow evening after you’ve had time to talk about this. You are looking skeptical,” he said to Eric. “You can ask your Doctor Ludwig to confirm it. She will be able to now.” The Prince walked around the table and leaned over to kiss Sookie’s cheek. “My blessings to you, Granddaughter. You have made me very happy, and I assure you, you have the protection of the Fae. Nothing will happen to any of you.”

He reached over and stroked Eric’s cheek as well, saying, “Northman! Who would have thought that you would become such a delightful relative!” As he walked toward the kitchen, Niall paused to say, “If you are feeling up to it, Viking, we could play chess tomorrow night.” When the Prince walked from the room Sookie felt the moment he stepped from their place into another.

Eric and Sookie sat on the couch, side by side, for a long time. After what could have been an hour, Eric said, “Dawn comes.”

Sookie nodded and together they stood, and hand in hand climbed the stairs that led to their bed chamber.
Lafayette

Thalia looked uneasily into the night. It was quiet here in the way all truly suburban neighborhoods were. It had been four months since the attempted takeover, four months since Thalia and Thierry had begun their final push to find Carlos. The trail they followed, tracking the New York King’s second, had intersected with the trail Thalia had been following for the rogues. Once she and Thierry located the gas station in Pennsylvania where Carlos had been captured on the surveillance camera, the path had been almost laughably easy to follow. Carlos used foolish names and charmed shop keepers. He hadn’t seemed to care about hiding his trail. He had met up with another vampire, and the two of them seemed to be treating their progress like some sort of rollicking road trip rather than a clandestine affair. When Thalia and Thierry reached the rest area outside of Scranton, Thalia recognized the overlap of Carlos’ trail with that of the rogues and for no reason other than instinct, she pushed the limits of their endurance to reach wherever the trail would lead as quickly as possible.

It hadn’t mattered. After several days spent buried in the dirt and nights spent tracking and trailing, she and Thierry found themselves in a small town in upstate New York. They were north of Saratoga, too close to the Canadian border. They had been eating up precious time, stopping at every gas station and package store that sold blood along the road. Their third stop was where they found what they were looking for.

“Oh,” the unshaven, lanky human had drawled, “you mean that big research place those vampire fellas have up on the mountain?” and then he’d given them both a look that was supposed to let them know he could tell them more for a price.

Thalia was ready to reach across the counter, grab the yokel by the neck, and shake it out of him, but Thierry stepped forward, smiled, and glamoured the man instead. Soon they had detailed descriptions of not only Carlos and his travel companion, but a number of other vampires and humans who were part of whatever operation was hidden away up on the mountain. The man didn’t know who owned the place, or what they were doing, but he knew their timetables; when trucks would come down the hill, stopping for snacks and gas, and he was able to draw a map to where the road to the facility was located. He was so helpful that neither Thalia nor Thierry thought to ask one of the more important questions: “When was the last time you saw anyone come down from there?” That oversight still made Thalia growl in frustration.

They parked their car well short of the road. They moved quickly enough, but climbing the hill, moving silently in parallel to the paved road, had been time consuming. The quiet of the place had been their first clue that something was off. The floodlights around the perimeter were on and there were lights burning inside the building, but there was no sound. There were cars parked neatly along the perimeter of the dirt apron waiting for their occupants to finish work, but there was a branch
blown down on one truck that looked as if it had been there a while.

Thierry had confirmed Thalia’s uneasiness when he said, “There is something wrong here.”

Still, they sat in the shadows for an hour just to make sure. When it was clear there was no movement, Thierry moved to the front door. It should have required a keycard but it pushed open to his touch. That was when they knew.

At first glance, the building merely looked abandoned. Thierry walked straight through to the back and then through the doors. The yard was dark, but that didn’t prevent them from seeing what appeared to be close to fifty holes in the ground. This was a nesting site. Thierry walked to the first row of holes, which were all empty. Thalia wasn’t fooled. She could smell the bright scent of silver and, sure enough, there were long silver poles lying on the ground. “They killed them while they were in the ground,” she told the French Sheriff, and she pointed to the places where the ground was a little depressed but still intact.

“All?” Thierry was aghast.

Thalia scanned her head from side to side. She sniffed deeply for the dry, thin smell of vampire, but there was none aside from them. “All,” she confirmed.

Thierry hissed as he followed her back into the building. They soon found cages, and within those cages, the remains of vampires. Shirt sleeves still draped through leather-encased silver shackles.

“The Makers?” Thierry asked.

“With the way the rogues were killed as they moved across the states, these vampires would have been insane. No Maker could withstand the deaths of so many if its progeny.” Thalia couldn’t stop looking. Five cages. Five vampires whose blood had been used to create the armies that had swept through the kingdoms, making progeny of their own. “We should see if there is any identification in the clothing,” Thalia said and then leaned in, carefully pulling the pants away from the silver. There were no wallets, no pictures in any of the cages. Thalia wasn’t surprised.

“Let’s find an office. There’s bound to be a computer somewhere. Maybe the files will tell us what happened here.” Thalia and Thierry separated. They found work areas and several offices, all with computer terminals, but the systems were locked and required passwords. Finally, in an office in the back, they found what they were looking for. The worker had taped his password under the keyboard. Thierry typed ‘startrek’ into the password field and they were in.

It didn’t take much searching to find a general email account that included letters and posts that appeared to have originated from Carlos. There were memos dated over a year ago asking for updates and demanding more vampires. There were memos dated more recently asking that surveillance be put in place to make sure the King (one supposed Misha, the New York King), didn’t find out about this place or what they were doing. There was a memo dated more recently that included a long diatribe about feeling betrayed by the King’s infatuation with the ‘bitch from the south.’ “I’m assuming that’s Pam,” Thalia had said dryly.

Everything pointed to a Second who had gone rogue, spending his own money to create his own private army. “I don’t believe it,” Thierry said when they read another email in which Carlos was venting that he had been cheated out of the Carolinas. “Old vampires don’t change. Misha would never have allowed any vampire in his employ enough rope to have done this. Carlos would have been watched even as he was watching others. That is Misha’s way.”

“Is there anyone the King trusts?” Thalia asked.
“Andrew,” Thierry said without hesitation. “He looks like the butler or a doorman, but Andrew is Misha’s real right hand. The rest of us cycle in and out of that kingdom, but Andrew? He’s Misha’s enforcer.”

Thalia had spotted surveillance cameras and they continued to search, looking for the security room which would house the feed. They found the heavy, fireproof door that led downstairs and as soon as Thalia swung it open, they knew they’d found the workers. The smell that reached them was the metallic tang of old blood. Walking carefully down the dimly lit stairs, they scanned from right to left, looking for some sign of attack, but there was none. There were blood stains at the bottom of the stairs and further down the corridor, several heaps of clothes. “Vampire,” Thierry said unnecessarily. Whoever had killed these people had cleaned up the humans, removing the bodies.

“We will probably find them outside somewhere,” Thalia said, jerking her chin at another of the dried blood pools on the floor.

“Makes it easier for us to move around down here,” Thierry nodded. “There is nothing more disgusting than the smell of a human decomposing.”

“So,” Thalia replied, “That would suggest that someone knew we, or someone like us, would come.”

“We were meant to find this,” Thierry agreed. Together they searched until they found the office that housed the monitors. The screens were black. Their search revealed that the footage from the past few weeks was missing, wiped clean.

“He’s good,” Thierry grinned, leaning against the metal desk in the office.

“Who?” Thalia covered her irritation by searching through some earlier tapes.

“Misha,” Thierry was now smiling. “I’ll look around, but my guess is we’ll find Carlos somewhere around here. I wouldn’t be surprised if the King had some hidden camera and was watching us even now.”

Thalia nodded, “Then we should go see him. It wouldn’t do to keep a King waiting when the matter involves his own kingdom.”

Thierry had been right. Remains that were probably Carlos’s were found, the wallet with his driver’s license conveniently located in the back pants pocket. “There were more vampires here than it appears,” Thalia observed. “They cleaned up the clothes, but they left the dust. Sloppy.”

“We will need to share that with Misha. If someone in his inner circle disappears, we’ll know the King was involved,” and Thierry winked.

“Interesting,” Thalia tilted her head to one side, “But without real proof we shouldn’t waste it. Better to figure out who was here and use that knowledge as leverage. Most will do what is needed to save themselves. If Misha is as you say, others will know that, too. It could be useful.”

A call to the King’s palace resulted in a quick invitation. They were met at the rental car office by Andrew. “Been a long time,” Thierry greeted the houseman warmly.

“Thierry speaks of you often. He misses you,” Andrew replied, and then turned to be introduced to Thalia.

Thalia lifted her chin briefly in greeting. Andrew had grinned and bowed in return. “You are everything your reputation says,” the New York vampire didn’t bother to hide his delight. Thalia watched the vampire carefully. Andrew was polite and pleasant, unassuming and almost
unnoticeable. He was the perfect servant, and yet he moved with a quiet, coiled grace. Thalia was
certain he carried weapons from the way his clothes pulled in certain places. He was certain to be
underestimated by most.

“Is Pamela Ravenscroft in residence?” Thalia asked.

“No, sadly,” Andrew flicked his eyes in the rearview mirror as they headed into the city. “Mistress
Pamela is in Connecticut. The Minnesota Queen is visiting Sanctum and Mistress Pamela is there to
help with re-opening the facility.”

“I will be sorry to have missed her,” Thierry said pleasantly. “I hadn’t heard that Sanctum was re-
opening, but we have been traveling for some time. That is a kind gesture on the part of the King.”

“It is a benefit to all vampires,” Andrew replied smoothly. “As you know, the King is much involved
in good causes for the humans of the city. He was delighted to be able to be involved in a good turn
for his own species as well. It is a cause that both he and Mistress Pamela share.”

Thierry and Andrew launched into a running chatter about mutual acquaintances. They reminisced
about Jane, the vampire who had fallen in the Northman’s front yard when Angie of Nevada
attempted her takeover. “She was so funny,” Andrew had remembered. “She could make me laugh
until things started to hurt.”

“She was a rare person,” Thierry agreed. Her remains had been sent to Phoebe Golden of Iowa
where they were preserved.

Misha himself stepped out onto the front stairs to greet them. He embraced Thierry, then stepped
back, his nose wrinkling. “Andrew! Our guests need rooms and some time to refresh themselves!”
Andrew nodded and Thalia and Thierry found themselves herded inside, their suitcases lifted from
the trunk to follow them.

“Our refreshing won’t help,” Thierry shook his head, “what clothes we do have are filthy. Traveling
and tracking is dirty business.”

“Don’t worry, my boy!” the King shook his head, “There will be robes and Andrew will see to
everything!”

It wasn’t until they were inside that Misha stopped and turned to face Thalia, “And you are the
famous Thalia!” Misha was smiling with his lips, but his eyes were cold and assessing. “It is strange
we have never met, but, of course, there is talk of you everywhere.”

“I didn’t always travel as much as I do now,” Thalia replied, bowing her head just enough to be
polite, but not entirely respectful.

“Of course,” Misha acknowledged, and still he stood looking at her.

Thalia recognized the King’s action for the power play it was. Thalia smiled thinly to let the King
know she recognized it before saying, “I understand Pam Ravenscroft is traveling. I have word from
her Maker. I will wait for another occasion.” Thalia was rewarded by a flattening of the King’s
mouth. “But that’s not why we’re here,” Thalia continued as if she didn’t notice. “We come to you
from a place within your own kingdom, but far to your north, so I might understand how this
escaped your notice.” The words were insulting, implying that the King was not fit to oversee his
lands, and Andrew threw Thalia a look that should have fried her. “It would appear there were illegal
activities going on under your very nose,” Thalia continued, adding fuel to the fire.

Misha’s expression changed. Instead of becoming angry, his face softened into a look of woe and
regret. “Yes, yes! Carlos! It is still hard to believe. I must be slipping in my older age, to have been
so fooled.” The King turned to Andrew, “With a Kingdom as large as this, it is so important to have
good help. I understand even Eric Northman struggles with securing his borders. Pamela told me all
about that abortive attempt to take his kingdom. One wonders how so many could have snuck in
without anyone noticing, that is until they stand in the shoes of one who was fooled, as I do now,”
and Misha smiled.

It was everything Thalia had not to rip the King’s smiling head from his body. “Yes,” she agreed
briefly, “Hard to believe.”

Thalia could see the King registered her hit, but there was no gloating in his tone as he said, “But this
is a talk that will require many hours, and you need blood!” Misha glanced at Andrew who moved
toward the stairs indicating they should follow him. Thalia glanced at the artwork as they passed first
one floor and then another, climbing ever up. She wondered if Misha would be so smug if she ripped
a painting or two from their frames and shredded them.

“Your master lives well,” Thalia said instead.

“My master does,” Andrew agreed and Thalia could tell he was watching her closely.

The conversation with the King had gone as Thalia would have predicted. The King was ‘surprised’
and then ‘appalled’ at what they found. He vowed to send people up to the facility to clean it out and
make certain that anyone else associated with the operation was found and punished. Thalia
suggested the new vampire police would serve the purpose. She offered to bring them in to lead the
investigation, but Misha declined. “There aren’t enough of them yet. They need to root out Vampires
First. That is their first priority. Were there more of them and were they better established, of course I
would welcome their help, but for now, they should focus on the larger enemy, the one that threatens
us all!”

It was masterfully done, and there was no opportunity to push further. During the course of the
evening, Misha introduced them to his new second, Jason. “Jason comes to me from Boston,” Misha
told them. “He shows great promise. I certainly hope he proves a more loyal employee than his
predecessor.”

Later, as they boarded the plane that would return them to New Orleans, Thierry told Thalia that
Jason was doubtless the one who had done the killing at the facility. “He had the scent,” Thierry told
her, “and the look.”

Now Thalia was in Lafayette figuring out her next move. There was more to this, there had to be, but
how to prove what she knew in her gut to be true? Danger would rear its head again, and when it
did, Misha would be standing in the shadows, pulling the strings, Thalia was certain of it.

Thierry walked past her, heading for the garage. He was dressed well and wearing a light cologne.
“Where are you going?” Thalia growled.

“Hunting,” he flipped his fingers and raised his eyebrows.

“Whoring,” Thalia snarled in return. “Why don’t you go crawling on your belly to Nabila so you can
stop your pointless catting around? At the rate you’re going there will be no virgins left on the
campus here, and the Christians will start seeking you out as the great corrupter.”

“I don’t have time for virgins,” Thierry laughed gaily. “They lack imagination. I prefer the older and
willing to get wiser ones. Besides, Nabila would just as soon stake me as talk with me. I have
nothing to offer her except talk, and she’s had her fill of that. Until we have something of substance
there is no point in boring her with my tales of failure.”

“So you fill your time with rutting and feeding?” It seemed a pointless endeavor to Thalia.

“And it serves a purpose,” Thierry nodded. “There is something about that moment just after you cum. Your mind is a blank and in that instant, the noise of the world clears away to allow me to think great thoughts.”

“I know bullshit when I hear it!” Thalia snapped.

“And I know that honey catches more flies than vinegar. You would use a computer expert. You found one, a good one, but you had to piss off Sandy Seacrest. Now you can’t get access to him and Eric Northman can’t help you.” Thierry nodded knowingly. “It might interest you to know my hunting grounds are full of aspiring computer programmers.”

“That is the weakest excuse I’ve heard yet for fucking and feeding. You must think me a fool!” Thalia was losing what little good humor she felt. It didn’t help that Thierry’s needling was accurate. Thalia suspected the trail she wanted to find could only be found in computer systems, but that required an expert, a true artist. Those experts were few and far between, and it was fewer still, those willing to work with vampires. Thalia had never heard of a vampire hacker. It was humans who had developed the expertise to trace through the codes and traps of cyberspace.

Sandy Seacrest employed such a hacker, but the last time Thalia had been in her kingdom, Sandy had provoked Thalia. Thalia retaliated by getting a contingent of vampire police positioned in the middle of Sandy’s husband’s kingdom. While the police were proving themselves useful in some ways, it would be some time before Sandy would be thinking about forgiving Thalia for her interference.

Thalia watched the taillights of Thierry’s car grow smaller as he drove down the road that led to the University. For the first time in many years she felt herself at loose ends. ‘I need purpose,’ she thought. She considered returning to Shreveport. There was always a welcome awaiting her with Indira, but Nabila was also in residence. Thalia had nothing against the former Queen, but Thalia could foresee Thierry eventually asking her to spy, or worse, influence. It would be insufferable.

Thalia thought of returning to Jackson. The Kings had returned there; it being winter up north. Thalia knew she would have a place there, even an offer of employment, but the Kings would want to reminisce about Bill Compton. They had started a library in Compton’s honor and were thinking about starting a scholarship as well. It put Thalia’s teeth on edge. Eric and she had discussed it shortly before the Viking and his mate returned to New Orleans. They had agreed there was nothing to be gained by destroying the Kings’ illusions and so they remained silent, but it was hard. Every time Thalia saw an article or heard about another monument or tribute to the dead vampire, she wanted to stand on the nearest hill and shout out what Bill Compton had done. ‘No,’ Thalia thought. ‘Not Jackson either.’

Each place Thalia considered was not attractive. She couldn’t go north to Maude; she wouldn’t be welcome with Phoebe. She might have something in common with Isaiah but they always seemed to fight within a short period of time and then they didn’t speak for longer.

Thalia growled. There was really only one place she wished to be, and that was where the Viking was, but she found she couldn’t. Each time she thought of Eric Northman she remembered his sorrow. His grief over the loss of his human child made Thalia remember that she might have changed things. ‘You made your choice,’ she told herself, ‘and it was the right one.’ Thalia just wished she felt more comforted by that knowledge.
“So where is she?” Octavia leaned forward, wrapping her wrinkled hands around the warm tea cup. “It was nice and sunny so I took her lunch upstairs to her little roof garden. It’s humid enough she’ll eat and then fall asleep. The sun’s good for her, and he loves how it makes her smell.” Devrah smiled tightly before sipping from her own cup.

“Things still aren’t right between them, are they?” Octavia already knew the answer. She could see it in the thin set of her cousin’s lips. When Devrah didn’t answer, Octavia said, “You know, I could charm them. It wouldn’t be a big thing, just a little push.”

“Don’t you dare to that!” Devrah hissed. “There’s plenty of things I can think of that would just put those two over the edge, and being manipulated against their will would be the worst!”

“She happy about the baby?” It was common gossip in and around the palace. Sookie and Eric Northman were pregnant again. They returned to the New Orleans palace within a week of the failed takeover attempt. They were subdued, but that didn’t surprise anyone. The attack had so quickly followed Rhodes and although the official story was that Sookie had transported them away from the explosion to safety, there were lingering rumors that Eric or Sookie or both of them had sustained serious injuries.

It was the heightened curiosity that was responsible for the close way the palace folk were watching them, and that was how the story about the tea traveled so quickly. Devrah had placed Sookie’s favorite sweet tea on the dinner tray. The couple was sitting in the little office. They were working and were expecting Mr. Cataliades. When the demon attorney sent word he’d be late, Devrah had a servant take in the Queen’s dinner. The door was open when the King told the servant to take away the tea. “My wife is pregnant,” he said clearly. “She should avoid caffeine.”

Within hours everyone knew.

The reaction was varied. There were some who said it was brave to go through in vitro again so soon after losing their first child. There were others who whispered that it took a certain amount of heartlessness to walk back into a clinic mere weeks after the fact and pick out another embryo.

The announcement about the miscarriage and the couple’s desire for privacy had been posted on a placard next to the front door of the palace. Stacks of sympathy cards were received from those who knew the Northmans as well as those who admired them. There was a general sense of sadness among many in New Orleans, a city that did everything, including mourning those who passed with style, that the promise of something so special and rare had been cut short. And now, so soon, that mourning seemed to have been shuffled to the side, and even those who supported the couple’s decision did so with quiet acceptance rather than open celebration.

But as the days passed, it became clear that something was not quite right. There was no official announcement of Sookie’s current condition and when Devrah asked, instead of looking pleased, Sookie looked embarrassed and then sad. What’s more, there was the clear sense that the Northmans had returned to New Orleans with no intention of returning north. The house in Bon Temps was closed up and a crew sent to clean and place things in storage. Arrangements were made to feed the livestock and a security firm hired to patrol the grounds. The Northmans had purchased the Compton property and there was some speculation as to what they would do with it. Like their own home in Bon Temps, the Compton place was closed up as well.

“I can’t say,” Devrah told Octavia. “It’s a fact. She’s getting bigger every day. She picked up that little belly of hers faster this time, but I guess that’s to be expected.”
“Well, I’m not sure what the problem would be. Not like they didn’t have to do some choosing to get themselves this way, at least according to what I read,” and Octavia shook her head. “I don’t think I would have made that choice to have another baby so soon after losing the first one. I hear some folks think it’s a good idea, but maybe this is the proof…”

“I don’t think this one is the same as the last one,” Devrah interrupted her, looking across the table under raised eyebrows. “There was no clinic visit, according to what I heard from Amy Ludwig’s regular assistant.”

“That doesn’t mean it didn’t happen,” Octavia shrugged. After a little bit, the witch asked, “You don’t think Sookie was raped or forced, do you?”

“I have thought of it,” Devrah replied, “especially at first, but now? No, I don’t think so. I’ve wracked my brains trying to figure it out. Charles and Owen are no help at all. They were there but they’re both silent as the grave. Told me it’s not my business!” Devrah snorted, “How can I do what I need to do if I don’t know what’s going on?”

“And they won’t say?” Octavia asked.

“You know me!” Devrah laughed, “I’m not shy! Of course I asked, but Sookie got real quiet and looked away. I asked the King if there was something I should know about this and he got cagey.”

“But how…” and then Octavia stopped. She drank some more tea and then tilted the glass looking at the leaves. “I know she shouldn’t, but do you think we could get Sookie to drink a little tea?” she asked.

“Maybe herbal or green tea,” Devrah shrugged.

“Won’t work,” Octavia shook her head. “If we could get her to drink a cup of black tea I might be able to read something in the leaves about this.”

“It’s not a choice anymore,” Devrah shook her head. “Anything with caffeine makes her nauseous. She’s real particular this time around. No chicken, no yogurt. I made her bread pudding when she asked and she was sick all morning. On the other hand, she can’t eat enough bananas and oranges. I’ve had the kitchen squeezing gallons of fresh orange and grapefruit juice for her two, sometimes three times a day.”

“That’s odd,” Octavia shook her head. “With Sookie being part-Fae, I wouldn’t have thought citrus would sit well with her.”

“Sits just fine,” Devrah shrugged. “Caught her the other day, eating the lemon I put in her water right out of the rind and she asked me for more.”

“Maybe she and the King are fighting,” Octavia suggested. “That might explain the unhappiness. Could be Sookie made the decision to do in vitro and didn’t ask him. With the pressure they’ve been under I could see them making foolish decisions.”

“No, that’s not it,” Devrah replied. “Fact is they are closer now than I’ve ever seen them. I don’t think I’ve seen them more than a few feet apart from each other once he’s up. Even when they’re across the room from each other you get the impression they are just two halves of the same whole. What’s more, I swear they’re communicating telepathically. One will look at the other and the next thing you know, they are moving just like they talked about it, but you are standing right there and they didn’t say a word.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that was the case,” Octavia smiled. “They are powerful beings, the both
of them. She was always telepathic, although she told me one time she couldn’t hear vampires. It was why she was so attracted to them. The quiet of their minds was restful to her.”

“I heard the King started hearing the Queen’s thoughts shortly before the explosion,” Devrah confided. “Folks said it was some kind of bonding gift from the Fae.”

“I imagine that would just piss off our Miss Stackhouse!” Octavia chuckled. “She always was a little too proud of having one up on folks by being able to see in their heads. I can’t see her being okay with having the tables turned on her.”

Devrah smiled, too, “I know that’s right! The temper on her can be a righteous thing, but I do think they can both do it now and it’s just made them closer, but sadder, too. I can’t explain it. They are just… careful with each other; real polite and always ready to protect the other. It makes you nervous just being around them. Still…” and Devrah gave her cousin a knowing look, “for all the talking and touching, there isn’t much sheet dancing.”

“And how would you know…” Octavia looked somewhere between appalled and delighted.

“I’m the housekeeper,” Devrah returned an arch look, “I see the bed linen and they may be holding onto each other, but there is no extra going on, and that’s just not good for them. They need to laugh and play, those two. It’s part of what makes them work as a couple.”

“It may be they just need time,” Octavia assured her cousin.

“I hope that’s it,” Devrah agreed.

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Eric rose alone. It didn’t happen often, certainly not since before Rhodes. Sookie’s side of the bed was pulled together the way she did when she slipped out during the day. Reaching out, Eric could feel the soft buzz that meant his wife slept. This pregnancy was like the one before. Sookie ate more. She slept more. Sookie smelled sweet, but as Niall had promised, the Fae thread to her scent signature didn’t strengthen. Standing up, Eric stretched and then closed his eyes, pinpointing her location. She was above him, which meant she slept on the roof. It was dark and Eric wondered that she had been left up there alone. Not stopping long enough to throw anything on, he walked with purpose through their chambers and then into the hallway. Charles’ greeting was cut short and Eric could hear James chuckle. ‘They are thinking I mean to claim her,’ he realized and the thought almost made him pause. He had felt his old self for a moment.

Eric continued up the stairs. He didn’t know what to think about this. Sookie was pregnant. Niall insisted that somehow they had needed no intervention to make this miracle happen. The Prince had stood in their home in Bon Temps and told them both in clear, triumphant words that there could be no doubt that the baby within his wife was their child, his and Sookie’s.

The Fae Prince’s smirking assurances hadn’t stopped Eric from asking Doctor Ludwig more questions and after a few minutes, Amy growled and offered to do a test to confirm a DNA match. Eric had almost agreed when he felt the quick hurt from Sookie and he realized what such a test implied.

“Of course this child is mine,” Eric snapped at the small doctor, reversing his position and making the doctor growl even more. “There is no need for tests!” he assured Sookie, but still, there was something that lingered. Perhaps it was a reluctance to so quickly set aside the memory of that other child. Perhaps it was the stubborn belief that vampires were incapable of making biological children. Perhaps it was the way Niall had smiled, so sure of himself. Eric couldn’t accept this thing. He was
reluctant to touch her, reluctant to get too close, and from her head, Eric could hear that Sookie felt the same way. It wasn’t that they felt any less affection for each other; in fact, the events of the past months seemed to bring them even closer which made the situation both better and worse.

Within three days of the takeover, Sookie announced she could hear his thoughts. Eric realized that had she told him that news at any other time, he would have been delighted, but now? The turmoil Eric was experiencing was new. He had only recently come to understand and accept the strong emotions he felt for his wife. He had recklessly embraced the feelings he had for his unborn daughter, and that head-long, no-holds-barred acceptance was what was at the root of his problems now. When she died, Eric found he had no defense against the grief he felt. It recalled his past and more. For centuries, Eric Northman had learned to live without the encumbrance of emotion, and now? Now he rose each night in a twist, remembering his existence in one moment and his loss in the next. Sookie had been his strength, and she still was, but there was something about the fact of this new pregnancy that didn’t make things better. It only served to remind him of what he had lost.

When Sookie suggested they leave Bon Temps, Eric jumped at the suggestion. He was happy with the idea that by leaving this place that held so many memories he would also leave the overwhelming sorrow behind. It was a lie. The sorrow followed him to New Orleans. He would catch Sookie staring at her changing body and feel her sadness. He would wish to comfort her and she would, in turn, wish to comfort him. They were wrapping each other in cocoons of caring, but in the process, Eric had a suspicion they were serving to keep the sorrow close at hand rather than helping each other to work past it.

Eric stepped from the stairwell. Sookie was lying under a blanket. The evening was unseasonably warm, and his wife looked beautiful, her hair spilling across the chaise, silver in the light of the moon and reflected city lights. Slowly he lowered himself to sit beside her. She must not have been deeply asleep because she opened her eyes to him, her slow smile greeting him and he tweaked a strand of hair from across her forehead. His fingers came away carrying the heady scent of sun. He felt his desire for her rising and Sookie held up her wrist to him. “For you,” she said softly.

Eric held her arm and watched her as he licked twice, preparing her. He sipped just a little, but it was enough. He licked again, sealing the wounds and he saw her eyes stray to his erection. Smiling, he drifted lower, pulling the blanket and then her pants from her. She tasted wonderfully. Not quite the same as the last time, but still so good. Eric suppressed the comparison and focused instead on the moment. He ran the flat of his tongue between her lips and then, parting her with his fingers, dipped in to kiss and pull, tongue and flick. It took little time to have his Sookie moaning and shifting and he held her more securely, using his fingers now to mimic the movement of entering her. She came in a bright, sharp cry and a burst of energy across his brain. Eric slipped his hand down to stroke himself and he started to move over her, but in the process, he touched the swell of her stomach.

‘Changeling.’ The word sprang to his head and he backed away, continuing to stroke until he brought himself to completion.

When he opened his eyes, it was to find her looking at him. “I think it, too,” she told him. He could hear her thoughts. She was a roil of emotion. She felt angered and sad; guilty and frustrated. She felt the creature that was growing within her was more invader than welcome, but, at the same time, she felt protective of it.

Eric laughed, but it was not happy, “Fucking fairies,” he said out loud.

“Niall didn’t say the Fae had anything to do with it,” and Sookie sat up. The last time she would have feathered her hand across her belly. When Eric had seen her do it he could imagine that same hand cradling their daughter. This time Sookie seemed to avoid touching her growing stomach, as if avoiding it would help it to not be so real.
“Niall didn’t say the Fae didn’t have anything to do with it, either,” Eric pointed out. He stood up, “Come, Lover. It is getting damp out here. You are hungry. I am sure Devrah has something ready for you.”

He waited while she dressed and then Eric walked them to their chambers. Sookie smiled at Charles and then at James as they walked through the doors. Eric handed his wife carefully into one of the chairs, called downstairs for dinner, and then walked through the bedroom to put clothes on. After dinner they would head downstairs, her arm through his as they rode the elevator. Saul would make some remark about how well they were looking and Sookie would thank him. They would spend at least an hour with Mr. Cataliades, and then they would attend to anything extra that needed their attention. When they had spent enough time with Max, Emil, and whoever else was visiting, they would retreat to their special room. Since it was warm, Eric probably wouldn’t start the gas fire tonight, but they would pick up the book they were reading together and they would remain close, touching each other, until Sookie fell asleep. It was the same routine they had followed almost every night since their return.

It was Devrah herself who brought the tray in tonight. “You’re looking better,” she smiled at Sookie, even though she really thought the telepath looked worn. “I wanted to remind you that Doctor Ludwig wants you in Shreveport sometime tomorrow.”

Eric walked out from the bedroom, “You are feeling well, Älskade?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s just that Amy wants to do an ultrasound… you know, check out that everything is developing well.” Sookie said the words to her plate, cutting the pork chop into little pieces.

“You didn’t think to tell me?” Eric wasn’t angry, just curious. He glanced at Devrah, then thought, ‘You don’t think I should be there?’

‘I’m not sure I want to be there,’ his wife thought back at him and Eric found himself looking at Sookie, really looking at her. Her face that had glowed with happiness was dim. Her eyes were patient, but rarely did they sparkle.

“I wish to go,” he said out loud, and he made sure his tone conveyed an interest. When Sookie looked up in surprise, Eric deliberately walked across the room to stand beside her and then he kneeled down. Licking his lips, he laid his hand on her softly rounded stomach and looking into her eyes, he told her, “You are beautiful, Sookie. I understand now why there are men who wish their wives to remain pregnant. You are beautiful at all times, but now,” and he stroked her stomach, “now you are radiant. You are my sun,” and he found himself warmed by the smile that lit her face.

Eric could feel the brief and subtle breath that he had come to recognize as her entering his thoughts, and he made sure that what she found in his head matched the words he had given her. His reward was the return of some part of the sparkle he realized he had been missing from her eyes.

When he walked Devrah to the door, the housekeeper turned before she left and whispered, “Bless you!” It seemed a little thing, although it had taken more from him than he anticipated, but Eric realized it had changed things.

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“Nice, strong heartbeat,” Doctor Ludwig was smiling. The doctor stood on a stool so she could pass the wand back and forth. The last time Jane had been here. The now gone vampire had used a different machine, one that showed their daughter in amazing detail. Eric wasn’t certain he would have been able to maintain his optimistic outlook, seeing the face of this new child. It was hovering there on the fringes of his thoughts, the feeling that the baby within his wife was something made of
Eric knew it was foolish, a holdover from the myths and legends of his human years. Eric also knew with Sookie’s new ability to read his thoughts, allowing this idea to take hold would hurt her.

The image on the screen was less distinct this time. There was a profile and a grainy arm reaching toward its face. “I think he’s sucking his thumb,” Amy Ludwig was smiling.

“He?” Sookie asked.

“Too soon to tell, particularly with this technology,” the doctor smiled at his wife. “If you’d like, I can get the other machine…”

“No!” Sookie exclaimed, saving Eric from having to say the same thing. There was something in the tone in her voice that made Eric look at her and then dip into her head. He could feel her emotions rocketing back and forth and he quickly withdrew. There were times in this pregnancy her ricocheting emotions made him feel ill and overwhelmed and this was one of those nights.

“All is well, Lover,” Eric stroked her forehead. “There is no need. Perhaps next time…”

“You want it?” Sookie was starting to sweat a little and Eric realized she was starting to feel almost panicky.

“No,” he shook his head, “No, Älskade, there is no need to see what we will both see in person soon enough,” and he pushed calm toward her.

When they were in the car on their way to Tara DuRone’s home, Eric asked, “Are you sure you wish me to leave you with Tara? I can stay if you wish.” Sookie had calmed down, but it was Eric who took the copy of the ultrasound images. Sookie would have left them on the counter.

“I’m fine, Eric,” Sookie insisted. “It’ll be good for me to have a little girl time. Besides, just the thought of walking into Fangtasia has me figuring out how fast I could make it to the women’s room. This morning sickness stuff is really kicking my butt.”

It occurred to Eric this was the first time Sookie had mentioned her frequent bouts with nausea in terms of morning sickness. She had been referring to it as ‘being sick’ or ‘not feeling well.’ Eric realized that like him, Sookie was dodging what was becoming an increasingly obvious reality and Eric acknowledged he bore some of the blame for it.

Deliberately laying his hand on the swell that was the child, Eric smiled and said, “This one is different. I have heard they are all different.” When he could see his words didn’t have the desired effect, he dug a little deeper, “Perhaps this one is more like me. He demands your attention.” These words worked a little better and Sookie’s smile seemed a bit more genuine.

As he walked her to the front door, he asked again, “You’re sure? I can see Mustapha another time.”

“No,” Sookie smiled, and she looked more like the saucy, strong woman she was, “It’s all good. I’m really looking forward to some girl time. You’d just cramp our style. Just don’t be too late and text me when you’re leaving,” and Sookie pushed up on her tiptoes, using a hand against his shoulder for balance so she could kiss his cheek. Tara swept out of the house and wrapped his wife in her arms, and Eric could feel the comfort Sookie took from it. For a moment, he was jealous of how happy she was in the arms of another, but he bit back his growl and patiently allowed Mrs. DuRone to hug him as well.

Suddenly the front door was shut in his face and Eric was walking alone back to the car. Rather than sit in the backseat by himself, Eric slid into the passenger seat next to Charles. “Women,” Charles
shook his head. “No one knows the mystery of women. Best to let them have their hen party and don’t ask about it later.” Eric nodded. He had come to appreciate Charles’ insights into married life.

“Do they talk about us?” Eric found himself asking, and Charles answered by laughing out loud.

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“So, you really think that somehow you got pregnant… like… the usual way?” Tara placed another plate of thinly sliced lemons in front of Sookie.

“There’s no other explanation, unless somehow someone came in while we slept, and Eric would have smelled it if there were some stranger in our bedroom.”

“Sookie? That whole smelling thing? It’s weird, I’m just telling you,” Tara smiled and rolled her eyes, “But I guess is does eliminate some possibilities. By the way, creepy possibilities! I swear! You live one weird life!”

“It is weird,” Sookie nodded. “If someone had told me that I’d be married to a vampire and related to fairies… well, I guess when I was a little girl I would have thought it was pretty cool.”

“You always were a strange one!” Tara smiled and leaned over to squeeze Sookie’s knee, assuring her friend that was a good thing. “So, let’s suppose that somehow after Eric got better, he really got better.” Sookie blushed a bit and Tara arched her eyebrow. “I’d say we can’t rule anything out.” Tara nodded, “Let’s just say that those swimmers are fully functional. Kind of changes things, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t think he believes it,” Sookie bit her lip. “He was thinking for a while that this,” and she glanced down, “was some kind of changeling or something.”

“A cursed child?” Tara made a sour face, “Really?” Then Tara sat back and asked, “What do you think, Sookie? Are you happy about this little baby?” and Tara leaned over and stroked her hand over Sookie’s belly.

“I don’t know what to think,” Sookie said, but even to her own ears it sounded more like an excuse.

“Well, I don’t know what that means,” Tara got matter of fact with her friend, “But what I do know is you have a little baby right here,” and she took Sookie’s hand in her own and laid it so it was palm down against her own belly. “A little baby that can hear you and feel you, and I’m betting if you’ve been carrying on the way you are now, he’s more than a little lonely.” When Sookie looked at her skeptically, Tara nodded, “You bet! You don’t think that some little person who is all tied up inside of you knows what’s going on? You need to pull your head out of your ass and start treating this little baby the way he deserves. You just told me yourself you believe this is you and Eric. I’m not saying the timing was perfect, but maybe in some ways, it was.”

Sookie felt quick tears coming to the corners of her eyes, but Tara wasn’t having any of it. “Now you just stop that right now!” she ordered. “What happened in Rhodes was terrible. It wasn’t your fault and it wasn’t Eric’s. You were both lucky from what I hear, not that either of you would tell me one piece of truth about it.” Sookie opened her mouth but Tara held up her hand, “Don’t bother! Jason told me some things and I figure the less I know the better I am, but there are some things I do know about, like how you can’t deny the bond between you and your child.”

“I’m not denying it!” Sookie protested.

“No, you’re ignoring it, and that’s worse!” Tara replied.
“I can’t help how I feel,” Sookie told her friend.

Tara narrowed her eyes, “Because how you feel is always right?” she asked. “I remember when you didn’t like me much but that was because you didn’t know me.”

Sookie smiled and laughed a little, “I thought you were pretty stuck up,” she admitted.

“I was really just shy and once you gave me a chance, we became best friends,” Tara nodded. She looked toward Sookie’s belly where her hand rested on top of her friend’s, holding it in place. “Maybe you need to give this little one a chance,” she told the telepath. “Talk to him. Comfort him. I think you’re going to find that he’s just what you need, what you both need.”

“I keep thinking that if I spend all my time thinking about this one, I’ll forget my little girl,” Sookie said quickly.

Tara scooted over to sit next to Sookie on the couch, “Well, over the years I’ve heard you say some pretty stupid things, but that? Sookie Stackhouse Northman, that is one of the stupidest things I think I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth. Your Gran would be pure embarrassed to hear that! I know you don’t have one brain cell. You act like you only have room in your head for one thought! You are smart as they come. How could you ever forget that first little girl?”

“Yeah,” Sookie sniffed, “It does sound pretty dumb.”

“So,” Tara asked, “Is that why you moved away?”

Sookie nodded, “That’s part of it.”

Tara wrapped her arm around her friend’s shoulders and pulled her close, “Running never solves anything,” she told Sookie. “And trying to make time stand still doesn’t work either. The only way to work through the sad times is to push through them and grab the happiness you find on the other side to keep you moving. This?” and she lay her hand on Sookie’s stomach again, “This is pure happiness just waiting for you to grab hold. This is smiles and laughter and love for a lifetime, and for you? Well, that’s a pretty long time.”

“What if something happens to him?” Sookie asked. “What if I lose him, too? I don’t think I could survive that!”

“What kind of talk is that?” Tara asked her. “So you’re going to live your life afraid of the ‘what ifs’? Where’s my friend, because the Sookie Stackhouse I know looks at those silly ‘what ifs’ and spits in their eye! There is danger that we all face every time we walk out our own front door. If I spent all my time thinking about the things that could go wrong, I’d be a shivering wreck under my bed every day. I have three beautiful babies who I have to send out into the world with their heads held high and I can, because I have faith that life had something good in store for them.” Tara squeezed Sookie and didn’t let go until her friend looked her in the eye, “I know life has something good in store for that little baby inside you! My God, Sookie! With your looks and Eric’s charm? You’ll be beating those gals off with a bat!”

Sookie smiled, too, “We don’t know yet if it’s a girl or a boy,” she told Tara.

“Well, you better find out,” her friend replied, “Because we are going to spend some of that money you have on the best baby stuff, and I’m not interested in doing some half-assed green or yellow theme. It’s blue or pink all the way!” When Sookie grinned, Tara shoulder bumped her, “Now eat your lemons! Everything is going to be fine!” and for the first time, Sookie believed her.
Chapter 31 - Telltales Fly

Chapter Notes

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Nautical Note: No one can see the wind, but knowing where it is is essential for sailing. That is why ribbons are sewn to the backs of sails. These ribbons, or telltales, flutter, giving visual proof of the flow of the wind as it moves across canvas, allowing a helmsman to adjust course to take best advantage of the air.

Zeus Summit – Denver

“I wish to thank Berthe, the Queen of Colorado, for hosting our Summit.” Stan was wrapping up his opening remarks. Zeus was the only other of the four Clans that had moved ahead with their Summit for this part of the working year. The Amun Clan Summit, which had been scheduled for upstate Michigan had been canceled in the aftermath of Rhodes and Narayana hadn’t had a regular Summit since the death of Robert of California. Stan swept his eyes across the crowd. Only his and Eric Northman’s Clans were left which could claim enough monarchs to make a Summit worthwhile.

Felipe de Castro, who was standing just below the dais, had benefitted from the deaths of most of the monarchs in his Clan, annexing their territories. Now, only Washington survived as a separate kingdom to remind others that there was more to Narayana Clan than the caped King. Moshup was similarly thin. There were only four monarchs surviving besides Mikhail, or Misha as he insisted on being called, and two of those were virtual recluses. For his part, Stan didn’t understand the interest in spreading one’s rule too thin. A diversity of monarchs meant a diversity of ideas and opportunities. Local representation ensured that humans would see a familiar face and since humans were the species with the most money to be taken, it was in all their interests to form close links with that species. That couldn’t happen if your only representation was states away.

Stan smiled briefly at Felipe, acknowledging his fellow Clan Chief in a way he knew would be recognized and appreciated by the bystanders. According to Stan’s most recent census study, the number of vampires in the consolidated Clans was dropping. Meanwhile, the vampire population in Zeus was growing. At first, Stan discounted the numbers, but now that the rogue invasion had all but stopped, Stan felt comfortable that the rising numbers translated to bright, capable money-makers attracted to his territory and that boded well for him. According to Stan’s data, although the numbers weren’t rising at the same rates, Amun was doing well too. Stan wondered how much of the Amun population growth was really those migrating into the Clan to join the law enforcement organization the Kings, Russell Edgington and Bartlett Crowe, were sponsoring. Vampires liked knowing things; it was something hardwired from lifetimes of hiding, and being part of the law enforcement group meant you would generally find things out first. It was a coveted job.

That didn’t mean the law enforcement group was universally appreciated. Rafe of Kansas had lodged a complaint. Interestingly, his contracted mate, Sandy Seacrest, had chosen not to file a
complaint in support of her husband’s. Stan noticed the monarchs were standing well apart from each other and some part of him wondered what had taken so long for the rift to form.

Stan had been called to Kansas a few months ago to adjudicate at a local Assizes matter when the vampire police in Kansas arrested two of Rafe’s Sheriffs along with several other members of his Court. They were accused, and subsequently proven to be radical members of the Vampire First movement. Stan had supported a verdict of final death. He had taken the extra step of privately warning Rafe that there was enough evidence to arrest him as well and only Stan’s intercession had stopped them. At the time it ended any thought Rafe had of protesting the verdict, but with the passage of time, Rafe seemed to have found new courage. The Kansas King told Stan he wanted to make the introduction of these law enforcement arms into Zeus Clan a matter of debate during tonight’s business meetings. Stan had purposely delayed that conversation, moving it to the more private Clan meeting that would happen tomorrow night.

When Berthe and Greyeagle bowed, Stan caught sight of the bright, red head of Finn, the King of Nebraska, across the room. Finn was not known to attend vampire functions, including his own Clan meetings, so there was some speculation as to why he was here. The Nebraska King’s fellow monarchs were suspicious of his known association with the Fae. With the events in recent weeks, including videos of Fae fighters, the speculation was getting louder. Questions about the public appearance of the Fae and what it might mean was on the agenda for tomorrow as well, following the standard inter-Clan business meetings. Stan bowed to the cluster of vampires surrounding Sandy Seacrest. Almost every monarch in his Clan was here. Stan didn’t flatter himself by thinking it was because of the superior agenda or the love between the monarchs.

The real excitement, and the reason they all came, was the scheduled appearance of the Ancient Pythoness before the closing ball. Their titular leader had been unreachable for over a year. Kingdom consolidations had happened and suspicious deaths had gone unanswered. The territories the Pythoness had created and the monarchs she had put in place were very different now, but through all the upheaval she had remained silent. Now, their grand lady would be among them and there was a palpable energy in the room as the vampires speculated as to what she would say and what she would do.

One thing they did know: The Ancient Pythoness had refused to hear arguments in the suit Eric Northman, Clan Chief of Amun, had filed against Felipe de Castro, Clan Chief of Narayana. The Viking was claiming damages for a failed takeover attempt in his kingdom. He alleged that De Castro was behind it. The Narayana Chief protested that it was his freed progeny, Angie, who had conceived of the plot on her own and without her Maker’s knowledge. De Castro had been heard to say on more than one occasion that had he really been involved; the attempt would have succeeded.

The Pythoness issued a statement through her people that without sufficient evidence, the claim by the Viking could not move forward. Now there was a persistent rumor that Eric Northman and his Fae wife would not be coming to Denver. They had contacted Stan, alerting him that they might be attending to lend support to their business team, but several vampires who had been to New Orleans recently told Stan they found it unlikely. They told the Texas King that Sookie Northman was visibly pregnant again and they couldn’t see either one of the Northmans leaving New Orleans without a compelling reason. The AP’s refusal to hear the case against De Castro eliminated any such reason.

Stan smiled automatically and pushed his glasses up on his nose as he stepped through the crowd. ‘Sookie Stackhouse,’ he thought to himself. The last time he had seen her she was radiant, standing next to the North Man. They looked like movie stars, so blond and golden. With her telepathy and attractive persona Sookie was always a prize, but now? Northman’s wife had once again confirmed her reputation as a brilliant fighter and no one could deny her tie to the Fae. In a time when allies still counted for something (and when did they not?) having someone who could bring the Fae into the
open to fight for you gave you tremendous power. Northman was truly a force to be reckoned with and Stan congratulated himself on being among those able to claim the Viking as both a friend and an ally.

As if reading his mind, Felipe de Castro stepped closer, “Do you know if Northman is coming?” he asked.

“I heard he was,” Stan replied politely, “He has a suite reserved but no one has confirmed his arrival.” Stan looked up to see two of the Viking’s Sheriffs nearby, “Oh, but perhaps his vassals can tell you. Thierry!” Stan said, calling the vampires toward them. “Thank you for giving the presentation this evening. It’s been a profitable year for all of us,” and Stan made of point of including the Nevada King in his head nod, “and I am sure after this evening’s report we will have new investors anxious to join in.”

Thierry and Thomas took care to bow equally to each of the Clan Chiefs. While it was common knowledge that their King was accusing De Castro, the charges had not been proven and it never did to assume things in the matter of Kings. “I am sure we will, Majesty,” Thierry responded, and then turning more fully toward Felipe de Castro, pasted his best courtier smile in place and said, “It is a pleasure to see you both.”

“I am anxious to resolve these awkward matters between our Kingdoms,” Felipe replied, getting right to the heart of the matter. “I have told your King this unfortunate incident was not done with my knowledge or approval. I was very sorry to hear of the loss of Jane. She was an exemplary vampire, a true asset to our race.” Felipe’s face had the appropriate amount of sympathetic regret and they all stood quiet for a moment. With timing that was perfect, the Nevada King flicked his eyes over their shoulder as if he was looking for someone before saying, “I am hoping your King will be coming to the Summit. I believe I have information that would allow us to move past this misunderstanding. After all, we are all business partners. I have an interest in the solar panels portion of our mutual energy operations and I am a business partner with Pamela Ravenscroft. This discord between our kingdoms is bad for business!”

Taking a quick look around, Felipe turned back toward them and in a slightly lower tone said, “I believe we are both victims to someone who seeks to profit by sowing this discord, someone who influenced my poor, impressionable Angie, leading her to her final death.” The King shook his head again and then looked directly at Thierry as he asked again, “Is your King coming?”

“I do not believe he and his Queen will be traveling for this Summit,” Thomas answered instead.

“Ah, you are Thomas!” Felipe greeted him, “You are mated to the Viking’s other progeny, Karin.”

“Karin the Slaughterer is my bonded mate,” Thomas corrected the King. Thierry snorted and Thomas flicked his eyes impatiently toward his companion.

“I congratulate you,” Felipe said courteously, then added, “I hope there are no further troubles in your kingdom that would cause them to remain within their borders?”

“No,” Thomas smiled broadly, “No troubles. It is instead the best of news. The Queen is expecting again and they have decided not to travel at this time.”

“Expecting…” and every vampire could see the uneasiness that passed over the Nevada King’s face. No one read anything into it. They all felt the same. There was something about this that didn’t sit right. Vampire Kings didn’t marry non-vampires. Vampire Kings didn’t make non-vampires their Queen. Vampire Kings certainly didn’t create some kind of test tube progeny. The Viking expected them all to accept too many new things; things that were not vampire. “Well, I will be certain to send
a gift,” Felipe said, his mouth stretching into a polite smile.

“Perhaps we may be of assistance in conveying this new information,” Thierry interrupted. “As you say, we are business partners and this disagreement has created unforeseen difficulties for us all.”

“It is delicate information and best delivered in person,” Felipe smiled apologetically. “I would suggest I do so, but under the circumstances it would mean traveling to Louisiana, something I don’t dare under the circumstances,” Felipe said with a quick laugh.

“Yeah, that firecracker of a Queen would probably stake you where you stand,” and Stan fought to suppress a laugh before adding, “or drive a car over you. Didn’t she almost hit you with a car once?” and losing the battle, Stan laughed out loud, causing those around them to glance their way.

“Actually, she saved my life by killing another vampire with a car,” Felipe was still smiling thinly. Turning back to Thierry, Felipe continued, “Perhaps after the business meetings this evening. What I have to say is not something I’d care to share with a crowd.”

They agreed to meet in Stan’s suite once meetings concluded as it was the closest to neutral territory. Their arrangement concluded, Stan signaled to the Narayana Clan Chief and they moved away to the cluster of vampires surrounding Gus of Wyoming. “What do you think he’s going to say?” Thomas asked.

“That New York was behind it,” Thierry replied, watching Felipe’s retreating back. “It makes sense. Angie was traveling there, Felipe doesn’t want to take the heat for this, and there’s no love lost between Nevada and New York.”

“I almost feel sorry for Misha,” Thomas shook his head. “Everyone is lining up against him.”

“He’s made too many enemies,” Thierry shrugged. “Perhaps it’s time for the crows to come home to roost.”

“Who in a position of power doesn’t make enemies?” Thomas shrugged. “You make decisions; you make someone unhappy.”

“Except our King,” Thierry laughed. “He makes decisions and it serves to attract more to fight for him.”

“That’s true,” Thomas nodded, “But that may not count for much among his own species. Vampires don’t like to mingle with others.”

“That may be true,” Thierry nodded, “but those protests will need to be made in a large room, one big enough to hold the Viking and his whole non-vampire army.”

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“No one is saying these police are spies. All I am saying is that we should be able to turn down the ‘offer’ of hosting them in our kingdoms without drawing suspicion onto ourselves.” Chase, the King of Montana was on the podium. The entire business portion of the Zeus Summit had been moved to the largest ballroom. There were vampires still waiting to register their opinion on the matter of the vampire police and this had already been going on for hours. There would be no meeting between the Viking’s Sheriffs and De Castro tonight. Stan glanced at his watch. Dawn was still many hours away but it was clear they would stay here, listening to testimony, until the sun naturally ended the parade of supporters and naysayers.

The evening had started as one would expect in the smaller room reserved for business meetings.
The lead presentation in the business break-out session was the team talking about the status of the energy company collaboration between Zeus, Amun, and now Narayana Clans. There was general approval for the returns and no small amount of self-satisfaction that vampires were outstripping greedy humans in developing and subsequently controlling renewable energy sources. Thierry had detailed the currently regulatory climate, recommending that vampires withdraw from fracking and related waste water reclamation operations within five years. Thomas talked about the progress of the wind turbine operations and Sandy Seacrest gave an impressive talk on the future of wire transmission technology and co-generation plants. There were several vampires who expressed an interest in making investments and Stan was basking in thoughts of future profits.

The next team was about to start their presentation on improvements in synthetic blood manufacturing when Rafe of Kansas stood up and said, “I am introducing a new piece of business to the floor.” It wasn’t prohibited to sidestep the agenda, but it was unusual enough that heads turned and murmurs started. “I am opening the floor for a more general discussion about these vampire police.”

Stan couldn’t keep the frown from his face. He had told Rafe he wished to delay this discussion to tomorrow night behind closed doors. Rafe was forcing the conversation into the open, which meant the Sheriffs would have an opportunity to weigh in. While the promise of these new vampire police was that they would be a support and aid to local Sheriffs, the reality was that the Sheriffs saw them as rivals and dangerous interlopers. The business in Kansas where Area Sheriffs were included among the Vampire First arrests and then executions had served to cement that impression and there was more than a little simmering resentment. “We have this on the agenda for tomorrow,” Stan spoke up, but his words were met with a general hiss.

“I think we should allow all of those present to weigh in,” Gus of Wyoming stood next. He looked around the room, meeting the eyes of Sheriffs and observers, “This matter is too important to all of us to have it decided by just a few.”

“We are Rulers to our people,” Berthe of Colorado protested, standing next. “Isn’t that our responsibility as monarchs? To find out the facts and then lead our people in the right decisions?”

“This is a delicate matter,” Nascha of New Mexico had stood next. “You can see the emotion it already creates. Bad decisions are made in the heat of the moment. All wise vampires know that.”

But Pandora’s box was open and word traveled. Vampires who had not attended the business presentations were trying to enter the already overcrowded room. Stan looked around and realized to try and push for delay would open him to allegations of favoritism. Forcing a smile into place, he said, “It appears to be the will of those here to have a general discussion ahead of the Clan talk tomorrow. I am sure the Kings and Queens here have heard the concerns of their people, but there is no harm in everyone listening to the thoughts of our colleagues from across the kingdoms of our Clan.” The Zeus Clan Chief hoped no one could hear his back molars grinding, “I will ask our organizers to move us to the larger ballroom. If you would allow us a few minutes…”

It was everything Stan had not to snap Rafe’s head off. He knew the short Kansas King was too stupid to be doing this as a challenge to Stan’s authority as Clan Chief. Instead Kansas was motivated by belligerence and temper. Had Kansas waited for tomorrow night, the monarchs could have worked out some compromise to present to those pressuring for new police in every kingdom. They could have argued their differences behind closed doors, but now it would become an angry, shouting shit show and Zeus could end up looking like the only Clan where the human-friendly police were rejected. It might make outsiders view Zeus Clan as supporting hate groups and that would be fatal to business with the humans.
As the Montana King concluded his remarks, Stan pulled out his phone and texted Bartlett Crowe. Someone representing the police was going to need to come to the Summit to press their cause in person and that someone needed to be in Denver by tomorrow night.

Jackson

“This is a cause you believe in. You know that a common police force is the only real way for us to protect ourselves from humans. Our own police mean we are kept informed if there are those working against us. What’s more, they will protect us from our own worst element.” Bartlett Crowe was pulling out all the stops. The Kings were technically in debt to Thalia since she had informed them of their security issues here in Mississippi, but Bartlett was certain that deep down, Thalia would do the right thing rather than make this a favor trade. “If you don’t go to Denver,” he continued, “It’s likely those Zeus rulers will decide to ban the police from their territory, and that would be disastrous for all of us!”

“What about Stan?” Thalia hissed. “He’s their Clan Chief! Why doesn’t he just order them to accept your police?”

“If Stan declares openly for one side or the other he won’t remain Clan Chief for long,” Bartlett said dryly. “His role is to listen to all sides and help his rulers to come to common ground. Being Clan Chief is not about ordering.” Bartlett struggled to keep his tone conciliatory. Thalia knew as well as he did how difficult maintaining leadership of a Clan could be. The Indiana King recognized she was being purposely difficult.

“So, I get to be the bad guy and Stan Davis gets to remain out of the fray?” Thalia growled.

“Of course,” Bartlett purred. “You’ve worked so hard on your reputation. I’d think you’d be thanking me for giving you this opportunity to shove it down everyone’s throats, including Stan Davis.”

“What makes you think they would listen to me?” Thalia growled. “The last time I was there I forced your police down Kansas’s throat and we all know how that ended. What makes you think I’ll make it off the airplane, much less through the convention door?”

Bartlett laughed out loud, “Oh, Thalia! You do say the funniest things! Who would dare raise a hand against you? You speaking out for the police will let others know its importance!” Bartlett stopped laughing, “Besides, those executions were the right thing to do, almost everyone agreed. The evidence was overwhelming and the documents were posted for all to review. It was even-handed and above board.

Bartlett shifted before saying, “For those who are not tainted by fear or paranoia the argument is already made. We get to know things first, we control what the humans know, and in exchange, all we have to do is agree to continue the promises we made when we started mainstreaming. We get everything and humans believe we are doing them a favor.” Bartlett waited, and when Thalia remained silent he added, “Besides, what else of value are you doing with your time? Twy tells me your Facebook group is alive and well. They posted another candid shot of you framed between two death-seekers in black leather last night. They photo-shopped it so you look like you’re smiling.”

“Fangtasia is not what it was,” Thalia snapped.

“Yes, things are always so quiet after a failed takeover,” Bartlett sighed. “Besides, there is another reason to go to Denver. Stan Davis informs me the Ancient Pythoness will be there. You know
we’ve been trying to get her to agree to take over leadership of the police but she hasn’t returned our call. If you were there…”

“You want me to invite myself to speak with the Pythoness?” Thalia growled.

“I have to imagine you’ve met her,” Bartlett shrugged. “Two strong women, hundreds of years…”

“She was ancient when I was turned,” Thalia answered which wasn’t really an answer at all.

“Yes,” Bartlett continued, “You would be in the right place at the right time to ask her to assume authority and that would finish any resistance from the states.”

“So why don’t you just do this yourself?” Thalia snarled. “You know what needs to be said. This army was your idea. You should be the one peddling it.”

“Well, that’s the problem” Bartlett sighed. “Russell and I are the ones who came up with the idea and we bankrolled the first graduating class. If we show up to defend it followed by a private chat with the Pythoness, everyone is going to think we are attempting a countrywide takeover at worst, that these are our paid spies at best. No one has to peel the veneer back far to accuse the force of being a private army. They can’t be associated with anyone who has prior allegiances. Russell and I are Amun, which is a rival Clan. I am a former Clan Chief, while you…”

“I am also Amun,” Thalia reminded him.

“No one counts you as belonging to any Clan,” Bartlett countered. “To vampires, you are viewed as independent, perhaps the only vampire in this country that is seen as outside any ruling structure, except for the Pythoness herself.”

“I have no way of getting there.” As soon as she said it, Thalia knew she was going. Bartlett knew it as well.

Thalia could hear the triumph in his voice as he told her, “There will be an Anubis flight awaiting you in Shreveport within the hour. There will be charge accounts ready for you at the hotel and you can use the Viking’s suite. He is not going and the rooms are there.” When she didn’t say anything, Bartlett said, “Thank you, Thalia. This is important.”

When he hung up, Bartlett turned toward Russell Edgington, who had been listening to the entire conversation. “So that’s done,” he told his mate.

“When do you think Thalia will figure out she just inherited the police force?” Russell asked.

“It won’t take long,” Bartlett smiled. “She’ll be angry for about two seconds and then she’ll realize what a favor we’ve done her. She is uniquely suited for it and who would question her? Even if people think she’s using the force as her personal spies, who would be brave enough to say it? Pushing her into this position was genius, Rusty.”

“And we can step back and regain our lives,” Russell nodded. “No more worries about Vampires First. No more worries about sabotage. As soon as these police take root around the country, even takeovers will become a threat from our past. If we have problems we can’t solve ourselves, we will know who to call and we’ll know she’ll be a friend.”

The Mississippi King extended his hand toward his mate, “I am looking forward to just being us again.”

“You may find that being King becomes pretty boring,” Bartlett purred as he perched on Russell’s
chair arm. “We’ll have to find new ways to fill our time.”

Russell tilted his head back, enjoying his mate’s fingers running through his hair, “Well, no time like the present. I heard there is a new quartet playing at Josephine’s this evening.”

“Then we should go,” Bartlett smiled back, “Just two happy vampires, out on the town.”

Denver

“Where is your doppelgänger?” the Ancient Pythoness asked Niall Brigant. The vampire sat in the high-backed chair she dragged from place to place. It was carved wood, a souvenir from her days in France during the Dark Ages.

“Finn is downstairs,” Niall sat easily in an opposing armchair, his hands crossed over the head of his cane. “I suppose you could tell me about him if I asked you.”

“I suppose,” the Pythoness grinned mirthlessly, her eyes shining in the dim light like a snake. “But you won’t ask me, Sky Prince, because you are too proud to give me the price I would ask.”

“I am so pleased you are still with us,” the Prince said caustically. “My existence would be much less colorful without you in it.”

“Do you suppose we have fulfilled the social niceties?” the Pythoness hissed. “You are here to ask something of me. Stop mincing and wincing your way up to it.”

The smile didn’t drop from Niall’s face, but his eyes turned as cold as the vampire’s across from him, “It’s not what I want, crone. It’s what you want, what you’ve wanted for some time.”

“You think to suggest my successor?” the Pythoness’ lips curved upwards. “Who? Your bastard child downstairs?”

“Of course not,” Niall finessed. “Finn is still too young and his gifts have yet to be tested. Besides, I’m not suggesting a replacement for you. I’m suggesting you consider handing over those parts of your duties you find most trying. Of course you should continue to be a seer to the people. It was your destiny before you were turned and remains your destiny now.”

“Only now I would no longer be burdened with governing them,” and the Pythoness leaned back. Her face softened and she tapped a long, bony finger on the arm of the chair. “And who would you suggest to relieve me of so much? Certainly not yourself! We would suck you dry in an instant!” and then she smiled, “Of course! The Viking!”

“Why not?” Niall said reasonably. “He has proven himself. He has made strong alliances with the other species. He has survived any number of trials and for every time he is dropped down he rises ever higher. He is both skilled and lucky. Who better?”

“I think you overstate his worthiness,” the Pythoness rasped. “The Were’s don’t openly support him.”

“Easily fixed,” the Prince replied with a flip of his hand. “The Were’s are held by an ancestral blood oath to the Fae. They are our traditional guardians and bound generation on generation to us. I will openly declare our alliance to Northman. It only takes my sending word that we are calling their oaths and they will be bound to him as they are to me.”

“Magnanimous,” the Pythoness nodded, “Quite the concession from a Fae Prince to a lowly vampire. I have to wonder. What’s in this for you? Northman is notoriously independent. He has the strength needed to enforce his will and that strength could just as easily be turned against you. I
suppose there is the obvious. You have linked your grand-daughter to him and a little more tightly
than you intended if I’m not mistaken. She may be immortal, Niall, but there will ever be resistance
from vampires in accepting her as full Queen.”

“Perhaps things have changed since the last time you looked into our future. Perhaps you should cast
your sight forward now.” Niall shifted forward, “But why are we squabbling? You have given much
of yourself to bring the vampires of this country out of the darkness. Years of your existence have
been spent running from Summit to Summit, a sideshow attraction settling their petty disputes
because they were incapable of it. But now you tire. Why not put someone with both the skills and
backing needed into the chair? You would still advise him. You would be his Ancient Pythoness and
he would lift the heavy loads you hand to him.”

When the Pythoness didn’t reply, Niall nodded and continued, “In recent years, some of these
vampires you put in positions of power and responsibility have done their best to step back into all
that was worst and petty about their race. They chase money and power. They fight for nothing
better than jealousy and ego, but there are some now, like Northman, who see and accept the future
you would have for them.”

“There are still a few of the old ones left,” the Pythoness sighed. “You are right about one thing.
Most that are thriving are the better of the lot.” The Pythoness turned her sightless eyes toward the
Fae Prince, “And again I ask, Niall, Prince of the Sky Fae, what do you get from this?”

“And again, Lady of the Dark Ones, I ask you to seek that answer yourself.” Niall sat back and
watched as the Ancient Pythoness stared out before her. After several long minutes her focus
returned to him. Her mouth was pursed and her face thoughtful. “Children,” she said, “Part Fae, part
vampire. That is quite the trick you pulled.”

“They are our future,” Niall told her, “both our races. These children will be capable of walking in
sunlight and darkness. They will wield both Fae magic and the powers of the vampires. And they
will be able to reproduce naturally.”

“And you believe they will thank you for their gifts,” the Pythoness was smiling.

“They will be special. I have declared the firstborn my heir when he is of age. He will show the way
forward for us all.” Niall’s eyes shone. He had seen many visions of these children. They would
grow in grace and wisdom. The North Man would honor his obligations to climb up the vampire
hierarchy. When his children came of age, there would be no barriers standing between their taking
over rule of the combined races. There would be a supreme leader, and that leader would be of
Niall’s bloodline and beholden to him.

“I can see that you believe this is for the best,” the Ancient Pythoness said mildly. “Far be it for me to
stand in your way. But I caution you, Prince of the Air, be careful what you wish for, for you may
surely get it.”


“Silly human nonsense often carries great wisdom for all it comes from an inferior race,” the
Pythoness observed.

“So, you will suggest appointing the North Man as High King to the Clans?” Niall pressed.

“He won’t thank me for it,” the Pythoness nodded, “but yes, Niall. I will do as you ask.”

The Prince stood up and swiftly bowed. “I thank you, Lady,” he drew himself up. “This will be a
great day for us all.”

When the door shut, the Ancient Pythoness said, “You can come out now.”

Thalia stepped from the shadows, “How did he not detect me?” the fierce vampire asked the old one.

“The Fae are not the only ones with tricks,” the Pythoness replied.

“You would allow this?” Thalia asked. “The North Man and his mate would not wish their children to be used in this way. They would have them retain their choices.”

“And their children will have that, even if the Viking and his mate do not,” the Pythoness replied. “It is why you are here. You will ensure that the Fae Prince remembers his place.” The Pythoness leaned back, “Niall Brigant is an old, greedy troll of a man. He forgets the warmth of emotion and the softness of a mother’s heart. I am ancient but I remember it still. Niall discounts the power of his Granddaughter and the fierceness of a parent’s protection. He sees the future but colored by his own ambition.”

“You must watch over them, this family of yours. Use Northman’s alliance with the witches when you must. They have magic that can bar the Fae when needed. I can’t stop the choice that will stand before those children, but we can make certain that their childhood is spent with their parents, away from the influence that Niall would exert.”

The Pythoness held out her hand and kept it there until Thalia placed hers upon it. The crone’s bony fingers wrapped around Thalia’s with surprising strength. “When the time is right,” the Pythoness told Thalia, “you will tell them what Niall showed you and when. You will tell them of his instructions and all will be well.”

“How will I know when that time comes?” Thalia asked.

“You will know,” the Pythoness answered, and she dropped Thalia’s hand and turned her head. When Thalia didn’t start to move, the Pythoness intoned, “Now go!”

Thalia turned and as if on cue, the door to the suite opened. As Thalia stalked down the hall, she thought, ‘Great! First the Fae and now the Pythoness! Would it kill you to just give a straight answer?’ Somewhere deep down, Thalia suspected it might.

Owatonna

Maude was walking past Inger’s resting chamber. Her second was not due to rise for another twenty minutes which was why Maude stopped when she saw the door handle turn.

“Good morning, Pam,” she greeted her favorite adopted daughter.

“Good morning back,” Pam smiled. Maude could see that Pam didn’t want to look guilty, but then she did.

“I am just headed downstairs. The donor selection from the University continues to improve. Perhaps you would care to join me?” Maude continued down the corridor, allowing Pam a moment to collect herself.

The donor selection this evening was delightful. There was a rather muscular young man with curly brown hair and snapping eyes and Maude couldn’t help breaking into a smile. To give him credit, he glanced at Pam who had trailed the Queen, but then snapped his eyes back toward Maude and nodded. Delighting her even further, he whispered, “Perhaps somewhere private?”
Maude glanced around. There was also a tall, blond man and he smiled as well. “The possibilities!” she sighed, but then said, “Unfortunately, I have guests and business to attend to. Perhaps another time.”

As she fed from the brunette, the blond slipped behind her, rubbing her back then slipping his hands around to her breasts. Maude sighed as she pulled back, sealing the puncture wounds she had made. “You should both come back,” she smiled. “But you should know, I think the best things cum in twos!”

Pam lifted her head from the strawberry blond woman and laughed, “Some things never change!”

“I could say the same,” Maude replied, her eyebrow lifting. Checking her shirt for blood and finding none, Maude headed toward the back of the palace where her large kitchen stretched.

“It’s not exactly cheating,” Pam told her as she walked over to the large table and took a seat.

“It’s not what you think it is,” Maude replied, picking up an apron and tying the strings, “It’s what the other person says it is. Fidelity is never how you define it; it’s how your partner defines it!” The Queen picked up a pot lid and waved the steam toward her face. “Interesting!” she remarked.

“Basil with teriyaki,” Deirdre was chopping cilantro. “There is a pasta dish we’re trying and the sauce needs to be piquant enough to energize the palate.”

“I don’t think I ever had pasta growing up,” Pam remarked, picking at the fringe of the placemat before her. “It looks bland.”

“It is,” Deirdre confirmed, “Which is one of its benefits. It absorbs and mutes strong flavors into something that is agreeable and filling for humans,” then Deirdre smirked, “So, cheating already?”

This time Pam didn’t deny it. “I can’t deny it’s a beautiful life. We go everywhere, we meet everyone. I have more couture than I can wear. I get free shoes; beautiful signed, designer shoes! We’re photographed. People recognize me on the street. He is courteous, imaginative. He lives very well.”

“You’re bored, Pammie!” and Maude laughed. “You’ve got everything you thought would make your life perfect and you’re bored out of your mind!”

“I don’t even know what to think!” Pam sighed, “It’s ‘Pamela’ this and ‘Zolotse’ that. Andrew hovers and I don’t even have to think. I barely consider having a bath and the water is drawn. If I mention I’m interested in a book or that a scent intrigues me? It’s there the next day! It’s more than bored… I feel smothered,” Pam shrugged. “I ended up walking to the Park by myself just so I could take my shoes off and feel free.” Pam threw herself back in the chair, “I’m manufacturing reasons to travel. Max wanted to come up to see the New York operations for himself and I convinced him that Boston really needed the look, just so I could get away from the brownstone for awhile.”

“I was wondering why I was seeing you more frequently,” Maude laughed. “I’ll try not to take it personally.”

“Me too,” Inger said from the door. The tall, blond woman nodded to Pam.

“I’ll take you any way you offer,” Pam purred and Inger smirked in return.

“I have an Assizes to attend in the Twin Cities,” Inger informed Maude. “I expect to return in two nights.” She looked expectantly at Pam who frowned and shook her head.
“Fine,” Maude replied as if she hadn’t seen the interplay, “I will look forward to your report.”

Deirdre was taking off her apron as well, “I have a class I’m teaching for the local community college,” she announced. “Wouldn’t do for the teacher to be late!” Within seconds Pam realized she was now alone with the Minnesota Queen and she got the distinct impression that was what Maude planned.

“Why haven’t you left him?” Maude asked after a time.

“I can’t believe I would want to,” Pam answered. “He does everything he can to please me. I have never been so pampered! I keep asking myself what’s wrong with me!”

“You haven’t given him your blood?” Maude was looking at Pam curiously. “I can smell his in you.”

“He likes me to bite him,” Pam shrugged. “He says he wishes me to know his heart.” Pam rolled her eyes, “He is really sweet.” When Maude just shook her head, Pam added, “He has started hinting he would like to share. I think he was hoping I’d spontaneously offer, but…”

“You don’t want him to know you don’t love him,” Maude finished.

“He will be really hurt,” Pam agreed.

“So, when are you going to tell him?” Maude’s voice was strong, but the hand that stroked Pam’s shoulder was kind.

“Soon,” Pam whispered. “I don’t know how he’s going to take it.”

“You could tell him you need to head home for a while,” Maude suggested. “I don’t know if you’ve been following the gossip, but it looks like your Maker will be asked to step into some kind of General Counsel role. Sort of a right hand to the Ancient Pythoness herself.”

Pam remembered the scraps of conversation she’d overheard in the brownstone. “Misha is not happy about that,” she told the Minnesota monarch.

“I can’t imagine he would be,” Maude shrugged. “Misha is a throwback in many ways. He believes that powerful vampires rise through strength and guile, not making friends and statesmanship. I’m sure he thought the position would be offered to him.”

“Misha would be a terrible choice!” It was out of Pam’s mouth before she could even think. “I mean…”

“I think you should let your gut do the talking,” Maude said under arched eyebrows. “Your instincts rarely lead you astray, Pammie mine! And I agree with you. Mister New York would lead a reign of terror and none of us would feel safe. Mr. Fae and Fancy has shown he’s more of a think now, act later ruler and that’s exactly what we all need.”

“You should have heard Misha go on about allowing those police into his territories! He was even angrier about that!” Pam was not holding back. This was her friend and Pam realized that she had been monitoring everything she said for a very long time. It was as if something inside her had been telling her not to trust anyone, and now, being able to simply say her mind, Pam felt renewed.

“He won’t have a choice,” Maude told her friend. “I have my own reservations about the amount of pressure being brought to bear. You know me! I hate to be forced into anything, but even I can see that the benefits on this one outweigh the problems. Not going to say that I won’t have my own
people watching them watching us, but it makes more jobs! Good for my economy!” and the Minnesota Queen laughed her great, booming laugh. Maude sat down in the chair beside Pam, “Seriously, Pamela, maybe it’s time you went home and paid a visit. Let me show you something.”

Maude walked over to the charging station and grabbed her phone. She tapped a few times and turned the screen so Pam could see a photo of Sookie walking in New Orleans with her friend Tara and Angel, the housekeeper’s daughter. Sookie was smiling and her hand was resting on the side of a distended belly.

“She’s almost six months now,” Pam said, staring at the photo.

“Karin tells me they are starting construction at the Palace to build a nursery. Everything is in an uproar on the upper floors. I’m sure Max told you he’s officially moved out.”

“It was past time,” Pam nodded. “He has an amazing house in the Quarter now, close to where Emil Touissant, the Packmaster and his family live.”

“The entire upper floor is going to be Northman family quarters.” Maude turned the phone, “You should go visit. I think Sookie misses you.”

When Pam looked up, Maude nodded. “I speak with Northman from time to time. He is my Clan Chief after all. Sookie always asks about you. So does he.”

“I wonder what they’re doing now?” Pam sniffed.

“Well, what say I call them and find out?” Maude smiled and before Pam could change her mind, the Minnesota Queen pushed the call button.
Chapter Notes

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Denver

The complaints and concerns from the monarchs and retinues of Zeus Summit continued. They lined up around Stan Davis to express their support for the idea of a centralized police force for vampires. There were those who spoke of the benefits of their law being above the fealties and jealousies of any one ruler. There were others who did not support the force. They spoke of the danger of having a group that was, for all intents and purposes, an unofficial army just waiting for the hand of a dictator to take control and wield it against them all.

Thierry turned to Thomas, “Do you care about this? Our King has already said he is bringing these police into our kingdom. What else is there to say?”

Thomas shook his head, “The benefits are obvious and this is something the humans already expect of us. To try and derail it now is a waste of time.”

“Good!” the French vampire laughed, “Let’s go get something to eat. Do you want take out or room service?”

“The donor area is fine for me,” Thomas replied, giving Thierry a sour look.

“Oh sure, now that you’re a bonded vampire… no wait, let me make sure I say it correctly, ‘Karin the Slaughterer is my bonded mate.’” Thierry precisely mimicked Thomas’ earlier words, and then laughing out loud, said, “Really? Could you have been any more of an ass? Why not get it made up into a sign, or a piece of jewelry and hang it around your neck! Or, if you are really determined to shove it in everyone’s face, you could have it tattooed across your forehead and have the ink refreshed every few weeks.”

Thomas shrugged, “Karin is mine. I am content and would have others know it.”

“And now that means what, exactly? You aren’t going to pretend you’re human and demand monogamy from each other, are you?” Thierry held his hand to his chest, looking horrified.

Thomas answered Thierry’s mocking words by cocking one eyebrow, and then, with slow, deliberate steps, he backed Thierry into the wall and leaned in for a long, lingering kiss. “We are still brothers. I would not wish to lose that,” Thomas whispered as his lips ghosted over the slight stubble that lined Thierry’s jawline. The slight rasping noise of lips and teeth against whisker was punctuated by a quick nip at the top of Thierry’s neck. “I won’t invite you into our bed without Karin’s permission, but what we do together on our own can continue if you wish.”

Thierry pressed his hand over the bulge in Thomas’ pants, “This is forever between us,” the French
vampire growled before turning his head to recapture the other vampire’s lips. When he pulled back from the kiss, he chuckled, “It occurs to me that if we were both to become Kings someday, we could marry and keep Karin between us.”

“Karin will never be between us, Brother,” Thomas surprised Thierry by stepping back. His eyes calm, Thomas said, “Karin is mine. I am hers. And if she were to tell me to give you up, Brother, as much as it would pain me, I would.”

That brought Thierry up short. “I would not ask you to share your blood, Thomas. You have bonded and that is hers to offer.”

“She is greedy,” Thomas explained, “and she is possessive. She has given much to be with me and I honor that.”

“Well, then,” Thierry nodded, “It will be up to me to make certain your Karin welcomes me as eagerly as she welcomes you,” and with a sly smile, Thierry kissed Thomas again, demanding entrance to his mouth and eagerly plundering once access was granted. Thierry took Thomas’ hand and started moving them toward a service door. The thought of taking Thomas in his mouth distracted him enough to explain why he was startled when a familiar voice said, “I wondered where the both of you had gone.”

Thomas released his grip on Thierry’s hair and they stepped away from each other. It was Thomas who recovered first, automatically smiling and dropping into a bow, “Majesty!” he greeted Felipe de Castro.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” the King lisped through his exposed fangs. Thierry noticed the other vampire standing just behind De Castro, a broad-shouldered thug who could have been a bodyguard or a Second, or both. When Felipe noticed Thierry’s stare, he glanced back and said, “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m being rude. This is Dieter. He is my new Second. I brought him to the Zeus Summit so he could meet the monarchs of our neighboring Clan.”

While Dieter inclined his head, De Castro gave both Thomas and Thierry a long, lingering look. “You’re sure I’m not interrupting?”

It was obvious the King was open to joining them, but Thierry considered that sharing a bed with De Castro under their present circumstances would not be wise. While they were business partners, De Castro was also being sued by their King, Eric Northman, who was accusing the Narayana Chief of orchestrating the recent takeover attempt. Thierry could see that De Castro was thinking similar thoughts, so he saved them all by saying, “Thomas and I were just headed to the donor’s area. Perhaps you would care to join us?”

Felipe chuckled and flipped back his cape, revealing how his cock was causing his pants to tent. “Perhaps it would be better to find some pleasure there first. Perhaps after we feed you would indulge me by discussing some business?”

Nodding, Thomas indicated that the King should precede them and soon they were all walking into the area that had been set up to service those attending the Summit. “You are certain you don’t wish me to select a few to be sent upstairs for you, Majesty?” the vampire named Dieter asked.

“No,” the King smiled, his eyes remaining on Thierry and Thomas, “Tempting as it is, I will take care of my immediate issue. There will be time for more interesting play when our work is concluded,” and he smiled specifically at Thomas, “ Wouldn’t you agree?”

“It should be as you say, Majesty,” Thomas nodded.
“Did anyone ever tell you what a pretty mouth you have?” Felipe asked.

“I tell him frequently, Majesty,” Thierry replied, then looking around, said, “Registry or something with a little more talent?”

“After the tease you supplied, I will be looking for someone with talent,” Felipe nodded and walked toward a stunning blond who was reclining on a low couch surrounded by drapes. Dieter followed him, pulled the drapes, and stationed himself on guard.

“More bodyguard than business?” Thierry quipped, looking at the King’s Second.

“More boy toy than either,” Thomas replied. “De Castro makes a show of preferring females, but I think his true tastes lie elsewhere,” then looking around, said, “Registry for me. I won’t be long.” Sitting beside a young woman, Thomas dipped to her neck, licked, and bit. Thierry sat on the couch across from him. His choice was also Registry, but the young man was dark-haired and built like Thomas. Thierry kept his eyes on Thomas, smirking as he delicately nibbled before sliding his fangs home.

Thomas had paid his tip and was waiting in the hallway when Thierry joined him. “You are a tease.”

“The drapes are still drawn,” Thierry looked pointedly at the alcove where Dieter stood. “We could finish what we started.”

“Not likely.” Thomas laughed. “I have no particular desire to have that man’s mouth on me and I fear he would hog the bottom.”

“I fear you would be right,” and the two friends grinned.

When the King rejoined them, they agreed to head to the hotel’s smaller lounge. As a facility that catered to vampires, this particular area was set up with private booths at the back. There was nothing to indicate the spaces were soundproof, but the padding on the wall made that likely. As it turned out, there was little need for concern. The flow of emotions around the subject of the police force was enough to have pulled all but the employees into the main ballroom.

Once they were settled and had sent the waitress away with a large tip and a request not to return, Felipe settled against the cushions and said, “I wish to say yet again how relieved I am that the damage done in Louisiana was minimal. Had your King not filed suit so quickly, I would have offered some reasonable restitution. Now, my attorney counsels me to not make any offers until it is known whether the suit will move forward. I am sorry for your losses.” Felipe paused to look into the eyes of each of them. It was a fine, theatrical moment and Thierry wished he could see it as sincere in even the smallest measure. When Felipe judged enough time had passed he said, “I am missing my child. Had I only known she was considering this! Ah, but how could any rational person think such a thing should be attempted? If only she had still been mine, under my control! She would have asked for my advice. I could have told her the dangers she faced. Alas,” and Felipe rolled his eyes and flipped his hand for emphasis, “Angie never did learn the lesson of biting off only what she could chew. Now, that foolishness has cost her everything,” and Felipe looked toward the table, “Perhaps I was a poor Maker to her! I should have held onto her longer!”

Thomas was sure the King understood that neither he nor Thierry were fooled. Felipe was softening them up. He wanted them to be receptive to whatever it was he was willing to offer; so eliciting sympathy was his way of opening that door. “It is not my place to question the judgment of my King,” Thomas nodded, “I am sure that justice will prevail.” In other words, Thomas would remain neutral, but, if in doubt, support his King.
“Yes,” Felipe sighed, “Yes, of course.” There was an awkward moment as they all sat, vampire still, waiting. Finally, the King shifted, “In one regard, though, we are in agreement. The one who is truly responsible for this, your loss and mine, should be punished.”

“Yes,” Thierry said reasonably.

“Yes,” Felipe sighed. “My poor, misguided progeny, so easily influenced! No, I meant the one who put the foolish idea in her head in the first place. I mean the King of New York, Mikhail!”

“You realize both Thierry and I both worked for New York at one time,” Thomas said carefully.

“Yes,” Felipe acknowledged, “Which is why I am sure you don’t doubt what I’m telling you.”

“You also realize that Misha is the acknowledged companion of my King’s progeny, Pam Ravenscroft. When news of the takeover became public, Pam and Misha were the first to call. Pam would have come right away and Misha made offers of support.” The Viking politely declined any offers, assuring his worried progeny and her companion that his own vampires and the Fae had things well in hand. Although he hadn’t said it, Thomas was certain his King didn’t trust Misha any more than he trusted the snake sitting across the table from them right now. “What possible motive could New York have for injuring my King when it would only serve to upset his domestic situation?”

“I believe that Misha prefers to be the only big dog in any field. For me, he is my business partner,” Felipe told them. “We share investments and our cooperation makes the difference in profits, but I believe he is jealous. He prefers to control all business in his Area, and pitting the Viking and me against each other would guarantee the true death of one of us. Whether it would allow him free rein over our mutual business concerns, or free rein over the beautiful Ms. Ravenscroft, I believe Misha felt he couldn’t lose.”

Thomas glanced at Thierry. Neither needed to say anything. What the Nevada King said rang all too true for both of them. The man Felipe was describing was Misha. “Do you have any proof of these allegations?” Thomas asked.

Felipe nodded toward Dieter. The bodyguard had positioned himself across the room, but at the King’s signal, he walked toward them, pulling papers from his breast pocket. They were copies of emails and texts between Angie and a single address. “I believe this is communication between Angie and Misha, or Misha’s agent. Look,” and the King pointed to the email addresses, “They all originate from the same address.”

Thierry examined them, “And you think this email address belongs to Misha?” he asked. “Have you tried to trace it back to its point of origin?”

“Yes, and my people are among the best.” Felipe didn’t notice the spark of interest in Thierry’s eye. “It was difficult to find this correspondence at all. My child had taken care to delete it and clean out her browser. She used a variety of phones and computers. It took many days for my people to sift through the temporary files and shadow clouds to find what is in front of you. But the masking on this IP address was unlike anything they had seen before. Simple… yet so complex. My people told me it is a marvel and must have cost this person,” and Felipe emphasized his point by tapping the paper, “a great deal of money. It’s not only the technology, you understand, it’s then in keeping the secret. The person or people who made that mask have not shared it with anyone else, and that’s almost unheard of. Something that good usually gets bragging rights. My people were very impressed.”

“So, why are you convinced it’s Misha?” Thomas asked.
“Look at the dates of the communications,” Felipe pointed. “They line up with trips Angie took to meet with him. She never stayed with the King in his residences, but she was nearby. The ways these messages are written suggest they are continuations of conversations she had during that time.”

“It could have been with someone else she knew there,” Thomas pointed out. “Just because the dates are right doesn’t mean the other party was the King.” Thomas nudged Thierry. He could see his brother leaning forward, becoming more interested. Thomas knew it would be better if they both remained uncommitted in this matter, but the look on Thierry’s face made that less likely.

“And then, there is the other correspondence my people found coming from this same IP address,” Felipe’s tone changed, and he looked specifically at Thierry. “This same signature was attached to several suspect transactions,” and then Felipe’s eyes narrowed, “including falsified financial statements that were sent to several newspapers in Charlotte, information that was used to hurt the then Queen of the Carolinas.” With a flourish worthy of the best carnival huckster, Felipe held up his hand and Dieter walked again from his post across the room. He pulled another sheaf of papers from his breast pocket and handed it to his King. Felipe waited for Dieter to retreat and then turned toward the French Sheriff. “Your interest in our former Clan Chief is widely known,” the King said with a slight smile. “Think of what it might mean to her if her name could be repaired?”

Felipe turned back to Thomas, “I’ll grant you, this is still not proof, but I ask you, who has stood to benefit from each of these actions? Who walked away with another kingdom? Who created confusion and suspicion between my kingdom and Northman’s, weakening us both in the process?” Felipe de Castro leaned forward, and pointed at the emails that lay on the table, “This is Misha! I know it! These dates are the dates my Angie met with him. There are things said that only they would know! I know this is New York and he is responsible!”

“We think he was involved in Rhodes as well,” Thierry said softly. Felipe turned quickly and Thomas’ eyes widened.

“Who thinks that?” Thomas asked. “Thierry, think Brother! These are the kinds of accusations that get vampires killed! Without real proof…”

“Unless we dig, there will never be real proof,” Thierry said hotly. Turning to De Castro, he said, “Are your computer people as good as you are saying?”

“I have spent thousands, perhaps millions, investing in my assets over the years,” De Castro nodded. “My surveillance is among the most sophisticated because I have wished it. As technology progressed, my investments kept pace. Even in years my money was thin, I continued to pay for the best. My livelihood is watching people spend money, my money! I need to know who returns to cheat me, who returns to pay me more, who is looking to rob from me. People try to hack my systems on a regular basis. They want game codes and security codes. They want access to my cameras and access to my rooms and I stay ahead of all of them!”

Felipe looked at the papers on the table, “Finding this in the spider web of cyberspace was not easy. If we knew what to look for, we might be even more successful.”

“What’s in this for us?” Thomas asked.

“Vindication,” Thierry answered and ignored Thomas’ firm, steady pressure on his foot under the table. “Thalia thinks this, too,” Thierry told Thomas. “She will be here tomorrow night. She is coming to hand the police force over to the Ancient Pythoness.” He looked at the Nevada King, “Would you meet with her?”

Felipe sat back “Yes,” he said. “As long as you guarantee my safety, I will tell Thalia what I’ve
As they walked down the corridor toward the elevator, Thomas hissed, “You are a fool, Brother! De Castro doesn’t care about our King or you! He’s just looking to save his own hide!”

“What does it matter if it ends that bastard?” Thierry didn’t bother to hide the anger in his voice. “He has taken everything I care about and he has trampled it! Thalia and I were almost there! We were only days behind Carlo. If only we’d reached him first, we would have the proof we need to end Misha!”

“Do you hear yourself?” Thomas asked softly. “You sound tortured, irrational. Remember who you serve now! Leave the past in the past!”

“I try,” Thierry shook his head, “But the past dogs my steps. No, Brother, this is a past that I must lay to rest or I will find no future of my own.”

At the other end of the hotel, Felipe de Castro walked toward the elevators in the VIP tower, Dieter trailing him. “So, Dieter,” he said companionably, “Which of our young friends is the most dangerous?”

“The Frenchman,” Dieter answered without hesitation. “He is passionate and quick to figure things out.”

“I would say you’re wrong,” Felipe chided him. “It is Thomas. Thierry fights for what he wants. A man like that can always be tricked into wanting something else, but Thomas? Thomas fights for loyalty and honor. The only way to turn that is to have his leader betray him. That makes him more dangerous.” As the doors of the elevator closed, Felipe said, “Good thing it’s the Frenchman making our introduction to Thalia.”

XXxxx

Thierry rose the next evening and automatically looked over at the pillow next to him. In the same instant, he heard the water running and got out of bed to join Thomas under the water. On his way past the dresser, he saw his phone flashing. It was a message from Thalia.

“We are wanted,” Thierry said as he stepped under the water. “Thalia is here. She is staying in the suite our King reserved. She asks us to join her in an hour.”

“How long do you think she’s been up?” Thomas’ tone made it clear his question was mere curiosity.

“She’s old,” Thierry shrugged, taking the washcloth from Thomas’ hand and stroking the vampire’s long back with sure, steady strokes. “It could be an hour; it could be more. I never felt comfortable enough to ask.”

“You’re lucky she doesn’t have a sense of humor,” Thomas chuckled. “With all the traveling you did together you might have risen to some embarrassment.”

“Thalia has a sense of humor!” Thierry exclaimed. He didn’t understand why he felt the need to defend the small, dour vampire, but he found he didn’t want Thomas thinking ill of her.

Thomas turned, his eyebrow lifted, and a smirk on his face, “Of course, Brother, if that’s what you think!”

“She is funny,” Thierry persisted, “It’s just not everyone appreciates her wit...”
“Well, I suppose,” Thomas took the washcloth and then turned Thierry away from him so that he could trade favors in backwashing, “if you consider pulling the wings from small creatures amusing, or perhaps you like the sound things make when they’re struck with a hammer, or thrown from a building…”

“It’s not like that!” Thierry growled.

“If you say so,” Thomas chuckled and threw the washcloth into the air. When Thierry turned, Thomas grabbed his shoulders, “How long do we have?” he asked.

“Long enough,” Thierry growled, and it turned out, they did.

Thalia was not in the suite when they got there, but she had texted them the door code. They helped themselves to blood from the mini-fridge and settled back, but they didn’t wait long.

“Greetings,” she said on entering, her voice tight and clipped.

“Something wrong?” Thierry asked.

“I’ve come from the Ancient Pythoness, “Thalia told them. “Niall Brigant is here.”

“The Prince?” Thomas was surprised. “I saw Finn downstairs but no one said anything about the Fae coming. I’d think it would be risky. The last time anyone saw Fae at a Summit was for our King’s Pledging.”

“Niall doesn’t believe that rules apply to him,” Thalia seemed agitated.

“Something has bothered you,” Thierry pressed. “You are not yourself.”

Thalia growled, but after a few moments, abandoned it and sat down, “I am bothered by it,” she told them and reached over to take Thierry’s blood.

“Please,” the French vampire quipped, “Help yourself. I’ll go get another out of this lovely stocked mini-fridge. I hope the charges for the room go to your personal account.”

“I am transferring them to the Pythoness,” Thalia grumbled.

“Well, in that case, I’ll help myself to two,” Thierry laughed, and offered another to Thomas who shook it off.

“There is less talk about the Fae than I anticipated,” Thomas remarked. For several weeks following the foiled takeover in Louisiana, social media had been burning up with speculation. There were few who bought the explanation that the glowing creatures seen fighting with vampires in the streets of New Orleans were part of a movie set, but, within a short period of time, the YouTube and other video evidence began to disappear. Posted pictures were discounted and there was even a short documentary demonstrating how the special effects had been made. All those efforts were for the benefit of humans. No supernatural was fooled. They all knew what they’d seen and how it changed things.

“The more time passes with no statement, the sooner it will be forgotten,” Thierry shrugged.

“No one will forget that!” Thomas scolded his friend. “What they will remember is that our King commands the loyalty of the Fae. When he calls, they come to his aid.”

“That is the message,” Thalia nodded. “It should not be a secret to any. It was a condition written in
the contract between them when the Viking pledged to the Queen. I am assured the contract is available online for any fool to read.”

“Those who are interested are not so foolish that they won’t make the connection between the Queen’s condition and the terms,” Thomas frowned. “It is risky.”

“As you said,” Thalia smiled, “Who will speak of it? Only the foolish, because it is clear that there are now forces that stand between the Viking and danger that only a fool would ignore, so it is good that talk of the Fae has lessened.”

“They are all too busy complaining about the police,” Thierry smirked. “I’m assuming that’s why you are here.”

Thalia nodded, “The Kings sent me. I thought to speak privately with the Pythoness earlier, but she had another use for me.” Thalia didn’t tell the two vampires about what she had heard in the Ancient One’s room. “Instead I will go to the meeting tonight and officially hand over the force to her. It will be public and when she accepts, that should end any more carping about it. Who would argue with a force governed by the Pythoness?”

“No one,” Thierry said, “Not even you!”

Thalia growled before saying, “I’ll be glad to have this errand completed. One more task in a long line of tasks, and not one step closer to uncovering the infection that threatens us all.”

“You still think it’s New York?” Thierry asked, more for Thomas’ benefit as to actually verify that nothing had changed.

“So do you,” Thalia sniffed. She glanced at Thomas and Thierry could see she’d read his true intent. “You don’t need to lead me by the nose to reveal what you wish your friend to know,” and turning more fully toward Thomas, she said, “I believe Misha is behind a series of plots and plans aimed at throwing many of the monarchs into difficulties. I believe he is a plotter who plants schemes and harvests the ones that bear fruit when he can gain the most advantage.”

“It’s a cynical view of a Clan Chief,” Thomas said mildly.

“It’s a realistic view of a master manipulator,” Thalia replied.

“Then you will be happy to hear that Felipe de Castro approached us last night. He wants us to broker a meeting with you to talk about joining forces against Misha,” Thomas told her.

Thalia turned to Thierry, “This is true?” When the French Sheriff nodded, Thalia bared her fangs and hissed. After a long moment, she took another sip of blood and settled back in a chair, “Why should we work with him?” she groused. “I’m sure he had his hand in the attack against the North Man and his mate. No one believes Angie would have moved forward without her Maker’s blessing.”

“De Castro argues Angie was jealous and anxious to prove herself. He says Misha used his time with her to give her dangerous ideas.” Thierry picked at the label of his bottle, “And he tells me he has access to some real talent in computers and would be willing to lend them to help.”

“Of course he’s being helpful!” Thalia snarled, “He’s been caught out. He would convince us we have a common cause and eliminate a rival in the process.”

“But what about Misha?” Thierry asked, “Who is the biggest threat? Felipe will have to lie low now. He has the lawsuit looming and he must appear innocent. He won’t risk another move for many years, but Misha? We know he had a hand in the bombing. We know he was behind the rogues. I
know what he did to my Maker, and De Castro had papers that linked him to Nabila’s fall. As you said, he is a fisherman, throwing his bait on the water to cause chaos and he then reaps the rewards. Who is the bigger threat?”

“Stop pushing,” Thalia sniffed, “You’ve made your point.”

“What about Pam?” Thomas asked. “If we go against Misha, she could find herself in the crossfire. She brought me to Arkansas and promoted me. I have no desire to see her harmed.”

Thalia nodded, “I will travel to New Orleans once my work here is finished. Pam is supposed to travel there as well. I will speak with her. If what Thierry tells me is true, Misha may seek to use her to stop us. It would be better if Pam finished her dalliance and moved on to greener pastures.”

“You think Pamela will be so quick to throw him aside?” Thomas asked. “Karin spoke with her after the takeover attempt. Pam was packed and ready to come to us but there was nothing she could have done. It was finished. Karin told me Pam seems happy in her choice of home. She spoke of the King with affection. Even if she was convinced to step outside his reach, there is more than one way to injure a vampire.”

Thalia laughed, “You think Pamela is like your Karin? Your bonded may bristle and bark but she is a little girl, looking for her father. You have stepped into that role. You press her and force her to behave and she loves you for it. Pam? Pam is too changeable, too fickle for that kind of love. She has been with the King how long? Months? Soon her mood will change and she will be looking for her next lover, her next adventure. It will take more than a King to win her. In truth, I don’t believe she will ever allow anyone to truly touch that part of her.”

“That seems a sad fate for our Pamela,” Thomas replied.

“Perhaps you think my fate is sad as well,” Thalia told him. “Not all creatures are meant for common lives.”

“Well, no one would accuse you of being common,” Thierry poked. “In fact, some might say you could use a little more common!”

“Some could say that you would do well to shut your mouth, but that’s not likely to happen either,” Thalia hissed, but no one really thought she was angry.

“So, do we accept De Castro’s offer?” Thomas asked.

“Of course,” Thalia sighed.

“But we will need to devise the right plan,” Thierry leaned forward. “It must be swift and unexpected. If Misha suspects, he will reach out to harm all we hold dear. I have seen his vengeance and it is cruel and complete.”

“He will know the Viking’s place in your affections, Thalia,” Thomas nodded, “and he will strike there. He may think that our King is behind this.”

“Then we must plan well,” Thalia agreed. She glanced at her watch, “Now come. It’s time for me to hand over our new army to the Pythoness.” Together they rose and headed to the ballroom downstairs.

XXXxxx

The ballroom was set up much as it had been last night. There were rows of chairs facing a raised
dais, only now, instead of the podium, there was the Pythoness’ great, straight-backed chair. Thalia and Thomas headed for the first row on the right. It would place Thalia near the stairs. When her signal came, Thalia would walk over, fall to her knee, and make the small speech she’d rehearsed. It was annoying that the Pythoness had put off any discussion earlier this evening, but in view of what she’d overheard, Thalia wasn’t surprised.

It was a lot to consider. While Niall’s intentions didn’t sound dangerous, it still set Thalia’s teeth on edge. The Prince had used her to get his way and he intended to use the North Man and his mate as well. Thalia understood making sacrifices for the greater good just as well if not better than most, but what she heard sounded too much as if the greater good was to Niall’s benefit alone. Thalia made her promise to the Pythoness, but even had the Ancient One not asked it of her, Thalia’s decision to act against Niall would have been the same.

The room was almost full. There was a great deal of conversation, the sound around them like one continuous hiss. “They are angry,” Thierry joined them. “They have heard the Pythoness will make a decision about your police without hearing their concerns.” There were two vampires standing awkwardly on the other side of the stage. “Those are the spokespeople chosen,” Thierry pointed out. “They were here until close to dawn and they will urge the Pythoness to delay building the force any further. They feel the matter requires more study.”

“They can flap their gums all they wish,” Thalia glanced at the two who were looking nervously toward the stage. “There are times I think nothing more will surprise me, and then something like this happens. After all these years, how can they think she will truly listen to them? The Pythoness doesn’t love us; she loves her vision for us. If she feels having a standing army masquerading as a police force is best, she will keep it.”

“Then you don’t think she will listen to them?” Thomas asked.

Thalia shrugged, tired of the drama that surrounded her, “It will be to the Lady to decide.”

There was a quick rap of a staff and all rose as the Pythoness walked from a place behind the stage. Usually she had handmaidens on both sides, holding her arms and guiding her to her chair, but tonight she walked unaided. A single handmaiden was behind her and she positioned herself slightly behind the Lady’s chair.

Stan Davis walked onto the stage from the same general direction and when he reached a place before her, the Pythoness said, “King Davis, I understand there is a matter that is causing great concern in Zeus Clan.”

“It is a matter that is causing concern across all Clans, Lady,” Stan bowed. “I have two vampires who would speak for all here to explain their concerns.”

The Pythoness raised her hand in assent and Thierry leaned toward Thalia, “Seems you’re not always right!” he hissed triumphantly.

Thalia flicked her eyes at him, but then settled back to see what the Pythoness intended. King Davis motioned to the two spokespeople who walked onto the stage and bowed. “Speak!” the Pythoness ordered, her voice surprisingly strong.

Thalia found she respected the vampires. They didn’t quail; instead they stood proud. “We are concerned about the formation of this army,” the one said. “We have kingdoms and Sheriffs, borders and Clans. We have followed the guidelines you yourself set down for us. Now two Kings from another Clan form an army that they claim is above our kings. They place their own people in our borders and arrest those meant to enforce the wills of our monarchs. They would place themselves in
“Is this the opinion of your Clan?” the Pythoness asked Stan.

“It is, My Lady,” he bowed. “While many, including myself, feel there are benefits to be gained, the idea of a group of enforcers who owe their allegiance to foreign Kings, however well meaning, is troubling.”

“Leave it to Stan,” Thierry hissed into Thalia’s ear. “He could make a cactus look cuddly!”

“I thank you for telling me of your worries,” the Pythoness addressed the two vampires, dismissing them with a motion of her hand. “While my sight requires that I see all things, it does not allow me to hear the loyalty that lives in the voices and hearts of my people.” Thalia found herself sitting forward, drawn to the magic that was the Ancient Pythoness. She knew if she glanced around she would see that all the vampires were leaning forward to catch the crone’s next words.

“When we first came to this place there was no order,” the Pythoness started. “The land stretched before us, inhabited by the First Ones. There was magic here, but of a different kind and we soon moved across the land. In those days, our numbers were few and it was no sure thing to think we would take root here, but we did. Then the work of humans from across the water made our coming here easier. We were able to travel in great ships and blend into cities where food was everywhere and hiding was easy. We multiplied quickly, but without structure, we fought with each other, exposing ourselves to the fears and anger of humans. We became the stuff of their stories again, and those who were cruel, the zealots and the angry, they hunted us and killed us in great numbers.”

There was a sigh from those around them. Most here were younger than the days the Pythoness described. Thalia remembered. She had come to this land to escape the humans armed with stakes and crosses, only to find more of the same on this side of the water, leading her to flee the cities. “It was then I realized that in order for us to survive, we needed to organize ourselves. I created the territories and the kingdoms. I selected from among the best of us to lead and I had each of our rulers create enforcers, Sheriffs who would make sure that we did not expose ourselves to humans foolishly. Many of our laws are from that time, and for over two hundred years, it has been a system that worked.”

“Now it comes,” Thierry hissed beside her.

“Many kingdoms, each with their own armies, made sense when passing information took hours or even days to accomplish. Territories needed to be small or rule would be impossible. Now, humans have changed the rules. We no longer need to travel on foot or on horseback to share news. We tweet it internationally with the tap of a button. Our computers allow us to meet across great distances, coordinating our efforts, and allowing us to band together in times of need.” The Pythoness paused, and then looked toward Stan Davis. “There are some Clans that have maintained their kingdoms, holding to the small holdings and defined borders,” and then her face turned until she was staring at Felipe de Castro who was seated in the front row, “And there are other Clans that are now a name only.” Felipe shifted, causing Thalia’s lip to lift.

“I have watched as the pressures of mainstreaming have forced change upon us. Our numbers have grown again, but never as quickly as the prey that surrounds us. Mainstreaming has been yet another pressure that has made us question how we live and how we choose to govern ourselves and what I have seen is that given the opportunity, we choose not to fight the danger that surrounds us, but our own kind.” The last words were said in a hiss and the crone’s lip lifted. “Who was our enemy in Rhodes this time? Who created an excuse for the humans to fear us and to wish us finally dead? Who
killed those vampires, taking King and vassal alike? It was our own kind! Vampire against vampire! Not even enemies, but killing for some political purpose!” The Pythoness hissed again. “And in the days that have followed, what do we see? Do we see a return to leadership among the monarchs? Do we see a coming together of our race? No! We see the rise of many among us who would place us at war with humans, ruling humans. Have we learned nothing from our long existence! We are not farmers or shepherds to lead humans! They are herd animals and we are hunters! We succeed when we influence them to act as we wish. We win what we need when they are drawn to us!”

“And what of our blood, our sacred blood? There are those among us who have allowed it to be diluted.” The Pythoness shook her head. Thalia looked up with a start. For some reason, she thought of the Viking and Sookie. There were many vampires who still complained of their bonding. Those vampires felt that by mating and bonding with his Fae Queen, the North Man had ‘diluted’ vampire blood, but the Pythoness headed in another direction.

“For many of you there were strangers who invaded your lands creating more of our kind and leaving them behind. These new vampires struggle to become part of our people and they make more of us through their ignorance. Our numbers, though small, have increased beyond my imaginings, but not in the way I would have wished for us.” The Pythoness looked across the audience, “Educating these vampires and making them understand how to live as hunters, preying on humans but not turning them against us is all consuming. It requires all the time and strength of our kingdoms and our Sheriffs. In this new world that we have created for ourselves, finding ways to interact with humans without triggering their jealousy or fear requires both guile and intelligence from our monarchs, but are they all ready to face that challenge?” and the Pythoness glanced at the rows of Zeus Kings and Queens. “Things have changed, and I worry that our kind may not survive.”

“It is the petty goals of some which have led to many of our troubles. Small rivalries now become larger. We can fly from one end of the country to another to exact vengeance. Internet and computers allow ambition to rule us, taking kingdoms that we can rule from very far away. Because we ignore the basic truth of who we are and who our enemy is, we have dealt death among our own in a public, extravagant way. Our foolishness has exposed our positions to humans and reawakened the interest of old enemies.” There was a hiss. Everyone knew the Pythoness was referring to the Fae.

“These events have troubled me,” the Pythoness settled back in her chair. “I have thought for many years about what should be done to save my race from the growing threat of humans and from the growing threat we pose to ourselves. And now, the answer has been presented to me,” and the Pythoness looked toward Thalia. “What better way than to have those among us who are not blinded by ambition and the concerns of one kingdom? What better than to have a group trained in the rules and laws of our people who can see with clear eyes? These ‘police’ you fear will be my eyes and ears in the kingdoms. Their job will be to police the grey areas that are our interactions with humans. When it is the dispensing of justice and the work of the Assizes, they will have no place. But they will also keep me informed of your actions. They will allow me, through my agent, to judge whether you work in the best interests of our people or whether your actions will endanger us.”

There was a hiss, a loud one, but the Pythoness stunned them all when she said in an unexpectedly loud voice, “Silence!”

The handmaiden stepped forward and gestured to Thalia. When the small vampire stood before the crone, the Pythoness commanded, “Kneel before me!”

Thalia watched the Pythoness, but the Oracle looked over her head to aim her words toward those who were assembled, “You all know this vampire. You fear her with good reason. She is a warrior like no other. She is not pledged to any kingdom; she travels freely among all. Long has her path been her own and she lives the code of vampire. Many times has she proven she does not work for
her own ambition, nor for money. She has no wish for territory or to possess.” The Pythoness turned her milky eyes to Thalia, “Thalia, I name you the head of my army, for army they are. I charge you with recruiting them, but take care that you keep their numbers small. You will see to their training, for who else would be best to teach what it means to be a vampire? You will be their Chief and it will be your role to work with the monarchs, but from this day forward, Thalia, you answer only to me!” The Pythoness leaned forward, “Do you accept?”

Thalia’s eyes narrowed. Before she could stop herself, she growled, but instead of being insulted or angry, the Pythoness chuckled. “You have me,” the small vampire mumbled, bowing her head to the inevitable.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” the Pythoness’ lips curled upward. “Rise and stand before me,” and the crone gestured to a place in front and to the side of her throne. Raising her voice, the Ancient One addressed the crowd, “When you see this vampire, know it is my right hand you see. Welcome her agents as you would welcome me. Know that what I do now I do for all of us. Ours is a proud heritage, a history of blood and pride, but there are things that are coming which will challenge us.”

“Our world is changing, my children. We must change with it if we are to remain in this world and not become as some others of our kin, nothing more than legends and stories told to children.”

The Pythoness stood and all those in the audience stood, too. “Bring De Castro tonight. We have more work to do,” she said to Stan Davis, then turning to Thalia, said, “And you will come with me now.”

Thalia followed the ancient who was now her boss toward the back of the stage. For some reason all she could think about was Thierry laughing.
Chapter 33 - The Deep Blue

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: I apologize for not replying to your comments and reviews yet. I will over the next couple days. I have been writing to stay on schedule, and with the plot twists and turns it has taken a bit to keep my few brain cells on point. Thank you!

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Denver

Thalia waited until they were in the smaller room to start to say something, but the Pythoness stopped her with a single, raised hand. Where outside in the auditorium the old vampire had walked straight and tall, once the door shut behind her, she changed. Before Thalia’s eyes, the Ancient Pythoness became smaller and more stooped. A handmaiden Thalia recognized as Diantha, Mr. Cataliades’ niece, rushed forward and took the crone’s hand, slowly and carefully leading her to a soft armchair. “Blood,” the old one croaked.

Diantha flashed Thalia a warning look, but Thalia couldn’t tell what the young demon was trying to convey. The second handmaiden hustled forward to hand the Pythoness warmed blood in a tall glass with a straw. The impossibility of the situation struck Thalia and she almost laughed. She was now at the head of an army, working for a walking mummy who drank blood through a sippy straw. “My Lady…” Thalia said.

“You will have to wait for your questions,” the Pythoness shushed, “The Clan Chiefs are just outside the door and there is still business to be done tonight.” Turning to where the handmaidens were hovering, the old one asked, “Is all ready?”

“New York will be on the conference,” Diantha said in her breathless way. The demon glanced at her watch and then opened the drapes that covered a wall, revealing a large television monitor. Thalia realized she was looking at a conferencing center. The Pythoness gestured with her hand again and the other handmaiden opened a door, admitting Stan Davis and Felipe de Castro.

“You will have to wait for your questions,” the Pythoness purred, “Isn’t that your coin in trade, Stan? You deceive with your appearance and lure with your compliments? You are the master of the deal, always looking for the angle to exploit, but you are the least offensive. At least your faults do not seek to harm others.” Stan rose slowly, his eyes wide and his mouth slightly ajar.
“And you,” the Pythoness turned her beady stare through eyes clouded, but no less sharp, to Felipe de Castro. “Do you even remember your progeny’s name? What unnatural Maker allows his only child to fall?”

Felipe’s eyes darted nervously toward Thalia and the small vampire saw it, but De Castro’s answer was aimed at the Pythoness, “I miss my child,” he protested. “I did not tell her to do what she did. She took that step on her own. I wish now I had counseled her to take another path.”

“That, at least, is truth,” the Pythoness smiled her mirthless smile. “It must feel strange in your mouth, Felipe. How does it taste?”

“My Lady?” Felipe looked confused.

“The truth, Felipe,” the Pythoness sniffed. “It is a novel thing coming from you. Surely it tastes different than the other words you use.” Turning toward Diantha, she said, “It is time!”

The monitor glowed softly and then came into focus, showing a dark office space. Misha, the King of New York, walked into view and sat down, his broad face filling the screen.

“Aaah!” the Pythoness said in a long exhale that sounded like air escaping a balloon, “And here is the last of you. Misha, Prince of all you survey! At your age I would have expected more wisdom.”

Misha was looking left and right, apparently seeing each of them. Thalia found herself scanning the room she was in until she spotted the discrete camera perched near the ceiling of the room. “I see you have assembled an interesting group,” Misha replied. “All that’s missing is the North Man, but perhaps Thalia has finally tired of being under his heel and has ended him.”

Thalia hissed, but the Pythoness laughed, “Your view of your world is an interesting one, Misha. Always a plot or a stake waiting in the dark.”

“That is not my only view,” New York said, his tone mild. Thalia noticed his eyes traveling to a single, yellow rose that sat on his desk. “Greetings, my fellow Chiefs,” he added and smiled, showing teeth.

As Stan and Felipe nodded, the Pythoness signaled Thalia to take a place standing beside her. “You will not have heard that I have appointed Thalia the head of my army,” the Pythoness said to the screen.

“It is well that you finally call things by their rightful name,” Misha was still smiling but he didn’t look pleased. “I am assuming this means we are required to welcome these ‘representatives’ within our borders?”

“I expect you to invite them in,” the Pythoness smiled back, “Enthusiastically. Thalia will wield them as she sees fit, and if she chooses to insert them into an investigation,” and she stared at Misha, “or open an investigation,” and she swung her eyes toward Felipe, “then she is acting within her authority.”

“There may be many among our people who will object,” Stan said the words they were all thinking.

“You have allowed the discipline in your kingdoms to grow lax if that is the case,” the Pythoness hissed.

“We have allowed our Kings and Queens to rule!” Stan protested. “These are not the old days. We are more than a handful in numbers now, and we no longer require absolute obedience from our vassals.”
“Then you will have farther to go in convincing your people,” the Pythoness shrugged, but turning to Stan, she continued, “But you, Stan Davis, will be the better for it. You already believe in what is coming. You see the possibilities along with the constraints.”

“It’s better for business if we aren’t killing each other…or humans,” the Texas King glanced at his peers.

“Spoken like a true businessman,” the Pythoness nodded. “Felipe, you and Misha could learn something from your fellow Clan Chief. He has the largest of the territories. He has more Kings and Queens, each with their own concerns and problems, and yet, Zeus Clan proves itself the best running and most profitable of all our territories.”

“Narayana is doing well!” Felipe protested. “Our profits increase and we can’t keep up with the opportunities available…”

“You would be stronger still if you had Kings and Queens to share the work,” the Pythoness hissed. “Instead you try to hold all things in your hand, but the harder you hold, the more things slip from your grasp.” The old one sat back, “Consider my words, De Castro. It is not up to me to change your fate.”

The words hung in the air and Thalia was sure that if he could have, the Nevada King would have paled. Turning her head back toward the screen, the Pythoness continued, “And you, Misha, who think so well of yourself. Wrapping yourself in beautiful things does not truly hide a rotting core.”

“What are you saying?” Misha hissed, “Are you threatening me?”

“No,” the Pythoness smiled thinly, “Why? Do you think I should?” The King’s eyes were blazing and he was no longer smiling.

“What is it you wish to tell us?” Stan asked. “You would not have called us together if you did not have a purpose, Lady.”

The Pythoness nodded, “I have decided that there will be one who sits in my place. I will be his counselor, but it is to him you will take your petty arguments and territory disputes. He will sit as judge in my place.”

“Northman!” Misha hissed from the monitor.

“What him?” Felipe asked.

“Who else could I choose?” the Pythoness settled back. “Thalia respects him, so she will trust him to arbitrate disputes in the matter of the army. He has history with each of you, but no particular reason to treat any one of you worse than the other,” but she looked sharply at Felipe de Castro again. “And what is more, he has the kind of protection that will make it impossible for any one of you to successfully challenge him. I wish peace and order in my kingdom and the Viking is the only one with the wisdom and the strength to do it.”

“I will not submit to him!” Misha roared.

“Then your final death will come swiftly,” the Pythoness was no longer smiling. Her fangs dropped and her hands gripped the arms of her chair. “You defy me?” and flecks of spit flew from her lips.

Thalia and the others in the room watched with interest as the New York King visibly struggled to regain his composure. Thalia saw in that moment what Thierry had been telling her. Although he might manage to keep it leashed, under the surface, Misha had a rage that drove him. It was a
dangerous thing and she could see from Stan’s face that the Zeus Clan Chief was taken by surprise. Felipe did not seem so surprised, and Thalia found she liked the Nevada monarch better for it.

“Will you submit?” the Pythoness stood up, her voice ringing like steel.

Misha’s jaw was working, his hands clenched as he gritted out, “I will, Lady. I will accept this.”

“Then you will live another night,” the Lady snarled and sat back down. Thalia found her eyes flicking to the seemingly frail woman. Did that mean the Pythoness maintained her own network of spies and agents in each of the kingdoms? Surely she wouldn’t make such a threat if she had no way of carrying it out, and then Thalia wondered about the conversation she had overheard with Niall. Thalia knew what Niall wanted, and the Pythoness was maneuvering to give it to him. Was the use of Fae as assassins what the Oracle had received in return? As if she knew what Thalia was thinking, the Pythoness turned toward her and nodded.

“Thalia, I will expect you to contact each of our Clan Chiefs, and the new Clan Chief that will be appointed for Amun Clan. You will let them know your plans,” and the Pythoness looked around her, “and you, my Chiefs, you will stand as surety that your people will agree and support my new commander.”

“How long do we have to prepare our people for these changes?” Stan asked.

“I will tell North Man of his good luck tonight,” the Pythoness purred. “And then I will make the official announcement tomorrow night at the ball. Within two nights time all the paperwork will be filed and posted,” and she smirked at Thalia, “Perhaps another ceremony can be arranged.” Turning toward the video feed of Misha, she said, “Once that happens I expect things to move swiftly.”

“So, the Viking doesn’t know?” Felipe couldn’t help but chuckle. “He was a most reluctant King.”

“And he will be an even more reluctant High King,” the Ancient Pythoness sat back. “It is what qualifies him. Of all my Clan Chiefs, he is the only one who doesn’t want it.”

“What if he turns it down?” Stan asked.

The Pythoness didn’t answer, instead she stared, and after a moment, Stan, and then Felipe bowed. At a nod, the monitor went black and the Chiefs understood they were dismissed. Thalia turned to follow them, but before she left, she said, “The Viking may say no to this. He has many worries. To do this now is not doing him any favor.”

“What makes you think I like him any better than the rest?” the Pythoness hissed. “Why should I treat him differently?”

Thalia was surprised at the venom in the Old One’s words, so she bowed and retreated, but as she did she wondered again at what hold the Fae Prince had over the Pythoness, and what hold she had on him.

New York

“Get the car!” Misha hissed. His fangs were extended and he was so angry his hair bristled on his head.

“Master!” Andrew said in alarm, and he glanced at the stairwell that led to the bedchamber Misha shared with Pamela Ravenscroft. Pam had returned from Minnesota earlier this evening and even now she was upstairs, presumably reading in their bed where he had left her.
“Then get me out of here!” Misha hissed again. “You know what I need!”

Andrew nodded, “Of course, Misha! Come!” and he moved swiftly down the stairs, pulling the King’s overcoat from the closet, and then racing down more stairs so he could go to the garage that sat on the back of the property. It was a luxury, having a vehicle on premises, but it had proved to be more than a convenience. Tonight was proof of that once again.

Misha was standing on the front porch, practically vibrating with suppressed rage when Andrew pulled the car around. Before the houseman had time to get out and open the door, the King was in the back seat and they were moving at high speed, away from the brownstone toward a certain brothel they knew that catered to a particular clientele.

From the light tight window, Pam watched the car pull away. She hadn’t heard much of what was being said downstairs but after the first shock of rage, the feelings she experienced through the blood tie muted to whispers but it was still enough to let Pam know something was wrong.

The tie that existed between them was thin at the moment. Pam initially planned on going along with Misha’s insistence that she take more of his blood. It had been some time since she had partaken, mostly because she felt awkward about it. It wasn’t that Pam felt any particular objection in feeding from the King. The experience was enjoyable for both of them and inspired their play. The thing that made it awkward was that Pam had no desire to reciprocate.

Pam knew Misha intended tonight to be a private evening between them. They hadn’t repeated their more intimate joining since that night long ago and Pam had seen no evidence of any playmate. Before Andrew knocked on the door, Misha had spent some time seducing her, and Pam was pretty sure that he was hoping she would share her blood this time, and perhaps more.

While she knew that this affair was winding down to its conclusion, Pam might have considered allowing it. In some ways, giving him her blood would make what was coming easier for both of them. Once Misha fed from her, he would know that the most she felt for him was affection. Pam had made up her mind. When she returned from this next trip to New Orleans, she would tell Misha she was breaking off their arrangement.

It wasn’t the first time Pam had delivered this kind of news although it had been some time since she had broken off a complicated relationship with a vampire of standing. As she sat on the plane earlier that evening watching the darkness dotted with small lights pass below her, she was almost resolved to do it immediately on her return. She’d tell him, turn around, and hail a cab. There were vampire-safe hotels in town and she’d manage. But then she’d arrived. Andrew was waiting for her in the terminal. They pulled up to the brownstone to see Misha standing on the front steps of the brownstone, flowers in his hand, and his eyes, so hopeful. Her favorite Chopin interlude was playing softly as they came through the door, and Misha couldn’t stop from bouncing from the room to return with a first edition Tom Jones he found for her. As he proudly handed it to her, Pam felt her heart melt a little toward him, but not in the way a woman should love her mate. It was more like the affection a mistress might feel for a pet and Pam knew her heart had truly turned.

As they walked upstairs, Misha complained that she only just arrived home and would be leaving right away for New Orleans. Pam could see and feel the King’s disappointment. He was so genuinely happy to see her and she just couldn’t bring herself to hurt him right away. As he chatted about mutual acquaintances, and asked about her trip and those she’d seen, Pam decided that breaking Misha’s heart was something that could wait until her return from her visit with Eric and Sookie.

Misha had just been slipping the straps of her negligee from her shoulders when Andrew knocked on their door. Misha hissed, ordering him away, but Andrew persisted, apologizing, and whispering that
the King’s presence was being required for a conference with the Ancient Pythoness. “No one turns
down the old girl,” Pam had kissed Misha’s cheek. “Go on. I’ll be here when you’re done.” He
kissed her hand and then stroked her sex, his eyes burning before he walked away. Pam felt a pull
toward him that was maybe more, and she found herself doubting her decision. She looked around
their beautiful room with all its perfect things. ‘What would be so wrong in choosing to live like
this?’ she asked herself.

But now, standing at the window and watching Misha’s hunched figure scuttling into the backseat of
his limo, feeling the brush of his fiery anger, and something else, Pam wondered whether a fast exit
would be the better choice. Clearly something had happened, something that drove all thought of her
from the King’s mind and Pam knew she had to find out what it was.

Pulling her bathrobe over her negligee, Pam padded down the stairs. She walked straight through the
living room and into the elegant office. The office chair still sat in front of the monitor. Misha must
have been teleconferencing.

Pam mentally walked through the sequence of experiences she felt, waiting for the King upstairs.
There was his annoyance, but within a short period of time, that escalated into sullen anger, and then
that turned into a sharp blossom of rage. It was enough that Pam had risen from the bed, determined
to investigate when the emotions broadcasting through their tie stopped. Pam was sure Misha
clamped down on his end and shrugging, she’d settled back on the bed again.

Temper and vampires tended to go together. If Misha was in enough control to remember their tie, all
was probably well. But then, without any explanation, Misha left the brownstone without even a
word to her. It was so out of character that Pam knew she had to take a look to see if she could figure
out what happened.

The laptop screensaver bounced from corner to corner, the password sign-in floating more slowly.
Pam didn’t have Misha’s password. She saw no reason to violate his trust that way, but she felt no
qualms about accessing what information was available through unsecured means.

Pam walked over to where the larger monitor was mounted on the wall. Over her many years, Pam
had overseen the installation of many a security system and she recognized the box on the back of
this one. Like many teleconferencing systems, this one had its own on-board microprocessor that
allowed the user to show video streaming with a slight delay. This meant the microprocessor
recorded what streamed through it and saved up to fifteen minutes or so in a temporary file. Picking
up a pencil from the desk, Pam turned on the monitor, the on-board speakers, and then the buttons on
the black box that would play back whatever images were stored on the small drive.

Pam stood back as the video began to play. She saw the Pythoness and Thalia. The Pythoness spoke,
accusing Misha of being rotten to the core. The recording did not play back Misha’s response, but it
wasn’t hard to put together the pieces. Pam listened to the Pythoness telling the Clan Chiefs that she
intended to declare Eric Northman as High King over all the Clans.

Pam found her eyes drawn to Thalia. She wished she had been in that room to share the moment
with her small, fierce friend, and then the Pythoness was looking straight at the camera, ordering
Misha to submit.

Pam found that everything within her became calm. She didn’t need to hear Misha’s words. It was
obvious that the thought of her Maker being given dominion was why she felt the rage coming from
him. Others tried to tell her that New York was dangerous, but Pam had decided to ignore them. The
playback of the Pythoness was now telling Misha that he would live another night. Pam knew that it
was Misha’s fury that caused him to drive away from his own home and his anger at her Maker that
caused him to leave without saying one word to her.
A growl crept from Pam’s throat as she stalked over to the small box mounted on the back of the monitor and pushed the small button that would refresh the temporary drive, erasing the recording.

Walking deliberately upstairs, Pam took her robe off and climbed back into bed, picked up her book and settled back. Misha would return before dawn and he would either confess and apologize, or he would lie about what happened. If he lied, Pam would know that some part, maybe the most part of what others tried to tell her about the New York King was true. What she didn’t doubt was Misha’s affection for her. She felt it through their tie and that could not be manipulated, but Pam was also experienced enough to know that sometimes what masqueraded as love was something else. A person who loved her would understand the place her Maker held in her heart. A person who loved her would welcome a strong alliance with Eric Northman, not rage against it. Something was amiss, and Pam had no intention of tipping her hand until she understood what that something was.

New Orleans

Eric opened his eyes to the sound of Sookie’s tone deaf crooning. His mate was lying propped up against the headboard and she was stroking her rounded stomach. Their eyes met and as she watched, he rolled over so he could kiss first her hand, and then her stomach. “Is he restless tonight?” he asked her.

“Been kicking all day,” Sookie rolled her eyes. “He’s quieter now. I can’t tell if he actually likes my singing, or if I’m so bad it just stuns him into staying still.” Eric grinned and then placed his hand under hers, holding it still against her. Almost immediately, Eric felt a small, but distinct, kick. “See?” Sookie told him, and pushing his hand a little, resumed her rubbing and humming.

He didn’t have much occasion to use it, but Eric had a fine, deep voice. Moving up on his knees, he took over massaging his wife’s belly, rubbing in firm, circular motions and he started singing his own song, a bawdy drinking song he learned in his years of traveling through Europe about a barmaid and an innocent lad. Eric could almost sense the child settling. Making sure he continued to rub her belly, he leaned forward so he could kiss Sookie between the chorus and the verse. When she grinned at a particularly obscene turn of phrase, Eric used his free hand to push up her nightgown and added massaging between her legs to his actions.

“Oh,” Sookie said, arching just a little as he found that particular place that always pulled a reaction from her. “I guess this is a ‘do as I do’ song?” Sookie said a little breathlessly.

“Think of it as theater,” Eric smirked, positioning himself so that he could draw her legs over his hips, “Where the people act and then sing for no reason.”

“You telling me this is my very own musical?” she laughed and then gasped again as he rocked forward, the tip of his cock sinking into her and then pulling back out again.

“It seems to be something you enjoy,” he teased, and then careful not to place too much weight on her, he rocked forward, deliberately moving back and forth in time to the song he sang. When he reached the end of the next verse, making the words about the young lad being seduced little more than a growl, Eric pushed his hips forward, burying himself fully. Sookie hissed, and then catching her breath, rocked against him, trying to bring him further within her. “Time for you to sing, Lover,” Eric whispered in her ear.

Whether it could be called singing or not was a matter of interpretation, but Sookie did make a great deal of noise before they were done. When she was a panting mess, her walls gripping him in time to her gasps, Eric rolled them over and then pulling from her, tucked Sookie into his side. Reaching under her thigh, he pulled her leg up so it lay over him. He knew this position took some of the pressure off her back, and rubbing her head, he purred, “I believe our son likes you singing that song...”
as much as I do.”

“He isn’t kicking the crap out of me, if that’s what you mean,” Sookie laughed. Eric bit his wrist and held it out to her, and while she drank, Eric rubbed his hardening erection against her leg. It was a perfect moment, the way she felt, so warm, her stomach slightly warmer than the rest of her. His cock stiffened further and Sookie moaned, her enjoyment of his blood almost a sensual act between them.

“Do you think you could play a little more?” Eric asked, anxious to drink from her and feel her, warm and wet around him again. Sookie answered by pushing herself up until she was straddling his hips. “Turn around,” Eric instructed her, and sitting up himself, pushed her forward so she was on her hands and knees. Rising behind her, he placed his head at her entrance and then gripping her hips, he entered her in one swift movement. “You are so warm, Lover,” he sighed. “I could get lost within you.” Rather than move right away, he leaned over her so that he could lick the back of her shoulder.

“Eric,” she sighed and she moved restlessly beneath him.

“I will have you, Sookie,” he growled, and slipped his fangs within her even as he pushed up into her sheath, rotating his hips to move even deeper. As he pulled his fangs from her, he reached around to play with her clit. He watched the small rivulets of blood run over her perfect back, slowly heading toward the side of her breast. The sight of the twin trails stimulated him further and Eric pressed into his wife again before leaning forward to heal the marks. Sookie was so sensitive that it didn’t take much effort on his part before she was moaning, then calling out his name. Rising up on his knees, Eric sucked his thumb and then breached her rosebud. Changing the angle of his cock, he timed his movements so that both cock and digit were penetrating her in tandem, and he purred as her cries transformed into screams. Her orgasm moved swiftly, her walls clamping down on him hard, her arms collapsing as he rocked more quickly. Three more strokes and he was shooting his essence within her, his teeth clenched, his head thrown back. She was in his head and he was in hers. The experience was intense and Eric felt his balls tighten again. “You will be my final death, my Lover!” he growled as he felt his cock jerk and his cum coat her walls again.

“Back at ya, Buster,” Sookie mumbled into the bedspread, her ass still high in the air. Eric collapsed onto his side. He threw his head back, breathing in their combined scents, and then sat up long enough to wrap his arm around Sookie, who was still panting into the bed. He pulled her onto her side and spooned up behind her, kissing her hair and wrapping her in his arms.

“And what about now?” he asked lazily. “Is my son still restless?”

“Oh, I think your boy is going to sleep for a long time,” Sookie said with a laugh.

“Are you sure?” he teased, his hand moving up so he could circle her erect nipple with his fingernail.

“What’s gotten into you?” Sookie laughed.

“I am in bed with my beautiful wife,” Eric smirked, “and I have been told that modern husbands help out with their children. I am helping.”

“Well, when folks say that, I think they mean changing diapers and night feedings,” Sookie laughed, “not fucking their mothers until they pass out.”

“Consider this practice,” and Eric raised himself on his elbow so he could turn Sookie onto her back. He licked her lower lip and Sookie was just opening her mouth to welcome him when a loud crash sounded above them. “Damn him!” Eric hissed and rolled away. With a single motion, he rose from
their bed and headed for the door. “I hope he has not blundered or broken something.”

“Can you put something on?” Sookie called, but she knew it was useless. Eric would head up the stairs, wearing the evidence of their love-making, and stake his claim...again.

Alcide Herveaux and his construction crew were upstairs as they were every night, working on a project to renovate the fourth floor of the New Orleans palace. When it was finished, the floor would no longer be a combination of royal chambers and guest suites. Instead, it would be a more contiguous family area incorporating bedrooms and gathering spaces. Sookie knew that part of what was irritating Eric was his own guilt over insisting that all the construction be done at night. Eric told her he wanted vampires available to keep an eye on things, but Sookie knew he really wanted to keep his own eye on Herveaux.

Something about the project had triggered a primal reaction in Eric. It went beyond his usual jealousy and unsettled nature when there were other males nearby. Sookie understood his possessiveness and she could manage it through their mental and blood bonds. This reaction was a little different and Sookie thought it might have to do with instincts that were not vampire at all.

Eric had definite proprietary feelings about this nest that would house this family, his family. Within hours of the start of the project, Eric went upstairs and started wandering through the fourth floor. For several nights on an almost hourly basis, he would excuse himself from what they were doing, walk up the stairs, and inspect every change. He would stop the crew, asking minute questions about what was done, and how it was accomplished. By the third day, Sookie received a call directly from Alcide Herveaux during daytime hours. She hadn’t changed her phone number, still, she was surprised to see the former Packmaster’s name come up on her caller ID. It was customary that any male calling her, even her own brother, would route through the Palace network.

“You have got to stop him,” the former Packmaster said without even pausing to say ‘Hello.’

“Well, nice to hear from you, too, Alcide,” Sookie sassed, and then asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Your husband. The King is driving my guys crazy. Maybe you should move out for a while, go back to Bon Temps until the work is done, or at least can get started?” When Sookie laughed, Alcide pressed on, “No, I mean it! If he doesn’t stop hounding them, they're all going to quit! Even if they don’t, I’m going to have to charge you more and your kid will be in high school before this job is finished.”

Sookie sighed. “Okay, I do know what you’re talking about. He is being a little over the top,” to which Alcide made a sound that let Sookie know the Were thought her husband was a lot more than that. “I'll talk with him tonight,” she assured Alcide. “Let’s see if we can keep the interference to a once a week meeting.”

That night Sookie confronted Eric about the impact his behavior was having on the project. Eric had to admit that the work would advance more quickly if he wasn’t continuously interrupting those doing it, but, for all of that, he found it difficult, if not impossible, not to show up on the floor at least once a night. It was better than it had been, but Sookie suspected it was why Alcide himself joined the work crew. When Eric’s head and shoulders would emerge from the stairwell, the Were would head him off and give him a quick, guided tour, detouring him around the crew, and allowing his people to keep working.

Eric knew Sookie found his compulsion amusing and she told him more than once that he was being ridiculous. For her part, Sookie stuck to the plan to only inspect the construction site once a week, and she refused to allow Eric to tell her anything about it at any other time.
It was proving challenging, the logistics of the floor plan. The building was essentially a large doughnut with all the rooms arranged around an airshaft that allowed light to travel to the garden space on the first floor. When Tara and Sookie started talking about how to arrange the nursery, Tara had suggested they just convert the space across the sitting room in the royal chambers, the space Eric and Sookie used as their private sanctuary. The room had originally been a second bedroom designed to house a royal pet, but now it was furnished with books and keepsakes, and it was the place that allowed Sookie & Eric to escape the pressures of their world and just be themselves. Eric had not expected Sookie to be so quick to turn down the suggestion, but he was pleased and delighted that she did.

Instead the decision was made to renovate the entire floor. They would break through into the bedroom suite that shared the back wall with their own bedchamber and closet. Their current bedchamber would be reconfigured and their closet and bathroom would be moved into what had been the next room. A small hallway passed through into another smaller bedroom that would function as a nursery, and later could become an office. This new bedroom was equipped with light tight windows, both above and in the wall with shutters that could be closed. A new kitchenette complete with a sink large enough to bathe an infant was added, and soundproofing blown into all the walls. In addition, the other bedrooms on the floor were being transformed. Some were eliminated in favor of open gathering spots and a larger ‘family’ room would be added, complete with a television, bookshelves, and plenty of room for sofas and a table. There would still be a suite set aside for a guard on the floor, but now there were bedrooms that were created ‘in anticipation.’ Sookie had blushed when Eric started talking about how many bedrooms should be added.

“We don’t know if this will happen again,” Sookie told him, her hand resting below the swell of her stomach.

“We know we don’t have to count on it,’ Eric shrugged. For the first time in a while, Sookie remembered the embryos that were stored at the reproduction clinic in Shreveport and knew that was what Eric meant. “Surely you would wish our child to have siblings?” Eric told her and when she didn’t answer right away, Sookie could feel his growing uneasiness. The possibility of a child had seemed such a long shot that they’d never really discussed how many children they might wish.

“Yes,” she assured him, ”I would want more than one if we could.” She felt his confidence return and she was glad they were on the same page about this.

Eric turned back to the design, “I think three bedrooms,” he said, and Sookie realized the conversation was not over.

“Well,’ she said, biting her lip a little, “I kind of think round numbers are better,” and she glanced up. “See, if there’s an odd number, one of them always gets left out…”

Eric had grinned at her, pulling her close to kiss her. “You are so clever, my wife!” he purred, nuzzling her ear. “Six, then!”

“Whoa, Buster!” Sookie huffed, pushing away from him, “You can just cool your jets! Let’s start with the idea of two and we can see from there!”

A decision was made to more fully tie the rooftop garden into the floor downstairs, reserving the space for the use of their family. While Sookie loved the idea, it meant access to fresh air and sunshine within the walls of the Palace was temporarily denied the telepath until the work was completed.

Sookie decided that she would get her daily dose of sunshine by taking long walks every day into the City. Devrah or Angel, Devrah’s daughter, would accompany her unless Tara was in town. Tara had
started coming down to New Orleans more often, sometimes bringing her children with her. Her shop near Shreveport was doing well enough between regular customers and Internet traffic that she was able to hire plenty of help. Tara’s Togs was now identified as the primary shop used by the Queen of the Vampires, and that notoriety had created a boost in her sales, although Tara sometimes shook her head at the kinds of clothing some people expected her to carry.

Every day, just after breakfast, Sookie would take her ‘constitutional’ through the streets of New Orleans. More often than not, she would find herself walking through the streets of the Quarter. Even though the guards trailed closely, it wasn’t long before Sookie acquired an entourage of admirers. There were the shop owners and street vendors who made a point of stepping out of their store doors or turning from their wares to greet her by name and ask after her health. There were others too who went out of their way to wave or shout their encouragement. Once her condition became clear, Sookie found herself approached by people on a regular basis who wanted to press gifts on her, ‘for the baby.’ There were toys and hand knit booties. One woman had made her a homemade quilt.

“They really love you and Eric here,” Devrah told the telepath, “They see you as part of the City now. One of their own!” Sookie could hear the thoughts around her, her pregnancy making her ability to both listen and block stronger, and she knew the housekeeper was right. The well wishes warmed her as much as the sunshine on her skin, and she told Devrah as much. Still, the housekeeper and guards would make sure that someone from the Palace stepped between their Queen and any gift giver, certain that no unknown item or person got too close to Sookie.

Sookie learned how to thank the person while her guards accepted the gift ‘on the Queen’s behalf,’ holding it respectfully, but securely, until it could be taken to the Palace and fully inspected. That wasn’t to say that Sookie didn’t still encounter the occasional problem or the odd heckler. She suspected there were those from the Palace she didn’t see who ranged ahead of her path, clearing out any Silent Witnesses or others who might try to upset her, but still some got through. But there were others who trailed her as well, and as the days passed, their surveillance became more persistent. Sookie suspected these watchers were from the FBI, although neither she nor Eric had heard directly from any agent in some time.

Eric growled about her walking out in public this way, but Sookie pointed out that she needed the exposure to sunshine and Doctor Ludwig was adamant about her getting regular exercise, “and I think she means more than the horizontal mambo,” Sookie informed her husband when he got that interested look in his eye.

Sookie sighed and got out of the bed. She walked to the bathroom and turned on the warm water in the shower. She wasn’t surprised when the door opened after a bit. “Can you hand me the conditioner?” she asked as she rinsed the shampoo from her hair. The bottle was pressed into her hand and she could hear the sound of Eric using the soap against his skin. When the foam was rinsed from her face, she opened her eyes and said, “So, everything still good?”

“It’s fine!” Eric shrugged, but Sookie could feel that her husband was disgruntled.

“How Alcide give you a piece of his mind?” she asked, knowing immediately she had hit the nail on the head.

“He is too sensitive!” Eric growled.

“You did walk into a group of Weres smelling like a…well, smelling!” Sookie pointed out.

“They should have been pleased,” Eric grumbled.

“You could see how it might be distracting,” Sookie poked his shoulder and gave him a look. “Look,
Eric, I’d like to get this work done and these guys out of the house before this baby comes,” she scolded. “You think you can rein it in for a couple days?”

Eric didn’t answer. Instead he turned her away from him and started washing her back. “Your Grandfather is returning tonight,” he said, changing the subject.

Sookie shook her head, allowing Eric to slip off the hook, “Yes, he is,” she sighed. “Have you thought about the name?”

The Prince of the Sky Fae had become a regular visitor as of late. He would appear in the vestibule every other night, upsetting their guards, but waiting, courteously, until he had been introduced. Niall generally joined Sookie for dinner and they would talk together about the future. Niall had proposed they name this first son Fintan Brigant Northman. The suggestion had come at the conclusion of a chess game that Eric had won, and the Prince had been almost apologetic in how he presented the option.

“I have no particular objection,” Eric replied, his hands never hesitating. Sookie could feel and ‘hear’ that Eric was telling her his true feelings. “What about you?” he asked.

“I just don’t like the idea of Grandfather naming our son,” Sookie groused.

Eric chuckled a little. “Still,” he continued, “It is a strong name. It would make clear our son’s right to rule the Fae if he chooses to pursue that destiny.”

“You sure you don’t want some other name?” Sookie asked.

“Like what?” Eric shrugged. “I don’t wish to give him my human father’s name. We fought for most of my life because I was not my brother and I survived. My mother was the one for whom I felt love and there has been no other male who I would wish to remember in this way.”

“Hmm,” Sookie murmured, wracking her brain for an alternative, “I guess I kind of feel the same. I thought about Jason for a while…”

“It could be a kingly name,” Eric acknowledged, turning her back toward him and handing her the soap before turning himself.

“No,” Sookie grabbed the washcloth and then got to work, scrubbing the long planes of Eric’s back. “Much as it bugs me to give in to anyone, I guess Fintan Brigant is okay.”

Together they emerged from the shower. Sookie glanced at the dresser where the latest baby photographs sat. “We should bring those with us,” she said. “Grandfather will get a kick out of them.”

They had been back to the clinic in Shreveport several times for doctor’s visits. Their curiosity had finally won out and they agreed to the more definitive ultrasound. The first image of the child within captured them both. Sookie and Eric held hands as they gazed on their son. They knew it was a he when within moments they had the answer to the question of their child’s gender. He displayed himself so clearly that Doctor Ludwig chuckled about ‘scaring small children with that thing!’ He was also a thumb sucker. Each time they saw him, his digit was firmly planted in his mouth, and for some reason, that endeared him even more to Sookie.

Two visits ago, their son had rolled over to reveal knobs near his shoulders. “I think they’re vestigial wings,” Doctor Ludwig announced. It gave both Sookie and Eric pause.

When Doctor Ludwig left them so that Sookie could get dressed, they talked about it. It hadn’t
occurred to either of them that this child might manifest physical attributes that would set him apart from others. “You know my cousin, Claude, had his ears surgically altered,” Sookie told her husband as they stared at the photographs from that night’s visit. “I was never really sure what I thought about that.”

“It doubtless made his mainstreaming easier,” Eric replied and then waited patiently for Sookie to continue. He had learned that it was better now, as she entered her third trimester and her hormone levels ping ponged, to let her process things and then talk. Anticipating her answers only seemed to lead to arguments.

“We couldn’t hide wings,” Sookie said uncertainly.

“Well, we don’t have to make decisions right away,” Eric assured her and they decided to think about it some more, and then discuss options on their next doctor’s visit.

Fortunately, they were spared from doing anything when the knobs just disappeared. “That happens,” Amy Ludwig explained. “Humans have them too, organs they don’t use any more. I usually see tails that are there one day and then just re-absorbed back into the body the next.”

Eric wasn’t sure when it happened for him, the true acceptance of this child, but he knew it had. He didn’t spend hours singing to it as he had with his lost one, but he enjoyed the feel of his son’s movement under his hand. Like before, he would rest his head on Sookie to hear the fast heartbeat. As the boy grew, larger now than his sister, Eric found he was excited by the baby’s progress. He had started collecting ultrasound images in his wallet and, sometimes, after Sookie fell asleep, he would pull them out and lay them in chronological order on the bedspread in front of him so he could see how his son had grown from one visit to the next.

Once they had dressed, they walked down the flight of stairs to find Niall, Prince of the Fae, already seated in the small office. The Fae rose and walked gracefully over to Sookie, wrapping her in his embrace and then laying his hands on either side of the child she carried. “You are radiant!” The Prince complimented her. “And you,” he said, smiling at the mound of Sookie’s stomach, “You are growing so quickly!”

“We have pictures for you, Grandfather,” Sookie told him, and then glanced at Eric who handed Niall the sheet of images.

The Prince looked at the pictures, and then, for a moment he looked frail.

“Grandfather?” Sookie asked and she stepped forward.

“It’s nothing!” the Prince waved her off, but still he turned and walked to the nearest chair, sitting heavily.

“Let me send for something,” Sookie persisted. “Some tea, perhaps?”

Niall’s eyes remained on the images, “He looks like Fintan,” the Prince said. “How can that be?”

“We have decided,” Eric sat down on the couch across from the Prince and held his hand out for Sookie.

“Decided?” the Prince looked a little lost.

“We’re going to name him Fintan Brigant,” Sookie smiled.

Niall swallowed twice and, for the first time ever, Sookie thought she saw the hint of tears in his
eyes. He cleared his voice and then glancing at the photos again, laid them on the table. “He will want for nothing,” the Prince declared, “And neither will you.”
New Orleans

As it turned out, two nights passed before the Pythoness made the call to Eric and Sookie Northman to give them the good news. The Pythoness didn’t ask. She told them that the Viking was now High King. In her next sentence, she told the stunned Northmans that Thalia would be arriving to establish her headquarters in the Crescent City and before the couple could ask any questions, the Oracle congratulated them and signed off.

Neither Eric nor Sookie said anything. The laptop they’d used for the video conference switched over to the screen saver. The vampire emoji appeared and started bouncing from one side of the monitor to the other, but still, Eric Northman didn’t move. Finally, Sookie rose from the seat next to his and, taking his hand, pulled his arm up so she could slide into his lap. Without looking at her, Eric wrapped one arm around her waist and placed his other hand over their child. He drew a breath in, using their scent to help calm the turmoil he felt and then allowed Sookie to draw his head down until their foreheads touched.

“You will make an amazing High King,” she told him.

“I don’t want this,” he replied.

“I know,” she assured him, and then pushing his head back, Sookie met Eric’s eyes. She smiled up at him, letting him know that everything would be all right. She stroked his eyebrows with her thumbs, encouraging him to release the worry that was furrowing his brow, and then she lightly kissed his lips. “I love you,” she whispered.

“That I do know,” Eric replied and his smile returned.

“I guess this means another big event,” Sookie teased. “Seems like you vampires can’t break a nail without making some kind of production out of it!”

“We are immortal,” Eric smiled sardonically, “It helps to relieve the boredom of our endless lives.”

Sookie laid her head against his shoulder, “I don’t know about you, but I could do with some boredom right about now.” They sat like that, their arms wrapped around each other. After another little while, Sookie asked silently, ‘Do you think this will bring more trouble to us?’

Eric knew the reason she asked it mentally was that his wife was afraid to say the words out loud. “No,” he told her, using his voice. “I think the reason the Pythoness chose us is because she believes of all the rulers, I am the one who is least likely to be attacked.”

“Because of the Fae,” Sookie concluded.
“Because of the Fae and the witches,” Eric nodded.

“You are pretty bad ass,” Sookie shoved his shoulder with her own.

“That may be,” Eric chuckled, “But skill with a sword won’t be what’s needed now.”

“So,” Sookie asked, “What do we need to do? Do you think we need to move?”

Eric sat back, shifting Sookie a little so she sat more comfortably in his lap, “No. If Thalia is coming here to establish a base for the army…”

“Police!” Sookie whispered.

“Police,” Eric corrected, “Then I think it is assumed we will keep New Orleans.”

“But not the rest of the state?” Sookie asked. “Will you still be King of Louisiana and Arkansas?”

“I don’t know,” Eric shrugged.

“What about Clan Chief?” Sookie asked.

“I don’t know about that either,” Eric told her. “I suspect not.”

“Well,” Sookie shifted again so she could look into his face, “What did the last High King do?”

“I don’t think there’s ever been one,” Eric told her. “I am over a thousand-years-old and I have never heard of it.”

“Oh.” Sookie looked away, turning that over, and then her face lit up with a smile. “So, I guess that means the rules are whatever we decide they are!” and she could see that her optimism made a difference for Eric.

“I suppose you’re right, Lover,” Eric was grinning now. “And what would your first edict be?”

“Right at this second?” Sookie smirked, “Well, it would probably have something to do with ice cream and chocolate, but I think that’s just your son talking!” Sookie wiggled off her husband’s lap. When he tried to pull her back, she explained, “I’m going to get a pad of paper. It sounds like we need to figure some things out.”

Sookie returned with a yellow, lined pad and a mechanical pencil, and sat down on the chair directly across the desk from Eric. “Well, I think you can move that laptop out of the way,” she told him.

“First things first, do we stay here in New Orleans?”

“Yes,” Eric nodded. “It is central and it has good transportation. The people of the City are comfortable with the Supernatural and we already have allies living in the City.”

“But you shouldn’t still be King of Louisiana and Arkansas,” Sookie said almost as a question. “Because if you’re busy looking out for everyone…”

“If we are looking out for everyone,” Eric reminded her.

“If we are looking out,” Sookie grinned, “then we’ll be too distracted. We should focus on one thing.”

“Agreed,” Eric nodded. He glanced at Sookie, “And the next King will be Thomas.”
“Why not Karin?” Sookie asked.

“For the same reason it won’t be Pam. I live. As their Maker, I can command them. They wouldn’t be seen as anything more than puppets and that would be dangerous to all of us. If I name Thomas, Karin is by his side. She is his bonded mate. He is ready.”

“Why not Thierry?” Sookie asked. “He’s just as hard-working. I know something happened between the two of you when you went away to Boston, and don’t deny it! But still, he’s made us a lot of money and he’s had more time with the other monarchs. Stan likes him and Sandy respects him. Maude and the Kings in Jackson like him.”

“Thierry has other ambitions,” Eric told her. “It may come to nothing, but he will only be happy with one throne, and it isn’t Louisiana.”

“Have anything to do with Nabila?” Sookie asked.

“You are a romantic!” Eric grinned. “No, not in the way you think.”

“Okay,” Sookie wrote something down, “but Thomas would be new to this. He can’t be Clan Chief, can he?”

“No,” Eric shook his head. “No, the role needs to be someone all of Amun will follow. Maude will refuse it. She has no interest in leading from the front. Isaiah and Roland are too erratic, and Phoebe Golden?”

“I can’t see anyone willingly following her,” Sookie shuddered.

“She does lack certain warmth,” Eric nodded, “But she is brilliant and vampires respect that. No,” he settled back, “I think we will need to convince Russell and Bartlett to step back from retirement. These are difficult times and Amun will need the hand of experience.”

As Sookie watched Eric settle back into planning mode, their son decided to make his presence known. The jab from inside was punctuated by a bang from upstairs, and she found herself looking at Eric who was watching her with eyes that let her know she was everything to him. “Do you think we could stay here at the Palace?” Sookie asked. “I mean, we’re going through all this trouble to build things out, and I like the rooftop garden and the folks here. I like our sanctuary and walking through the Quarter, even when it’s hot as Hades. I mean it wouldn’t be a deal breaker or anything, but…”

“This has become our home,” Eric nodded. “I will speak with Thalia, but we could declare New Orleans a Free Zone, an open city to all supernaturals. It will be solely under our jurisdiction and we could govern it ourselves.”

“And I’d want to keep Bon Temps, too,” Sookie said. Her eyes dropped. They hadn’t spoken of the house or the land since they’d left a few months ago. They’d taken the extra step of having both their house and Compton’s house officially closed up. The memories were too painful at the time, but Sookie found she didn’t dread it as much as she had. She glanced down at the swell of their son, “I grew up with grass under my feet, chasing fireflies. I can’t think of a better way to spend childhood than surrounded by cousins and friends, horses and all the quiet that only the country can give.”

Eric nodded, “There is no guarantee that this child, any child of ours will be able to tolerate sunshine,” he reminded her.

“Well, there are still fireflies!” Sookie persisted.
Eric smiled, “Then we are agreed. The Bon Temps property will be our second home. It will also be governed by us.”

“But we would have to give the new King his due,” Sookie sniffed. “Pay taxes…”

“Tithes,” Eric corrected her.

“Tithes,” Sookie nodded. She looked at the paper, “And what about the businesses? You’ve spent all this time building up that energy business. Does that go with the kingdom?”

Eric nodded, “It would have to. The kingdom must be able to sustain itself. If we keep New Orleans, we keep the tithes of the City and the port. That is probably enough to sustain us, but Thomas will need more to build and strengthen his holdings. That will require the energy business pass to him. He has already been developing revenues in wood and agriculture. He should find himself in a good position.”

“All of this is going to need a lawyer,” Sookie said, half to herself. “It occurs to me that we haven’t seen Desmond much since we returned. I thought he’d show up with Grandfather, but, now that I think about it, we haven’t really seen him or the Fae at all.”

Eric cocked his head, “I also hadn’t thought of it, but your Grandfather is returning tomorrow. I believe he intends to transfer certain of his assets, so doubtless we will see the demon then.”

Calls were placed. Thomas and Karin agreed to come to the Palace in two nights’ time. Thalia confirmed she would be arriving tomorrow evening. She informed Eric she would be staying elsewhere in the City since she had no desire to share a roof with Alcide Herveaux, even for a short period of time.

The Kings were next. Russell protested and Bartlett disagreed, but Eric knew by the end of the call that they would re-assume Clan Chief from him.

They stood up to move into the garden space. Eric had had the space furnished with softer furniture, including the large fainting couch from their sanctuary, until the construction was finished. Sookie turned on the television and searched for her stored episode of Outlander. When she turned around, Eric was already naked and sprawled across the chaise.

“Warm or something?” she laughed at him.

“Demonstrating what those Scots wear under their kilts,” Eric chuckled back and then opened his arms to her. When she climbed onto the couch, Eric rolled her onto her side and started pressing his fists into the small of her back, relieving the knots of tension that formed from carrying their son.

“Oh Jeez!” Sookie sighed, “Just so you know, that is so much better than sex right now!” Eric laughed, and Sookie felt all was right with the world. Then she asked, “What about Pam?”

“What about her?” Eric slowed his motions.

“You know you’re going to need someone to be your right hand. Pam is the best choice.” Sookie hit the forward button, moving the episode through the credits.

“You could be my right hand,” Eric told her.

“I am going to be spending a good part of my time learning to be a mother,” Sookie said. “It’s not that I couldn’t do it all, and it’s not that I don’t want to be your Queen, but there are things Pam knows and that Pam can do that I just can’t.” Sookie swallowed a little, and then she felt the flush as
an unexpected wave of emotion hit. Even though Sookie knew it was hormones, she was all but helpless to stop her reaction.

“What is it, Älskade?” Eric rolled her toward him, leaning down to capture her quick tears with his tongue.

“I miss her!” Sookie laid her hand on her husband’s cheek and suddenly she was crying hard.

Eric gathered her against his chest and rubbed her back. He suppressed his urge to verbally comfort her. During these types of outbursts he had learned that adding verbal assurances could backfire, causing Sookie to rage at him. He suspected she was really raging at herself, but it didn’t make the words she used or the tone any easier to bear. When Sookie quieted, her fingers starting to pull and stroke the short, curly hairs that sprinkled across his chest, he said, “Pam will be here tomorrow night. She is due to arrive after Thalia. We should speak with her.”

“I know she’s happy and all, but I would be a lot happier if she was closer,” Sookie sniffed.

“Then we will tell her that, Lover,” Eric assured her.

“This could all be okay, couldn’t it?” Sookie asked, her voice still tremulous with emotion.

“This will be perfect, Min Hustru,” Eric assured her. He wrapped his arms around her and said, “Now, hit the Play button and later we’ll see how well you’ve learned your Scots.”

XXxxx

“He’s here,” Devrah announced.

“Bring the Prince to the small office,” Sookie told their housekeeper. She and Eric were sitting in the kitchen. It seemed an odd place for them, but the long metal table was a good work surface and it allowed them to look at reports and exhibits without having to worry about outsiders seeing things they weren’t ready to share. Since the days of the donors, the staff in the Palace had been reduced and those left scrupulously reviewed. Now, even the cooking staff was known and trusted by both Sookie and Eric. Every person who worked under the roof was trusted. Most were still Were, but there were also a few more vampires on the guard staff. There were no humans with the exception of Devrah and her daughter, Angel. It wasn’t anything that was in writing. It was just understood. Humans could be glamouried. Humans could be brought to harm or corrupted more easily. Devrah and her family were members of the Palace and had been for generations. She was related to Octavia, a human, but also a powerful witch. Some might call foul, but Sookie was okay with it.

“It will be good to see Desmond,” Sookie told Eric, but when they walked into the office, it was another person they had never met who was handling Niall’s paperwork.

“Ah, Sookie! Eric!” the Prince greeted them. He hugged them both and Sookie almost giggled when she felt Eric’s discomfort through their bond. “This is my new solicitor,” he continued, gesturing to the formally suited man. “This is Barton Barrows.”

“Where’s Mr. Cataliades?” Sookie asked.

“I am no longer employing him,” Niall said, using the same tone as if she’d asked whether he wanted tea or coffee today. When Sookie didn’t move or say anything more, the Prince stopped to clarify, “It was time for me to make a change, Granddaughter. Sometimes in business you need to gain a fresh perspective, a new set of eyes. Desmond has been handling my affairs for a long time. Too long! He became so accustomed to things that he no longer saw what was right in front of him,” and the Prince smiled broadly and gestured toward the chairs.
Over the next hour, Niall led them through a series of documents. Sookie knew the Prince intended
to sign over certain assets to them, but she hadn’t anticipated the extent of his generosity. In addition
to paying off all outstanding debts for the reproduction center in Shreveport and naming Sookie sole
owner, the Prince signed over majority ownership in several biomedical research facilities, a plastics
firm, and two firms that were developing autonomous trucks. (“I think there’s a big future in this,” he
told her). The Prince maintained minority ownership in only a few of the companies and the
documents indicated that even this ownership would be ceded away from the Prince over a period
of fifteen years. It was also made clear that Sookie was a custodial owner and that when her first child
came of age, the ownership would move into a structure that would allow equal ownership to be
divided between Sookie and each of her children.

“What if some of my children don’t have the spark, Grandfather?” Sookie asked. Niall gave her a
look that suggested she’d made a rude noise, but she persisted, “It could happen. There’s no
guarantee. Even vampire progeny can’t count on inheriting their Maker’s gifts.”

“I think that is highly unlikely,” the Prince said tightly, “But I have not differentiated the terms of the
ownership shares based on those criteria.”

“And why not include Eric in this?” Sookie asked.

“What you choose to share with your vampire is your decision,” the Prince said narrowly. He turned
to Eric, “I do not mean any disrespect. You have been an exemplary mate to my Granddaughter.
You have defended her and you have done everything in your power to improve her situation and I
am most grateful. We are all adults here. If Sookie falls, you will as well. And, of course, the same is
true of you. It is not what I would have chosen, but she did. So you understand, I see no reason to
add your name to any of this. If you both survive, you both benefit. If one of you falls, you both fall…”

“And the Princess’ share will pass to the children’s guardian,” Attorney Barrows supplied. He smiled
pleasantly, but the Prince shot him a venomous look.

“There is a role for a guardian?” Eric asked.

“Of course,” Niall said smoothly. “It is customary when those named lead, well, shall we say less
than conservative lives.”

“And who is named as this guardian?” Eric asked.

“Well, it’s not specified,” the Prince was starting to get a little huffy, so Sookie reached over and
poured some more tea which she held out to Niall. “I am looking out for my heirs,” Niall said, his
voice aggrieved.

“I know you are,” Sookie soothed, “And we are both very grateful, aren’t we, Eric?”

“Of course,” Eric nodded. “Most generous.” The Prince was settling back when Eric said, “Of
course, we will want our own attorney to review the documents and offer an opinion.”

Sookie was glad Eric said it and when her Grandfather looked to her to protest, she held up her
hands and said, “It seems a prudent thing to do. You told me yourself never to sign something
without getting a second opinion, Grandfather.”

Eric watched the interplay between the lawyer and the Prince, and he had a feeling they would not
be seeing this particular person again. The Prince recovered quickly, taking a sip of his tea, and then
said, “I am flattered that you have listened so closely to me, Sookie. You are showing wonderful
There was a discreet knock on the door and Devrah walked into the room. “Miss Thalia’s arrived,” she announced.

“Please have her come in,” Sookie said. “We’re good for now, right, Grandfather?” she asked.

“Of course,” her Grandfather was smiling. He signaled the attorney who gathered up the paperwork.

When he had assembled it back into his leather portfolio, Eric said, “Will you be sending copies electronically so we can send them to our lawyer?”

“Why, I can leave them now,” Niall replied, his smile wide and his eyes wider.

Thalia entered the room and her sharp eyes swept over those assembled. “Viking,” she bowed, and then “Sookie,” another bow. “Prince Niall,” a head nod, and then a stare at the lawyer until he dropped his eyes and his smile faltered.

“Welcome home,” Eric chuckled. “You are a person of some importance now.”

“As are you, High King,” and Thalia’s eyes warmed.

“Are you staying for dinner?” Sookie asked her Grandfather.

“No,” Niall smiled, looking at Thalia, “No, not tonight, but do see if you can have those papers reviewed soon. So many arrangements to make and I’d like to have everything settled…” and he stood up. Sookie stood as well so she could walk him out. “Yes,” the Prince continued, “All should be ready for when this one arrives,” and his smile became less sharp as he reached over and laid his hand on Sookie’s stomach again. He smiled into Sookie’s eyes and turning, said, “Always a pleasure, Northman,” and tucking Sookie’s arm through his, headed to the door, the hapless attorney trailing them.

“What was that about?” Thalia asked when the door shut behind them.

“Niall is signing over assets to Sookie to be held in trust for our children,” he said.

“You are not looking pleased,” Thalia sat down on a chair near the Viking’s.

“He would have rushed us through signing without having an independent opinion. He is…too friendly.” Eric shrugged.

“Don’t trust him,” Thalia hissed.

“What do you know?” Eric asked.

“Nothing I can say, but check every gift he offers you. Question his motives. He is Fae. They did not earn their reputation for being tricky for nothing.” Thalia felt that she couldn’t say anything more until she understood what was in the papers. It could be that the Prince was acting in good faith in which case, if Thalia raised suspicions, it would cast those same suspicions on her own motives. Better to wait.

Sookie rejoined them. “I am so happy to see you!” Sookie’s voice was warm and Thalia wondered if the Queen also had some ulterior motive, but Sookie didn’t pursue it beyond a quick touch on the wrist and then settling down next to her husband. “I am wondering just where Mr. Cataliades is,” Sookie continued. “I would trust him to look at those,” and she jerked her chin toward the leather
portfolio that held all the contracts.

“Do you have a way to contact him?” Eric asked.

“Not anything recent,” Sookie sighed. “I tried the number I had that was working right before the takeover, but that’s been changed.”

“I could contact his niece,” Thalia offered. “She works for the Pythoness.” It was agreed and Thalia texted Diantha. Thalia’s phone buzzed back almost immediately. “She replies that she will have her uncle contact you,” Thalia confirmed. Sookie shifted, her hand moving to her side. “You are in pain?” Thalia asked.

“No, it’s just that time of night. He’s a dancer, just like his daddy!” Sookie answered. The Viking’s mate was smiling, although what she was describing did not seem like anything to celebrate. Of course, Thalia knew how human children were made. You couldn’t hunt them without learning something about these kinds of things, but to be this close and to be so intimately involved in the process felt unnatural. Thalia turned toward the North Man, intending to distract herself with more appropriate conversation when she was confronted by the sight of the Viking’s eyes on his mate. He was smiling and it wasn’t just some indulgent look. She could see that Eric Northman cared deeply about this; he was eagerly anticipating this child and it gave Thalia pause. It was one thing to guard the North Man and his possessions, and that was what a non-vampire mate and progeny should be, but what Thalia saw was something else. The North Man was emotionally invested, and that complicated things in a way Thalia was not sure she could understand.

XXxxx

“So have you been to the Palace yet?” Maxwell was stretched out on one of the leather club chairs that framed his small fireplace. The living room was dark wood and rich cream and for any other male it might have been declared fussy, but for Maxwell Lee with his just-so suit and his elegant, thin mustache, it was perfect. There was a baby grand piano in the front window area and Pam found herself thinking of musical evenings in New York. Misha preferred classical music and he was fond of their playing duets.

“No,” Pam answered, “I’m expected there in an hour. Karin and Thomas will be there tomorrow night and it sounds like it will be all kingdom business. I’d rather avoid that for as long as possible. When I return this evening, do you think we could go down to Bourbon Street?” When Max tilted his head, Pam explained, “I’ve been surrounded by so much pretention lately. I just want to go somewhere and shake my bon bon ‘til it hurts!”

“I can absolutely handle that!” her business partner grinned and he headed over to the piano and broke into a blues piece they both knew. The lyrics were especially raunchy and by the second chorus they were belting them out as loud as they could. When Max wrapped it up with a flourish, Pam collapsed against him, laughing.

“Thank you!” she told him, and then in a softer voice, “I’m really happy to be home.”

“So when are you going to break the news to him?” Max asked. He didn’t need to say Misha’s name. They both knew the ‘him’ Max meant.

“Not until I get back,” Pam shook her head, then walked back over to the club chair, and collapsed into it. “He suspects, of course. He’s been texting me like some crazed lunatic. Devrah called from the Palace. We weren’t so good when I left, and he’s sent so many flowers to the Palace that Devrah’s worried folks will think she’s arranging a funeral.”
“So he’s gone stalker, too,” Max grinned, riffing his fingers across the keys. “He really doesn’t know you at all, does he?”

“I guess not,” Pam shrugged. “It’s my fault. I got carried away by the romance of it. It reminded me of London and growing up, all the good parts. But Max? There’s a reason I ran away from that life, and it wasn’t just the bad aspects. Even growing up in my family’s house, I was a handful. I wanted the dresses, but not the party manners that went with them. I wanted to speak my mind and do as I wished. It’s not that he tells me what I have to do…he doesn’t. It’s that whole way of life, the museums and the concerts and all the right friends feels like stepping back into a box, and I just can’t do it!”

“And he isn’t exactly soft in the right places, either, is he?” and Max waggled his eyebrows.

“I have to hand it to him,” Pam nodded, “He found some pretty interesting ways around that little dilemma, and he does have access to some amazingly beautiful women! But, no. It’s not the same. Having sex when your real partner isn’t sexually attractive to you? Whoever we shared would leave and I’d be left resting next to him. The whole exercise lost its novelty pretty quickly.”

“So…” Max kept his eyes on the keyboard, “Does this mean you found someone who is tickling your novelty?”

“Not exactly,” Pam sighed. “Not really, but that’s not why I have to break it off.”

“And?” and Max turned to look at her, “What’s stopping you?”

Pam sighed, “I just hate to think of that grown man crying.”

“Misha?” Max laughed, “Seriously?”

“Actually, yes,” Pam nodded. “He is not going to take this well.”

“But you’ve exchanged blood,” Max looked confused. “Surely he understands your feelings.”

“Well, no,” Pam winced, “No, we haven’t.” When Max made a noise, Pam shrugged. “It just never happened.”

“So, you know him, but he’s been willing to be blind. Oh, Pamela!” and Max folded the cover over the keys and came back to sit across from her.

“I know!” Pam rolled her eyes. “Not good, but for a while I figured it would happen, and then I knew I didn’t want it to.”

“You don’t think he’ll be angry?” Max was starting to look concerned.

“Maybe,” Pam returned his look, “and there’s something else,” Pam sighed. “Before I left, I overheard something that isn’t sitting right. I’m not sure what to make of it. I’ll discuss it with Eric tonight.”

“Well, if it’s scheming you need, you’ve come to the right place. Your Maker is one of the best plotters I’ve ever met and in case you didn’t know, Thalia’s in town, too.”

“And you are known to have a few of your own,” Pam spoke up.

“Next to them?” and Max smiled, “They make me look like a newborn. How long are you staying?”

“Three nights,” Pam sighed.
“Well, then you better get moving! There is a lot of Quarter to cover and only so many hours of darkness,” and rising, Max took a few steps, turned, and offered his arm. “Come on, Princess, I’ll escort you to the Palace, and then we can go find our friends in low places!” and together they stepped into the night.

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“You sure you won’t change your mind and stay here?” Sookie shifted slightly and her mouth turned down. Pam slid from the chair to sit next to her.

“May I?” she asked and when Sookie nodded, she placed her hand on Sookie’s distended stomach. Sure enough, there was a slight movement followed by a kick. “He is a fighter already,” Pam smiled, then looking more closely at Sookie, said, “Does it hurt?”

“I’m fine,” the telepath snapped and then moderating her tone, said, “I’ve started to swell a little, mostly around my ankles and fingers.” She waved her fingers, “Look! No rings! Doctor Ludwig told me I need to walk more and try to work in mild cardio, like taking the stairs as long as I have someone to walk with me.”

“You’re not capable of walking the stairs by yourself?” Pam was aghast.

“It’s not that,” Sookie smiled, “It’s just that I’m off balance. What can I say? I tip over sometimes. And I wear almost all my food. I never thought I had a hole in my lip, but I sure manage to dribble a lot!” Sookie pointed to a small stain that was the grapefruit juice she had been drinking earlier. The telepath’s breasts were much larger now and along with her abdomen, Sookie was taking on a much more circular appearance. As if she knew what Pam was thinking, Sookie said, “Yup, skinny legs and skinny arms and a big old basketball in between!” Eric and Thalia had stepped from the room taking Max with them, and Sookie was using the time to answer all Pam’s baby questions. “I know I have months to go, but between you and me, I’m not sure how much more room this baby is going to be able to take. He’s already pretty big.”

“I don’t know,” Pam said gallantly, “He doesn’t look all that big from here.” Sookie smiled and Pam figured she must have said the right thing.

“I saw photos of the two of you, you and Misha, at that museum event a couple weeks ago,” Sookie said warmly. “You looked so beautiful!”

Pam wondered which museum event Sookie might mean. When Pam was in New York, her evenings with Misha were an endless swirl of openings, charity parties, and intimate parties for all the ‘best’ friends that never seemed to number fewer than twenty. “There are so many good causes,” Pam said gamely, then with more enthusiasm, “So, how goes the renovations?”

“I can take you up for a tour if you’d like,” Sookie offered. Pam almost agreed, but then she shook her head. She could see that Sookie was tiring. It had been an eventful evening and Pam knew she was only one in what had been a procession of visitors.

“Perhaps tomorrow or the day after?” Pam suggested. “I’ll be here for several days.”

“He must really miss you,” Sookie said, glancing around them. Pam glanced as well. There were bowls of fresh flowers all around the room. She didn’t need to ask where they’d come from. As Pam had walked through the downstairs to the office she’d seen vases of yellow roses on almost every flat surface. “You sure you don’t want to take these with you?” and Sookie jerked her chin toward the nearest vase.
“He’s apologizing,” Pam sniffed. “If they are too much for you, there is a hospital you support here. You could have them sent over there.”

“Everything all right?” Sookie asked, and Pam couldn’t help but feel that Sookie was not exactly hoping that it was.

“Everything is fine. We had a fight. We do,” Pam shrugged, as if it was a regular event, which it wasn’t.

Eric, Thalia, and Max walked back into the office. Eric seemed to see the same thing in Sookie’s face that Pam had, and he walked over so he could sink onto the couch next to his mate. “It is late, Lover. Let me take you upstairs,” he offered.

“I feel terrible,” Sookie said, not exactly protesting. “Pam just got here and I’m too exhausted to even be polite.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Pam reached over and gently squeezed her Sookie’s hand. “I’ll be back tomorrow night and we can catch up then. You can show me the nursery.”

Sookie nodded, and Eric stood up, bringing her to her feet beside him. He glanced at Thalia and something seemed to pass between them. He got Sookie started toward the door before saying, “I also look forward to seeing you tomorrow night, Pamela.”

Pam couldn’t help feeling jealous, watching her Maker leave, his arms around Sookie. She and Eric had barely exchanged twenty words although Pam was certain that all was forgiven between them. When Eric was gone, Pam turned, expecting Max to be ready to go, but instead her partner sat down. Thalia gestured that Pam should take a seat as well. Pam looked over, expecting Thalia would have also seated herself, but she didn’t. Instead, the small vampire remained standing.

“Okay,” Pam said. “What’s this all about?”

“I’ve agreed to stay on with the High King,” Max said from his place across the room. “I’ll be in charge of handling all their business dealings, kind of a Chief Executive. I’ll be continuing to perform most of the duties I perform today for New Orleans, plus overseeing the financials and operations for whatever this High King thing becomes.”

“Congratulations,” Pam said, but she knew her voice was not sounding it. With each passing moment, she felt farther and farther removed from where she really wanted to be.

“Are you happy in New York?” Thalia asked, bringing Pam back from her growing misery.

“What do you mean?”

Pam felt startled by the question, but Max leaned forward, “Tell her what you told me,” he urged.

The last thing Pam had considered was confessing to Thalia. To tell these things to Max felt fine; he had been both friend and partner for a long time. To tell Eric felt fine. He was her Maker and could probably feel her unsettled emotions through their bond anyway, but there was something in how Max was looking at her that encouraged her to tell. “I’m not planning on staying in New York,” Pam confessed. “This thing with Misha has run its course and I intend to end it when I return.”

“Do you have other plans?” Thalia asked. Pam’s eyes widened. It wasn’t like Thalia to show an interest in her personal life.

“Not really,” Pam shrugged. “I might spend some more time in Minnesota. I suspect I’ll want to stay
You might consider returning here,” Thalia told her. “The North Man needs you here as his Second, if you would be willing to take the post.”

“If that’s what he wants, then why didn’t he ask me himself?” Pam couldn’t help it. The question just snapped out of her.

“He didn’t want you to feel pressured,” Thalia sniffed. “If it were me, I would have ordered you to return, but your Maker wants you to have a choice.”

Pam glanced at Max and then, looking straight at Thalia, she said, “There’s something about Misha you need to know.” Pam had planned on telling Eric, but now, with as far as she’d already come, Pam told Thalia instead.

She told the small vampire about what Misha had said about the police and the role of High King before the teleconference, and she told Thalia about seeing the part of the teleconference stored on the hard drive. Then she told Thalia about Misha’s reaction and his sullen hostility when he returned from wherever he’d gone in such a hurry that night.

Misha told her not to go to New Orleans. They ended up fighting about it. “He really never fights with me,” Pam told Thalia. “He treats me like gold, but this time was different. He was angry, really angry. I don’t know where he’d been, but I know that even after he took a shower, he still smelled like death.”

Thalia nodded, “Perhaps now you are ready to hear what I have to tell you!” Thalia sat down, but before she started, she looked at Max. “What I am going to say now must never pass your lips, Maxwell Lee. The Viking will not tell you why you will not be asked to be Sheriff here, but I will. You gave Bill Compton permission to return to Bon Temps when he was banished. It is true there was no edict restricting his return, but Compton was a problem. Your decision showed poor judgment and it could have placed the Queen in danger. If you repeat that kind of lapse again, I will end you. Do you understand?”

“I…” Max started, but then he sat straighter, shut his mouth, and nodded.

“Good,” Thalia said. Leaning forward, she told both of them what she knew. She told them about Carlo and Bill Compton. She told them about what she and Thierry found in New York and her theory about the rogues. Thalia told Pam and Max what Misha said about it and how he refused her access to investigate further. She told them about Nabila and she told them about how Thierry’s Maker, Teresa, met her end. “He glorifies Appius,” Thalia told them. “He believes in the way of the old ones, but it’s more. He is filled with a rage that never leaves him. It waits under the surface, and it pushes him to maim what he can’t kill.”

“But I…” Pam said softly.

“Except you,” Thalia said thoughtfully.

“What if I held off on accepting Eric’s offer and was to return to New York? It occurs to me that the laptop behind Misha’s desk may hold some of the answers we both seek.” Pam smiled and arched her brow.

“I think that’s a really bad idea!” Max exclaimed.

“I agree with him,” Thalia nodded. “Besides, it would serve no purpose.” Thalia told them of Felipe de Castro and his offer of a skilled computer hacker. “I believe De Castro is anxious to prove his
new-found friendship and he is motivated to breach New York’s systems. Within a week, we’ll have what we want.”

“Well,” Pam said, “You see, that’s the thing. That laptop Misha uses in his office is not wired to anything. He uses it like some kind of storage device. He hooks drives into it, downloads information, and then powers it down. I don’t know what’s stored there, but even Andrew treats it like it’s some kind of vault.”

Thalia thought about this development, “And you are willing to return to Misha for a short period of time? Pretend everything is fine between you?”

“Yes?” Pam answered.

“Then we would need some kind of plan,” Maxwell said quickly. He turned to his partner, “Pam, you can’t believe you can waltz in and waltz out. You would have to get access into that computer and not be detected for a while, enough time to get you out of his territory.”

“Let me ask De Castro’s computer troll if he has any ideas,” Thalia nodded. “If this human is as good as De Castro says, he might be able to give us a way.”

“There will be a password,” Pam mused. “I’ll need to figure that out, but I may have an idea how I can do that.”

“This is a bad idea,” Max said again.

“If he’s a danger, we should know it,” Pam reasoned. “I can get close to him. I can find out fastest. Max,” and she smiled, “You know it’s true!”

“I’ll make some phone calls,” Thalia nodded and then she gifted Pam with one of her rare smiles, “You really are a bad ass, Pamela Ravenscroft!”

“Takes one to know one,” Pam grinned in return.
Chapter 35 - Charts and Bearings

Chapter Notes

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New York

“Perhaps we should go out into the City,” Andrew said quietly.

Misha spun around, ready to snarl again. He’d been staring out the front windows of the brownstone, watching people walking below on the sidewalk. His residence had nothing out front to call it out as the palace of a vampire king. It made no difference; most in the neighborhood knew who and what he was, but this was New York. They didn’t care. Misha told himself that observing humans was good practice, and something he should do every day, but really he was marking time, waiting for his phone to ring. It had been two nights since Pam left for New Orleans, and still she had not called. He left her messages and sent baskets and boxes of flowers. Andrew informed the King that if he chose to send more he would have to make special arrangements. The houseman had been informed by the third florist he called that there wasn’t a single yellow rose left in all of Louisiana. All this Misha had done, but still, no Pam.

“She will forgive you,” Andrew said, guessing the cause of Misha’s turmoil.

“I shouldn’t have demanded she stay.” Misha thought about how angry Pam became. She accused him of trying to control her, no better than any male. Her fangs had extended and she’d hissed when he grabbed her arm. He only meant to stop her motion long enough to make her listen to his words, but the feral look in her eyes frightened him. He wondered if that single gesture on his part had damaged the thread that held them together.

The bitter regret rose in his throat again. He meant the evening to be another turning point for them. He knew that it would be the night they would finally exchange blood. His Pamela would offer her neck and they would couple again. Misha’s cock twitched as he remembered that first, and, as it turned out, only time she offered herself to him sexually. The experience had been profound. Pamela had offered herself to him again the next evening, but Misha guessed rightly that to have taken that offer would have cheapened the moment. He was sure his Zolotse would offer again, but the days and weeks passed and she hadn’t.

In moments when Misha was being less sentimental and more objective, he felt that, if anything, Pam seemed to be drifting away from him. When his thoughts moved in this direction though, he would scold himself. He would remind himself that Pam’s business was important to her and that her many concerns, her clubs, and her event planning business were located in far flung places. Misha reminded himself of what he had always known; his Pam was a business woman and needed to travel. The King would shake his head and chide himself about his lack of acceptance of modern ways, but as his heart became more engaged, Misha found he was coming to dread walking through the door of his home. It was as it had been before. Andrew would be in the hall and fresh blood would be warming in his living room. The paintings and drawings would call to him and the
ceramics and other pieces of art would be placed to perfection, yet it was different. The house no longer seemed welcoming when her face was not there.

“What if she doesn’t return?” he asked out loud, and when Andrew didn’t answer, Misha stopped looking and instead studied the sad, pensive face that stared back at him in the window’s reflection.

Misha felt his lip stiffen and his shoulders pull back. This was unacceptable! He thought of his mentor, the great Appius Livius Ocella. He imagined that vampire’s reaction to Misha’s pathetic self-pity and he shook himself mentally, turning away from the window and his gloomy thoughts. “I believe there is only one good way out of this dilemma. Certainly, standing around here pissing and gibbering like some school boy is not improving the situation!”

“What did you have in mind, my King?” Andrew asked. Usually his houseman was enthusiastic, but this time he seemed less enthusiastic.

“I have tried apologies and gifts,” Misha sniffed. “To continue that course of action is foolish. I can only conclude that my Pamela is allowing her anger and her fear of being trapped to cloud her judgment. After all,” and he held his hands out, palms up, “I know that in her heart she knows I would never harm her, but my Zolotse is proud! Her head is arguing with her heart! I must convince her head!”

“She should not doubt you, Majesty,” Andrew nodded. “You have never damaged or threatened her.”

“I have only grabbed her arm twice. She is a strong woman. It didn’t injure her.” Misha’s head was nodding. He was speaking out loud, but more to himself now than Andrew.

Andrew remembered what he saw that night. He had been on the stairs when Pam stalked from their shared bed chamber, only to have Misha follow her and spin her around. Andrew knew the King’s grip on her upper arm had hurt Pam, but Andrew also saw that Misha realized his mistake and released her quickly enough. “I agree, Majesty,” Andrew nodded. “It was no more than a lover’s quarrel. There was no malice and I’m sure Miss Pam realized that.”

Misha’s mouth twitched, “A lover’s quarrel, yes,” and he smiled briefly, “Nothing more.” Misha sniffed as he walked into the living room. “In all my long life, Andrew, I never thought to hear those words applied to me! I believed myself immune. Love!” and Misha’s smile was mocking.

“Miss Pamela is an extraordinary woman,” Andrew assured the King.

“An extraordinary person,” Misha nodded, “Who is also extraordinarily busy. She juggles so many things in her life, I’m amazed she is able to organize everything.” Misha sat down on the couch, taking a heavy blown glass paperweight in his hand, “She is so gracious to everyone, but there are so many whom she needs to satisfy.”

“She does feel beholden to many masters,” the housekeeper moved to the warmed blood and poured his King a goblet.

“Like Northman,” Misha growled.

“He is her Maker,” Andrew shrugged.

“We can’t always choose our Makers,” Misha growled more as he took the goblet from Andrew’s hand. Misha sipped and then set the goblet down so quickly the stem snapped. With his reflexes, the King was able to grab the bowl before it fell, but still, a few drops splashed onto the table and the rare, silk rug under his feet. “Fuck!” Misha screamed. He sprang up and stalked across the room,
hurling the damaged goblet into the fireplace. Blood splattered against the brick backwall, the sound of the shattering crystal as jagged as Misha felt. The King took a long, shuddering breath but when he turned back toward Andrew, his customary calm expression was pulled firmly back into place, “I apologize for my outburst,” and Misha nodded his head in apology.

“It’s nothing, Majesty,” Andrew shrugged. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to get some cleaning supplies for the rug.”

Misha walked back over to the couch and sat down. He thought about the turmoil he was feeling. It wasn’t just Pam. It was everything.

“How did it come to this?” Misha asked out loud. He looked around him. He had played by all the rules. He had mirrored all that was best about vampires, modeling his life and his actions on the old ones, and up until now, the promised rewards had come his way. He preyed on humans. He used his skills. He plotted and planned, making strategy his guide. The lieutenants and seconds he developed were sought after by monarchs across the country. He had expanded his territory, taking in both New England and The Carolinas kingdoms. Even with the myriad challenges he faced and the additional responsibility it entailed, he transitioned things well and profits grew.

Misha felt the injustice of the Ancient Pythoness’ actions swell his throat and tighten his chest. He had succeeded, yet when it came time to reward and recognize his achievements, he was passed over! The titles, which should rightly have come to him were, instead, handed to the Viking.

“It must be his looks!” Misha grumbled out loud. He turned his head when Andrew came back into the room, a bucket in his hand and a small apron tied around his hips. “I’ll be upstairs,” Misha sniffed.

The King didn’t stop at the next floor or the floor above that. Instead he continued until he was standing in his rooftop garden. It felt better, somehow, to be out here in the night air. The sounds of the City were a constant symphony of sound and the faint odor of car exhaust was everywhere, but it didn’t matter. As Misha recalled the Ancient Pythoness’ harsh words toward him, the sour smell seemed appropriate.

Misha knew there were many who believed the Pythoness was a true Seer, that she could part the veils of time to see into the future. Misha knew in what was left of his heart that it was a story that was more myth than fact. Certainly he had seen many things in his long life, magic of all types, but a true Seer? Those were the things of fairy tales! Of course, the old crone was smart and she could read people better than almost anyone he had ever met, but Misha was convinced that was the end of it. There had been too many times she could have changed things, prevented things if she truly had sight. No, Misha was convinced she had a solid spy network and good instincts, nothing more, which meant she could make mistakes, mistakes like picking Northman.

“Perhaps if she saw he is not as protected as she believes,” Misha said out loud. “If she understood he is more of a liability to us?” Misha’s thoughts churned. Clearly a physical attack was out of the question. Felipe and his pathetic progeny had demonstrated that, and then Misha chuckled.

Misha walked back downstairs. The room was put to rights. There was no sign of the broken glass or spilled blood. A fire was blazing in the fireplace and the dark stain on the back bricks was gone, replaced by the soot of burning wood. Misha walked to his laptop, the one that sat idle on the back table behind his desk. This was where he stored all his bits and pieces, the things he’d collected that could be used later.

Misha had rules that he followed, rules designed to keep this ‘vault’ secure. The laptop was never powered up longer than five minutes. Misha took steps to have all connectivity removed or disabled,
but he didn’t wish to risk someone discovering a way to trigger some dormant capability. Signing in required two passwords and everything was encrypted, including the start-up routines. Misha kept a bowl of new USB thumb drives next to the laptop. Information was collected from other devices. The information was printed and then rescanned before it was saved to Misha’s business computer. From there, the file was downloaded to one of the new thumb drives, run through another anti-viral scanning program, and only then was it uploaded to the laptop that sat on back of the desk. Once the file was loaded, the thumb drive was crushed.

Each file was uniquely named, the label leading off with the name of the person who had the most to lose if Misha’s information came to light. There were three separate files that started with ‘E-Northman.’

These files had been collected by Misha’s now finally dead second, Carlo. Carlo had discovered the material in the apartment of a woman in Boston. Her name was Sonder and she had been one of Bill Compton’s fuck and feeds. Compton had also made the mistake of telling his little pet about his killing sprees which gave Misha the leverage he needed to blackmail the writer. Compton had proven adept at killing on demand until the pressure caused him to snap. The second Rhodes was the result which only proved to Misha what an imperfect servant Carlo had been.

Still, the letters stacked in Sonder’s apartment were an unexpected bounty. They came from another woman in New Orleans. The cover letter talked about their friendship and common cause. This other woman, Meg, had gone to some trouble to collect information and pictures of the donor pool that existed in the palace in New Orleans. Meg pinpointed the date when the donors disappeared and she had proof that Eric Northman was in the building that night.

Purging pools was a time-honored tradition. There was a time, before Misha was King, that he had participated in purgings. Before things became so costly and privacy so difficult to ensure, it was not uncommon for Sheriffs and even subject vampires to keep donors in their residences. There were basement rooms converted from wine cellars or coal rooms that made perfect holding pens. Some kept their donors in better circumstances, but the practice fell from favor for all but royalty almost a hundred years ago. Since monarchs were expected to entertain and maintain large staffs, donor pools remained a part of their lives, but recently that changed as well.

If Misha tried to pinpoint it, the change came with mainstreaming. Suddenly there was an expectation that there would be more interaction with humans, and not in the hunting and feeding way. Natural instincts were channeled to the pursuit of money instead of blood and pools started to become more liability than luxury. Misha was sure Northman wasn’t the only one to wipe out his pool, but his was the only action that was documented.

Misha smiled tightly as he loaded the new thumb drive into his laptop vault. He dragged the three files onto the drive, made certain the files were now deleted from his laptop, and powered everything down. Taking the thumb drive, he turned around to face his business computer. Closing his eyes, he reviewed all the FBI contacts he knew in the country. He was sure he had at least one name in Louisiana, and then, in his mind’s eye, he saw her. She was not unattractive, but she was known to be a rabid hater of vampires. Her face appeared in photographs showing vampires being executed by chaining them to meet the morning sun. Misha remembered the faint smile her face held as the tortured souls before her were writhing in their final agonies. ‘Nothing like a zealot,’ Misha thought.

“What are you doing?” Andrew was standing before him. Misha felt irritated that he was so intent on his mission that he hadn’t heard Andrew approach.

“I am going to reveal Northman for the bad investment he is,” Misha smiled.

“Majesty…” and Andrew’s face was troubled. The house man almost seemed to back away, but then
he turned back, “Are you certain of this course of action? If Miss Pamela should find you were involved in harming her Maker…”

“And who would tell her?” Misha’s eyes narrowed. “Have you decided you favor her?” Misha’s words were gentle, but Andrew was no fool.

“No, Majesty,” Andrew bowed his head. “I am loyal only to you. There is no choice for me.” He waited and Misha finally nodded, satisfied of Andrew’s sincerity.

“Then what is your concern?” Misha asked.

“Miss Pamela honors the Viking. Even though they fought, she still feels great affection toward him. To damage him may feel to her as if you are trying to damage her,” and Andrew waited.

“It is a risk,” Misha conceded, “But a slim one. There is nothing that ties me to this information. Compton is dead. Meg, the woman who created this material is dead. Even Sonder is dead. All that remains are these files and no one will question an anonymous source when the information is so well documented.”

“Then you are decided?” Andrew confirmed.

“You will see,” Misha grinned. “Eric the North Man will be crucified by the FBI and the press. He will be arrested and probably executed, maybe others who surround him, too. The Pythoness will have to retract her offer and consider naming another. If she chooses me, all is well. If she decides not to name another, that is even better and things continue as they are.” Misha leaned back, “And Pam will need to leave him.” Misha crossed his hands across his stomach. “She won’t be able to stay because her business, particularly her event planning business, relies on a good reputation. She will have one fewer place she can go to ground.”

“She still has Maude,” Andrew reminded Misha.

“It might be better if Maude removed herself to Sanctum permanently,” Misha mused. “Then Pam would have her great friend, but closer.” He looked up to see Andrew’s shocked expression, “But that is a thought for another day. First, let’s get the doors of New Orleans kicked closed.”

“If I wait any longer, Thalia, that cold bitch, will have her police in place. They may be able to interfere. No, Andrew,” and Misha’s fingers flew over the keyboard. “No, now is the time to act.” He inserted the thumb drive into the USB port and dragged the files onto this email. “The best time to end a King,” Misha smirked, “Is before he is crowned.” Misha hit the ‘send’ button and smiled broadly.

New Orleans

Pam and Max sat in the little office in New Orleans. Thalia was looking at a street map of the city and Thierry stood beside her. Thierry had arrived from Lafayette during the day and was staying here, in the Palace, on the second floor, across the courtyard from the King and Queen. “I didn’t recognize the guards stationed at their door,” he remarked to Thalia.

“Their regular crew is still on extended vacation,” Thalia told him. “After Bon Temps they gave their Were time to spend with their families.” Owen and Charles were given full months off and fully-paid trips for their entire families to Disneyland. James was also given a vacation, but he was already back on duty. Emil filled in the gaps in staff that this created from his Pack and there was no problem finding those anxious to try out for the post. After what they had seen or heard, every Were
knew that working for the Vampire King and his mate did have a few dangers, but they were more than offset by the benefits. What was more, working for the Viking was not like working for other vampires. The North Man respected his guards and treated Weres more as equals. For a traditional relationship where the balance was so clearly defined (vampires were up and Weres were most definitely down), it was a refreshing change.

“Any idea when we might see them?” Max asked. Everyone knew he meant Eric and Sookie.

Thierry smirked and then laughed, “They are noisy. They laugh a great deal.”

“She suits him,” Thalia nodded.

Pam stood up and walked to stand next to Thalia, “What are the options?” she asked. Thalia was looking at three potential locations for her police headquarters. Thalia pointed to the buildings and gave a quick summary of each.

“I will also ask the FBI here for their recommendation,” Thalia said with less enthusiasm.

“I imagine working with them will become an everyday event,” Thierry snickered. Thalia had dealt with the FBI before, most recently in Rhodes following the second bombing. She walked away from that experience with a less than positive impression of the agency and more particularly, the agents.

“I am sure we will come to an understanding,” the black-eyed vampire said, her voice low and somewhat menacing.

“Charm can be a mighty weapon!” Max reminded Thalia.

“You are being cruel!” Thierry laughed more fully, “To remind her of those gifts she is entirely without!” Thalia cast him a warning shot, but Thierry shrugged at her, wagging a finger while he continued, “Were you to look up the definition of blunt instrument, surely your picture would be there! Our Thalia is the bull in the justice china shop, ready to break heads in the name of truth!”

“You’ll find your head pulled off your shoulders if you don’t learn to stop poking at badger holes!” Thomas’ voice interrupted. Everyone turned as he and Karin entered from the hallway.

“Brother!” Thierry moved swiftly toward the couple, wrapping Thomas in his embrace.

“Do you mind?” Thomas asked softly in Thierry’s ear.

“You know what I wish,” Thierry assured him, “I am happy for you both.”

While it wasn’t official, every vampire in the office knew that Thomas would be offered the position of King of Louisiana. As far as Thalia could tell, James had been the first to overhear it and he told Devrah, but, in doing so, one of the vampires on staff overheard and he told Maxwell Lee. Max told Pam and Pam told Thalia. Thalia normally would not have told anyone else, but she worried about Thierry’s reaction so decided to tell him ahead of time. Pam likewise walked over to hug Karin and Thalia realized Pam had also passed the information to her sister.

As Thierry pulled back, he said, “I can’t help thinking what a lovely bride you’d make!” It seemed to be an inside joke of some sort because Thomas’ eyes narrowed but he seemed to find it amusing. Thierry turned then and with grace that just bordered on mocking, bowed over Karin’s hand. “And you, Karin of Slaughter, appear particularly lovely!” When she laughed, he straightened himself, and more seriously enfolded her in an embrace, saying, “I am pleased my Brother has found you. You make him complete.”
Thalia could tell that Thierry’s words pleased Karin. It was in the woman’s eyes. Thalia wondered what mischief the French Sheriff was contemplating and resolved to ask him about it later.

James appeared at the door and coughed. The vampires turned as one and stood still, waiting. “They are ready for you,” he announced, looking toward Thomas and Karin.

“You deserve this,” Pam told her sister and they watched as Thomas and Karin followed James from the room.

“How things have changed,” Max said out loud.

“In what way?” Thierry asked.

“We hand our titles from one to the other with no battle, no challenge,” Max answered.

“It was changing even before mainstreaming,” Pam observed, and then turning toward Thalia, said, “And with this new army, it will change even more.”

“It has long been in my mind that we have needed this,” Thalia nodded, taking one last look at the map before moving to stand behind a chair. “Of course, we have our Assizes. We get justice for small vampire matters, and great ones if the Pythoness agrees to hear them, but for some time I have thought that vampires have needed the ability to expect protection along with their justice.”

“In what way?” Max asked.

“I often think of Sophie-Ann LeClerq,” Thalia told him. “She was clever and, while she could be vain, she was a good Queen. We accepted her rule and we honored her, but when she was injured through no fault of her own, all her good works came to nothing. The hunt was on to end her and to take her kingdom.”

“In all fairness, it’s how things have always been,” Max pointed out.

“But, as Pam mentioned, things have changed,” Thalia countered. “Centuries of experience and knowledge gone in a moment, because she had bad luck. We deserve better than that!”

“It is an interesting concept, this justice you describe, but I wonder if we are ready for it,” Thierry was draped across one of the armchairs. His voice was light, but Thalia looked at him closely. It was when he affected this attitude that the Frenchman was at his most sharp. “Our way of life may carry away those who deserve better, but what of those who deserve a swift end? Why give them the opportunity to escape the fate they deserve?”

“If it is their fate to meet their final death, then let the evidence speak to that,” Thalia shrugged. “It worked in Kansas. Those vampires deserved their end and justice was served.”

“They were minor functionaries who owed allegiance to a weak King,” Thierry’s voice remained soft as though this conversation meant little to him, but he leaned forward. Thalia was not fooled.

“You mean, what if the vampire who deserves death is a King?” Thalia allowed the question to hang in the air and all eyes turned to Pamela.

“I have to know!” Pam told them. “If Misha was the reason Bill Compton ended up in Rhodes, I have to know.”

“I say stake him now and ask questions later,” Max growled. When Pam’s eyes swung his way, he said, “You have said enough to let me know that not everything has been wonderful between you.
Your heart is not engaged. He is surrounded by bad rumors and worse stories. He is old and dangerous. Why wait?”

“If there were an assassination now,” Thalia fixed Max with her narrow gaze, “I would feel compelled to investigate. If I could not find cause, I would feel compelled to punish the vampire, rather than reward that vampire with a kingdom.” She turned back toward Thierry, “It is likely that punishment would be true death. I favor meeting the sun. It allows the wrong-doer time to contemplate his or her own stupidity, and I hear the final moments are excruciatingly painful.”

“Too bad you weren’t around to avenge Tranh,” Thierry said to no one in particular while contemplating his fingernails. Tranh was the former Queen of New England. She and Misha’s rivalry ended when Misha ended her. No one denied nor disputed what happened, and Misha had sent Sookie one of Tranh’s fangs as a pledging gift.

When Thalia started to growl, Pam interrupted, “As Thalia points out, things have changed and we can’t go back to try and change our past. What we can do is decide how we are going to move forward. And I, for one,” and now Pam looked directly at Thalia, “I need to know what really happened at Rhodes. I know Compton was the cause of that explosion and not some hate group. I also know it took some major kick in the ass to get Compton to move. He could talk himself out of things faster than most, so that he felt such despair that he was willing to do something tells me there is more here than meets the eye.”

Thalia nodded, “You know how I feel about this. I believe Misha was the reason Compton acted, but we have no proof.”

“And again, I’m betting that proof we need is sitting in the computer behind Misha’s desk,” Pam stated.

“She’s right,” Thierry nodded. “He stores all his most damaging secrets in that single computer. When he is out of town he takes the hard drive from it and locks it away. It is rumored he then smashes the computer itself and replaces it with another, just in case there is some residual information stored on the mother board. He never allows direct interface from another device. He takes steps to keep it from connecting to anything.”

“I know it requires more than one password,” Pam added.

“He will have his regular password and then the second to pass the encryption,” Thierry agreed.

“This is a really bad idea,” Max told Pam. “I know you have decided he’s not the love of your life, but you still have some affection for him. The idea of you trying to go back into that house and fool him has disaster written all over it.”

“I would agree,” Thierry gave Pam a long look. “Misha is an uncanny reader of people. I’m assuming you have not exchanged blood. If you had, you would not be welcome to return. Misha does not tolerate those who are not completely loyal to him. You agreed to be his, his companion! You’ve changed your mind. If he finds out, he will feel compelled to end you.”

“You don’t know that!” Pam protested.

“I do,” Thierry told her. “He will follow the ways of Appius Ocella. It didn’t matter how attached Appius was, if he felt those around him, even those he had made, were less than worthy…”

“He would end them,” Thalia finished. “Pam, I can’t recommend you return.”

“I don’t have to stay long,” Pam told them. “You don’t understand! I have to know. They lost their
child! Eric was…is, still suffering because of it. I was with Misha when all of this happened. He was telling me how much he loved me, while at the same time he was destroying my Maker and Sookie?” Pam stood up, her turmoil forcing her to walk back and forth, but then she stopped in front of Thalia. “Maybe it was my better instincts that kept me from engaging my feelings. Maybe it was some small voice telling me it wasn’t wise, but this isn’t about that.”

“He has made you doubt your ability to judge people,” Thalia accurately guessed, but she could see from Pam’s reaction, the vampire wasn’t ready to accept that interpretation.

“No!” Pam protested, “It’s not about that! It’s about Eric and Sookie! If everything you told me is true, Thalia, he used me to hurt Eric. I…” and Pam faltered. She looked around her to find sympathetic eyes, “I have to know,” she said quietly and then sat next to Max who took her hand in his.

“Then you should be allowed to find out,” Thierry agreed. Thalia’s eyes narrowed. She knew the Frenchman’s motives were hardly altruistic. He wanted Misha gone and would support any opportunity to end him. “But there are dangers beyond detection to consider. For one thing, you can’t take the laptop from the house. Assume there are alarms and locks that will engage if certain of Misha’s belongings get too close to a window or a door. If you are going to get information and get off premises, you won’t be able to carry it with you.”

“You haven’t been a resident of that house for many years,” Thalia interrupted. “You don’t know if any of your assumptions are accurate. We have that expert of Felipe’s. We should call him and describe what we know about the computer, how he handles it, and his security systems.”

“He still has everything alarmed?” Thierry pressed Pam.

“And metal bars that drop into the floor at all the doors,” Pam nodded.

Thierry smirked, “You know, Thomas outfitted his lair with the same type of doors? It has proven highly effective!” but then the Sheriff’s expression turned more serious. “Of course, you have figured out Andrew.”

“You mean how dangerous he is?” Pam asked.

“He could go up against Karin, and I’m not sure I’d place bets on the outcome,” Thierry nodded. “Has Jason moved in yet?” When Pam shook her head, Thierry explained to Thalia, “It would be standard practice for Misha to have his new Second move in for awhile so that both he and Andrew can watch his in close quarters. We know Jason killed Carlo, so you know Jason’s skills are extraordinary.”

“Were you his Second?” Pam asked Thierry.

“No,” Thierry shook his head. “I was offered the position, but I turned it down. Misha’s Second at the time was the vampire who mentored me when I first came to this country and I would have had to kill him. It’s how Misha does it, survival of the fittest.” The French vampire’s expression softened, “If it’s any consolation, Pam, I have never seen him treat a vampire as he treats you. Andrew has long served as his lover, but he has set you above even him. I never would have guessed him capable.”

“That’s great,” Pam shrugged, “But it seems that even all that emotion couldn’t stop him from screwing with the ones I care about.”

“He wasn’t raised right,” Thierry quipped, making Pam smile in spite of herself.
“Sure you don’t want to wait for a warrant or impose some new rule?” Max asked Thalia.

“And allow Misha to destroy what we want?” Thalia’s lip curled. “Humans are stupid! Better to steal what we want and let his innocence speak for itself. The evidence is there, or not.”

“It’s just a matter of getting our hands on it,” Thierry agreed.

“I will call Felipe,” Thalia nodded. Turning to Pam, she said, “We must consider whether or not we tell the Viking. If you are caught, it would be best if he didn’t know.”

“He would never forgive you,” Max told Thalia.

“I don’t think I would want to keep this kind of secret,” Pam nodded. “If the worst were to happen, Eric would need all the facts. If he is surprised, he could do something rash.”

“And if you do survive, you will need someplace safe to come to ground,” Max added.

“The best place would be here in New Orleans,” Thierry agreed.

“I could go to Minnesota,” Pam shrugged.

Thalia scowled, “To go there would place Maude in danger. Misha will want to act quickly. We need to get you somewhere where you have strong allies who can fend off any kind of assault. This is the only place.”

When Pam nodded, Thierry continued, “You will need to get out of the house quickly. You will need a car. If you’re on a plane, he can have it turned back. You don’t want a bus or train. Their routes are known. He can have people waiting. He can bribe a taxi to take you someplace. No rental cars. They have trackers. He’ll find a way to hack in and intercept you.”

“We can buy a car and have it made available,” Thalia agreed.

“Who rises earliest?” Max asked. The vampires turned to look at him. “If Pam is the oldest, it could be the window she needs to collect whatever she needs and get out of the house. Even if it’s only by a few minutes, it could be enough.”

Thalia nodded, “Clever,” she complimented Max. “We will need to coordinate this. Likely you won’t have much head start before Misha has his vassals hunting you.”

“If we know when you plan to do this, we can arrange to meet you just over his border. The best option, though not the fastest, would be to drive through to Pennsylvania. Judith won’t challenge Misha directly, but she won’t help him either,” Thierry told her. “If you can reach the border, we can join you and get you home.”

Thalia nodded, “I have been through Pennsylvania a number of times now. There are good places to go to ground and friends who will aid us along the way.”

“Judith may not stop us, but she won’t help us either,” Pam said. “It may come to a fight.”

“I don’t mind the prospect of fighting that bastard,” Max told her, “or finding my final death beside you. Either option is acceptable.”

“Then I think we’d better start lining up our resources,” Pam nodded.

“And if it turns out we’ve misjudged him?” Thalia asked.
“Then I guess I’ll owe him retribution,” Pam shrugged. “I’ll buy him truckloads of flowers and send him a song, but either way, I’m done with New York.” Pam shook her head, “What was I thinking?"

XXxxx

“You will need to speak with each of the Sheriffs. Their pledge was to me as the King of Louisiana. Once the transition is complete, their duty ends. Keeping them or replacing them is your choice.” Eric and Sookie were meeting with Karin and Thomas in the enclosed garden that made up the middle of the Palace building structure. Sookie sat next to Eric on the adjoining armchair. The firmness of the seat suited her better now, the straight back allowing her to place a pillow at the right angle to support her. The telepath had been listening attentively, but suddenly she shifted and rubbed the side of her distended belly, her expression turned inward.

“Does it hurt?” Karin asked. While she still viewed the pregnancy cautiously, spending this time around her Maker’s mate allowed her to feel a little less repulsed by it.

“He’s just real active this time of night,” Sookie smiled, her hand rubbing along her side. Eric was watching Sookie as well and Karin saw their eyes meet. She was sure they were communicating. It was as if she could almost hear it, whispers just beyond her ear. Her Maker smiled and turned back to Thomas.

“You are sure you wish me as your successor?” Thomas asked. “Thalia…..”

“Thalia can speak for herself,” Eric told him, “And she has told me she has had enough of vampire gifts for a while. Until she can figure out how to give her latest gift back, she won’t be accepting any more.” Eric’s expression was pleasant and Sookie laughed. Thalia had left the Zeus Summit as head of the newly formed vampire police force. Thalia’s plan was to leave that responsibility with the Ancient Pythoness, but it hadn’t happened that way. Instead the old crone had cackled and announced before all the assembled monarchs and minions of Zeus that Thalia would wield this new army of their world in the Pythoness’ name.

“You are the best candidate,” Eric told Thomas. No one mentioned Thierry, who was the other obvious candidate, but, then again, no one in this room thought the French Sheriff would be content in Louisiana. All knew the Frenchman had his eye trained on another throne far to the north. “I have not left the kingdom in the best of shape in terms of personnel. You will need to find replacements. I will be happy to assist in asking the monarchs for recommendations if you wish.” Thomas nodded, but they both knew the younger vampire wouldn’t take up that offer. Thomas had served in several kingdoms before taking his current position with Eric. Between Karin and himself they had a wide acquaintance that spanned both the United States and most of Western Europe. Vampires were wanderers, but they were forever to most of those they knew still lived. Eric could tell Thomas was already making mental lists of possible fits.

“You don’t mind moving the capital to Little Rock?” Sookie asked.

“No, Majesty,” Thomas smiled. “It provides us distance, both physically and in the minds of our peers. New Orleans will be the hub of the vampire world on this continent, and with the City’s acceptance of vampires and all things supernatural, that is as it should be.” It was a good speech and Sookie was pretty sure Thomas actually meant it. Karin didn’t look quite so pleased, but Karin, for all her surly independence, liked to immerse herself in a more cosmopolitan lifestyle and Little Rock was no New Orleans.

There was no question of Thomas retaining the role of Clan Chief. That title would pass to another, and, in spite of their protests, Eric had reached out to Russell Edgington or Bartlett Crowe and he was awaiting their call, confirming they would emerge from their self-declared retirement to take it
There was a loud noise above them and they all glanced up. “Your old friend, Alcide Herveaux, is upstairs working. Would you like to see him?” Sookie asked.

“Alcide Herveaux is not my friend,” Karin smirked. “I think Pam’s the one with the soft spot for the old dog.”

“Well, he’s promising the renovations will be finished in another two weeks,” Sookie smiled and then she asked, “Would you like to see it?”

“I appreciate the offer,” Karin was smiling but her eyes were not. “But I will decline. The dust and smell of that many Weres in such a closed space might be distracting.” Eric laughed and Thomas’ lip curved up, but he looked worried.

‘She mad at me?’ Sookie asked Eric silently.

‘No, Lover. She knows we are adding rooms for children. It makes her uncomfortable. When this child arrives and it smells of me, her attitude will change.’ Eric smiled indulgently at his eldest child. Karin, for all her need for physical action, was the least accepting of change and change was all she’d had since the takeover. She had bonded with Thomas, which would be a big adjustment for any vampire. It was a well-known fact that during the first months of bonding there were times when even those less strong-willed than Karin struggled. No one who knew Thomas and Karin would think that bonding was not proving a challenge, but that wasn’t their only change. Karin had physically moved north. She was establishing herself as regent in that new territory which meant new people and the need to prove dominance, and now Thomas would be King for both states. Being able to welcome a new type of sibling on top of everything else was a step beyond what Karin was prepared to handle.

“I do not foresee any issues in terms of New Orleans,” Thomas said. “My preference would be as you have suggested. It is declared a Free Zone. I assume that means you would retain staff here to administer it?”

Eric smiled, Thomas’ words convincing him that he made the right choice. “Yes, as you say. The responsibility for New Orleans will be mine. Thalia’s police will serve the role of Sheriff within the borders of the City.”

“What about Max?” Karin asked.

Eric shook his head, “No, I won’t ask Maxwell Lee to continue as Sheriff. Security is not his strength. I have need for someone to organize and run the administrations of this office, such as they are. Max has agreed to accept that role.”

“Have you figured out what those duties are yet?” Karin asked.

“Travel, for one thing,” Sookie said. “It’s pretty clear that we’ll need to attend most of the Summits for a while, or at least until things settle down.”

“I’m not surprised,” Thomas nodded. “This idea of a supreme King is new and many will need to be convinced of its wisdom even with the blessing of the Pythoness.”

“We got congratulations from lots of folks,” Sookie smiled and placed her hand on Eric’s knee.

“But not all,” Eric added. “Our friend in New York has been silent.”
“I’m not surprised,” Thomas’ tone was serious. “He will be important to bring into line. He has submitted to the Pythoness in past, but I’m not sure how far his respect for her may carry in this case."

“Have you talked with Pam about him?” Karin asked.

“I have asked Pam to be my Second,” Eric replied. Karin could tell Eric knew something, but she didn’t feel that now was the time to get into it. Besides, Pam was just next door and it would be best to have her sister speak for herself.

“Are you happy to be High King?” Karin asked instead.

Eric’s smile remained, but his eyes were not so cheerful, “It is a great honor,” he told her. “One we,” and he swept his eyes to include Sookie, “will try to be worthy of holding.”

Thomas was watching Karin carefully. He seemed to make a decision, and he interrupted before his mate could pursue things further, “We are heading out into the City with Thierry and Max. Perhaps you would like to join us?”

“Perhaps later,” Eric replied. “We are expecting our new attorney and Pam and I have much to discuss.”

“You and Pam could go out and join them later,” Sookie spoke directly to Eric. “I’m afraid my nights have become pretty boring.” She touched her stomach, but then, as if catching herself, she removed her hand and, looking at Karin, said, “I do apologize for not being able to join you. It really is a night for celebration. I am happy for you, happy for you both. You are going to make a wonderful Queen!”

“I won’t be Queen,” Karin corrected.

“You will always be my Queen,” Thomas said gallantly. Before any more could be said, the knock at the door let them know the next visitors had arrived.

“It would be nice to see you out and in the night,” Karin told Eric as he hugged her goodbye.

“We’ll see,” he replied, but they all knew it really meant, ‘no.’

No sooner were Karin and Thomas out the door than Mr. Cataliades was in. He was wearing his customary dark suit, but Sookie could see that something had changed. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Ah,” the attorney smiled slightly, “I suppose I am looking a little out of sorts. Separation from any employment can be a shock,” and he seemed to be making an effort to look less haggard. “But, of course, Prince Niall was correct. It was time that we parted ways, professionally.”

“Did he damage you?” Eric asked.

Sookie was shocked, and then, somehow, she wasn’t. “Did he?” she asked as well.

“Nothing of the sort,” Mr. Cataliades assured them. “Of course, I signed a confidentiality agreement. The terms were unique so the negotiations of our separation, especially in view of my employment with you, were complex.”

“Why…” Sookie started, but Eric was in her head, telling her that now was not the time to press the demon.
“I am most grateful that you have agreed to become Counsel to the High King,” Eric told the attorney. “Your reputation is known to all and, of course, the Pythoness herself congratulated me on my approaching you.”

Mr. Cataliades almost looked relieved, but there was something else that Sookie couldn’t put her finger on. “I will do my best to justify the confidence you have placed in me.” There was an awkward silence broken when Sookie shifted again, her hand rubbing the place her son was pushing against.

“I would offer you a gift.” Mr. Cataliades’ eyes were on Sookie’s unborn child, and then he looked up into the telepath’s eyes. “I would offer you a thimble of my blood.”

“I’m not sure…” Sookie stammered.

“It is a true gift,” Eric interrupted, “And we are honored by the offer.”

Mr. Cataliades nodded. “You do not need to decide immediately,” he said, keeping his eyes on Sookie. “I realize that the telepathy you inherited through my gift was the cause of many problems to you growing up. If Fintan had lived, he would have helped you. For my part, I didn’t fully appreciate that your Grandmother didn’t understand what was involved. I assumed Fintan would have told her.”

Mr. Cataliades sighed, “It could be that when your father and aunt were born without any spark, Fintan assumed the magic had failed, but Sookie,” and the attorney smiled. “In this case, it wouldn’t fail. With your current magic, it would almost guarantee telepathy for your children. They would probably have stronger telepathy than you. You can read vampires now, but I suspect once this child is born, your powers will fade again.”

“I can read Eric,” Sookie told Mr. Cataliades, “Not other vampires.”

“Your children would,” the demon persisted. “And you would be here to train them. You could help them discover how to block and filter the thoughts of others. They would come to understand the power of the gift. Consider the advantages of knowing the motivations of those around you. They will not be fooled. They will know danger before it gets close.”

“They won’t be able to form close relationships because they won’t be able to stop hearing every stray thought that filters through anyone’s mind,” Sookie said, her voice sad. “They’ll hear every silly rumor. They’ll know about things they are too young to understand. I know that in time they’d learn to block, but how do you explain that to a baby? We don’t live in Fae where everyone is that way. People in this world don’t know to watch their thoughts around children. They don’t understand telepathy at all. I appreciate the offer, I do, and I understand the benefits, but I think I need to turn this one down,” Sookie told the attorney.

Mr. Cataliades nodded, “I understand,” he told Sookie. “The offer is always there for you.”

Eric watched her thought-hooded eyes, and Sookie had the feeling she and her husband would be discussing this again later. Instead, the Viking picked up the leather portfolio of documents Prince Niall had left. “These are bequests from Sookie’s Grandfather. Does your separation agreement preclude you from reviewing anything from Niall?”

“Certainly not!” the attorney said, “I would be delighted to review these and provide my assessment!”

There was something about how Mr. Cataliades said it. He wasn’t exactly rubbing his hands together or jumping up and down with glee, but he still looked a little too happy. “You thinking you’re going to find something we won’t like?” Sookie asked.
“In truth, Princess,” Mr. Cataliades winked, “I’m counting on it!”
Chapter 36 - Moving to Stations

New Orleans

“It will be beautiful,” Pam assured Sookie. The nursery was still just a web of framing and bare wiring. The bathroom tub had been re-installed, but little else. Pam didn’t have to be bonded to Sookie to see her swing precipitously between pride and despair. “I build out clubs all the time, Sookie. Framing means you’re almost there,” Pam told her, patting the telepath’s arm.

“You think so?” Sookie was wringing her hands and there was a tremor in her voice.

“I know so!” Pam said with such confidence that Sookie’s lip straightened and her mood lifted. “Now, you look exhausted.” Pam turned to Thalia, “Would you mind walking her downstairs? I want to catch up with Alcide.”

Thalia nodded, but Pam caught the vicious look the small vampire threw toward the former Packmaster. Pam felt the same way about it. The construction was not nearly done, and Alcide Herveaux’s team had been at it for weeks. The minute Sookie disappeared down the stairs, Pam rounded on the Were, prepared to let him have it with both barrels, but he was already standing before her with his hands up. “It’s not me!” he protested. “It’s your fucking Master! I’m telling you, Pam, he’s up here stopping work every goddamn night! Here’s a ten,” and he pulled a bill out of his pocket, “If your Maker doesn’t come up here twice before the night’s over, I’ll give it to you. He’s a frigging head case and he’s making this way harder than it needs to be!”

As if he read the Were’s mind, Eric’s head appeared in the stairwell. “Dead man walking,” one of the Weres grumbled from down the hall, and Alcide shot Pam a look.

Eric was looking in the opposite direction, but before he could get started, Pam walked over to intercept him, “Looking for me?”

“Yes,” he said, but Pam could tell it was only half true. “So, you got a tour of the work? What did you think?” and Eric took another step into the hall, clearly looking as if he intended to continue on his own tour.

“I think these Weres have a lot of work to complete in a short time,” Pam said pointedly. “I hope you’re penalizing them for being so far behind schedule.” She could hear Alcide start to growl, “Unless there is another reason they are being held up,” and Pam turned to stare directly at Eric. “Are you having supply problems?”

Eric was giving her his snarly look. She could tell he suspected her of manipulating him. “No, the suppliers have been available.”
“Well, then,” Pam shrugged, “I can’t explain it! You should have seen Sookie. I thought she was going to cry when she saw how little progress there’s been.” Pam drilled Eric with another glare, and then turned back to Alcide, “You really should be ashamed of yourself!” she scolded the Were.

“He may not have been totally to blame,” Eric mumbled behind her.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Pam swung back toward her Maker, “I know you would never do anything to make your wife’s life more difficult.”

Eric stared at her a minute and then said, “You’ve made your point.” He turned and together they walked down the stairs, leaving a grinning Alcide behind them. “Sookie was truly upset?” he asked once they had turned a corner.

“She was ashamed to show me how far behind the job was,” Pam didn’t give him an inch. “She’s already pretty uncomfortable. No telling how long she’ll actually carry this child, at least that’s what Amy Ludwig told Karin. I can’t imagine how upset she’d be if she drops that baby and there’s no place to put him.”

“Perhaps it would be acceptable if Alcide were to build during the day,” Eric was sounding pretty remorseful.

“Yeah,” Pam poked his arm, “Perhaps!”

They met Thalia on the second floor landing. “She said to tell you she had to go to sleep,” Thalia told the Viking. “She was so tired I helped her into her nightgown.” Thalia looked curious, “Is it normal, how big she’s become?”

“The doctor says everything is developing normally,” Eric said, but he glanced back up the stairs and Pam mentally cheered to see Thalia’s words make him worry further.

“Eric has decided to have the Weres work during daytime hours, too,” Pam stated, knowing that now Eric couldn’t back out.

“I’m surprised you didn’t do that before,” Thalia frowned at Eric. “It would probably be done by now.”

“My thoughts, exactly,” Pam agreed.

“Enough!” Eric snarled. “I have agreed and it will be done!” Eric turned to continue walking down the stairs while Pam and Thalia trailed him. Pam lifted her fist and Thalia nodded rather than fist bump in return. They walked into the small office and Pam sat down.

“Well, as long as you’re in such a good mood, I should probably let you know I’d love to be your Second, just not right away,” Pam told the Viking.

“It is a great deal to ask,” Eric nodded. “You have established a life in which you are happy. We would prefer to have you here, but we understand. We will find someone else.”

“It won’t be necessary,” Thalia spoke up. “The delay Pam proposes would not be prolonged.”

“What am I missing?” Eric’s eyes narrowed and he looked from one woman to the other.

“I am heading back to New York long enough to steal information from Misha,” Pam said nonchalantly.
“I thought you were happy there,” Eric’s eyes narrowed further and his voice was tighter.

“I think something’s going on,” Pam told him, “Something none of us will like. I can get into that house and get what we need to find out.”

“Who came up with this plan?” Eric hissed.

“We are working on it,” Thalia spoke up. “Thierry is calling Felipe de Castro. The Nevada snake is most anxious to harm Misha and is willing to be our great friend to do it.”

“He is probably hoping I’ll drop my lawsuit,” Eric was still looking wary, but more willing to listen.

“Doubtless,” Thalia said dryly. “He is giving us the use of a computer person of his…”

“Someone good at espionage,” Pam added.

“We know what we want,” Thalia continued. “The King maintains a stand-alone laptop in his office. We think it’s where he stores his secrets. If Pam can access the information…”

“Why not do it remotely?” Eric asked.

“He doesn’t leave the computer turned on,” Pam replied. “It makes it virtually impossible to ‘find’ it remotely.”

“You think it will be as easy as printing something or plugging in some drive?” Eric was becoming angry. “There will be passwords, firewalls. Misha has survived for a long time, what’s more, he has flourished!” Eric turned to Thalia, “You of all people know how dangerous he is. He is canny. He has to know that Pam is no longer…” and then he looked at the roses on the table next to his elbow.

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“He doesn’t leave the computer turned on,” Pam replied. “It makes it virtually impossible to ‘find’ it remotely.”

“You think it will be as easy as printing something or plugging in some drive?” Eric was becoming angry. “There will be passwords, firewalls. Misha has survived for a long time, what’s more, he has flourished!” Eric turned to Thalia, “You of all people know how dangerous he is. He is canny. He has to know that Pam is no longer…” and then he looked at the roses on the table next to his elbow. He looked at the roses on the table in front of the couch and the roses on the desk across the room. “Perhaps he does not appreciate how fleeting Pam’s affections can be,” and Eric nodded. “Let’s say that Misha has not come to appreciate how truly fickle you are. Let’s say he welcomes you back. Then what?”

“I’m older than everyone in the house,” Pam glanced at Thalia. “I will rise earliest. I believe Andrew and Misha are almost the same age. My twilight ends almost fifteen minutes before his. It would be enough.”

“When do the locks disengage?” Thalia asked.

“After Andrew rises,” Pam nodded. “I will need a reason to be out of the house before they realize what’s happened.”

“How often does he check that computer?” Eric asked.

“Most evenings he doesn’t go into his office until later. When I’m there we usually rise and head out to eat unless we’re entertaining in. He rarely goes into his office until later. I could have an hour… maybe more.” Pam was smiling and Eric could see her sense of adventure was overshadowing her common sense.

“But there is no guarantee, Pamela,” Eric shook his head. “I don’t like this idea. What could be so important that we need to take these kinds of risks?” He looked at Thalia, “I can’t believe you would support this.”

“I believe Misha has been behind a number of dangerous events. Even Rhodes…” Thalia stopped when Eric growled.
“If it was him pushing Bill Compton, then no one deserves revenge more than me, but Rhodes is over. It is past. There are other ways to find information that won’t require Pam walking into the lion’s den and taunting the lion.” Eric scowled at Pam, “I appreciate your sense of adventure. Your willingness to take risks has always been one of your most attractive qualities, but, in this case, I am inclined to forbid it.”

“You freed me,” Pam reminded him, and not kindly. “Are you going to reassert your Maker’s command?”

Eric looked at Pam. He let her feel his sadness and then his anguish. When her shoulders became a little less stiff, he said, “If something were to happen to you, I would not recover. You are my progeny. You are a part of me in a way that can never change. You carry my blood. I live in you, Pam!”

“Rhodes is not the only example,” Thalia continued. “The rogues were his. I know it. He is dangerous. Pam told me that following the teleconference with the Ancient Pythoness he was enraged.”

“He felt almost unbalanced,” Pam told Eric. “When he returned, we fought about my coming here. I saw a part of the video conference. Misha was furious over you being named High King.”

“He thought it should have been him,” Eric said, and then to Thalia, “So?”

“He models himself after Appius,” Thalia’s tone was the same that someone would use with a slow child. “Think, Viking! What would your Maker have done?”

“Found a way to destroy his rival,” Eric confirmed.

“We can’t afford to wait,” Thalia nodded. “You know this. If Misha intends to move against you, he will do it soon.”

“He may find it difficult,” Eric shrugged. “I have the protection of the Fae. Borders are watched. I have allies who inform me when things are amiss.”

“All the things Nabila doubtless told herself before she found herself living here in exile, and she was the lucky one. Tranh was not so lucky.” Thalia’s fangs extended toward the end, her last sentence a hiss.

“Maybe we’re wrong,” Pam nodded. “Maybe Misha has changed, but I’d rather know, and I know the answers are on that computer.”

There was a knock on the door. Thalia got up and let Thierry into the room. “What did you find out?” she asked.

“Felipe’s man says that if the computer is turned off after every use that could work to our advantage. It is during boot-up that it would be most vulnerable. He can provide a drive that would be able to bypass most security and take a dump of the data during power-up. If there is secondary encryption, though, it may fail.” Thierry shrugged, “It is the best he can do.”

Pam nodded, “How quickly can he get this drive to us?”

“He says it can be delivered here tomorrow, during the day,” and Thierry glanced at Thalia, and then at Eric, who was looking angrier.

“What does this accomplish?” the Viking asked. “This sounds like the flimsiest of plans. Even if this
drive succeeds, there is no guarantee there is anything useful. It may just prove that Misha is a savvy businessman with no ill intent."

“He’s vampire,” Thalia snarled, “There will be something!” and then she sat down. She watched Eric carefully and then leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, “You can’t be involved with this,” she told the Viking. “You are High King now. If it looks as if you were involved, no one would ever trust you again. If it’s just Pam, it’s a dispute between lovers. We say she grew angry with Misha and sought to punish him. If he chases her, she would be within her rights to end him.”

“And if there is something, if we’re right, and Misha has been trying to destroy you all along, then we have the proof to bring him to Assizes and punish him!” Pam declared.

“I can never dispute your loyalty,” Eric shook his head, “And I am grateful, but I still believe it would be more prudent to look for another way.”

“I wouldn’t count on your allies to be able to protect you from everything,” Thalia stood now. “You can become too reliant on the illusion of safety they provide. You and I both know that a determined foe will find a way and sometimes the only way to defend you and yours is through a strong offense.”

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t investigate,” Eric protested. “I’m saying that sending Pam into certain danger can’t be the only alternative.”

“What are you considering as alternatives?” Thierry spoke up. The French vampire had listened with increasing impatience. “You are wrong if you believe Misha is not already moving against you! This is exactly the kind of situation that prompts him to attack, and it won’t be you he’ll move against!” and Thierry threw his hands into the air, “It will be everyone you love! He will find your soft spot, your heart, and he will destroy that first.”

“Like Appius,” Thalia hissed. “He wants to see the pain of loss in your eyes when he ends you!” Eric’s fangs extended as well, and he almost unconsciously hissed. He could see in his mind’s eye the many times he had watched as Appius ended a rival. What Thalia and Thierry described was all too familiar. Eric had experienced too many times watching those who appeared friendly toward him tortured by Appius as a way to punish his progeny. He remembered the horror he felt when Appius came to Bon Temps. He was convinced that it was only Alexis’ growing insanity that had distracted the Old Roman from capturing and torturing Sookie. It was the kind of thing his Maker enjoyed, ripping whatever Eric loved apart, piece by piece, just so he could enjoy his progeny’s anguish.

“I don’t doubt Misha is motivated,” Eric said, his fangs retracting, “But I am unwilling to risk Pam to find out.” When Pam looked up, Eric told her, “I love you too dearly to try this, Pamela. You will not love me for it, but I will place a Command on you if I must.”

“This is a mistake!” Pam hissed.

“I agree with her,” Thalia spoke up.

“Perhaps,” Eric stood now, “But we must try to find another way.” He glanced toward the door, “And now you should go and find Thomas, Karin, and the rest. I don’t want to be bailing a new King out of jail.”

“You’re not coming with us?” Pam asked.

“You’re not surprised,” Eric replied.

“Talk with your mate,” Thalia growled. “Pam doesn’t leave until tomorrow. We should all speak of
this further.” Eric looked skeptical, but he didn’t say no. As they walked from the Palace and out into the night, Thalia turned to Pam, “I would to be reluctant to move without the Viking’s permission, but I still think this is our best option.”

Pam glanced at Thierry’s grim face before answering, “Then we just won’t tell him.”

XXXxxx

Susan Anderson grew up in a small town in the Midwest. Her family wasn’t overly religious, but Susan was given a clear understanding of what was right and what was wrong. When she chose to join the FBI her classmates were baffled, but her parents told everyone they’d always known their daughter would grow up to do something important.

Susan wasn’t the head of her class, but she worked very hard. Promotion came a little slower, but Susan made sure that none of her supervisors had cause to regret the opportunities they did present her. Susan found herself working human trafficking cases. This was not the glamorous side of the agency. The agents getting all the recognition were involved in domestic terrorism and cybercrime. The cases Susan was assigned were barely on the publicity radar. The work was grueling and there were few rewards. It was like wrestling an octopus. You cut off one arm and ten more appeared. What was more, the violence she saw on a daily basis was numbing. In many of the cases there would be a series of victims who met violent, tragic ends. Most of the victims were female, but there were a growing number of males, mostly young men and boys, who were killed in the skin trade.

When Susan told her mother a little about the nature of the work she handled, her mother asked how she could return to work every day. Susan told her mother it was the rage she felt for the victims that kept her going. In truth, Susan had a point when she started to worry about the amount of rage she seemed to be carrying from day to day. Susan started exercising regularly. At first it was time spent in the gym, but then she found she craved the physical exhaustion she found in more military style drills. Fortunately, her employer encouraged the time and effort required, and Susan found she could easily incorporate the extra hour or two she needed into her regular work day.

When vampires made the announcement that they existed and what’s more, they were mainstreaming, Susan was outraged. She had long suspected there were monsters living among them, and this confirmed it. There were things she’d seen in her years with her unit that she couldn’t justify as being the work of humans. Now, she knew. Humans could be cruel, but there were real villains who had to be behind these crimes and they wore fangs.

Susan had been stationed in New Orleans for several years. She didn’t like the city much. While Susan was used to hot weather, the combination of heat, humidity, and the smell of water gave the city an odor she found unappealing, and then there were the people.

There were some citizens who were ‘normal,’ like her. Mostly they were folks who moved into the City from places like Susan’s own home town. They came for the opportunities New Orleans offered, but they avoided the French Quarter and lived their lives quietly and courteously. Susan was friends with several of her neighbors who moved in around the same time she did. They invited her to their picnics and she watched their homes when they took vacations.

Then, there were the other people who lived in New Orleans, the crackpots. They believed in voodoo and witches. They wore charms and seemed to center their lives around strange festivals and Mardi Gras. They had customs that made no sense and everything they did, from the way they talked, to the way they walked, to the way they spontaneously broke into dance when they passed musicians on the street, just set Susan’s teeth on edge.

Susan was quick to volunteer when the first unit was put together to investigate vampire crime. She
was selected to participate in a few cases, and she was even there to witness an execution. Susan would never forget the sight of those vampires chained in silver against a wall. Their skin smoked where the chains rested against them. Her supervisor explained that all they had to do was wait for the sun to rise, and it would be over. Just before sunrise, Susan had walked closer to one and placed her crucifix on his arm, just to see if that would make his skin smoke, too. It hadn’t, but her supervisor had seen her and recommended she be transferred back to her unit.

It had been a blow, but Susan worked hard to convince her superiors that she changed. She applied for every open slot and she volunteered for any case looking for extra investigators involving vampires. That was how she got the opportunity to interview Eric and Sookie Northman.

There was a leader among the Silent Witnesses, a citizen’s action group that Susan supported, who went missing. There was a city-wide manhunt, but days and then weeks passed. The Northmans were identified as persons of interest since the leader, Meg something or other, had worked in their home as a domestic at one time. Susan went along on the interview as the junior agent. She was able to ask a few questions, but mostly she was there to observe. Aside from the vampires who had been executed, this was the closest she had ever been to a real vampire, and of all the vampires she could have met, this was the famous Eric Northman! People said he was over a thousand-years-old and he was handsome in the way that any demon can have an attractive face.

His so-called wife, Sookie, was some piece of work. Susan couldn’t put her finger on it, but she was sure there was something off about the woman. At first the agent had been prepared to be sympathetic; a human married, doubtless against her will, to a vampire. As the interview progressed though, Susan changed her mind. Sookie Northman was obviously in league with her husband and there was something about the way she looked at Susan that said she wasn’t exactly what she appeared to be. When they left, Susan asked her partner if Sookie Northman was a vampire, too. “If she is, she’s the only one that can walk around in daylight,” he’d laughed, but Susan knew there was something extra about the blond-haired woman.

The case had gone cold and the pressure from the Silent Witnesses waned as well. Susan went back to her own unit and spent extra time working cold cases. She had thought she found a connection between vampires, and in particular, Eric Northman and some missing women many months ago. These were young women who had come to New Orleans and disappeared from their apartment. There were no signs of foul play, but neither had they taken anything with them. One day they were going to work, paying rent, and the next, they were just gone. New Orleans was a port city and these women were attractive. It was possible that they were grabbed to be made into prostitutes in some other country that would appreciate their American looks and accent. Susan dug around some more, and then on a whim, used some facial recognition software and found one of the women in a street shot many years after her disappearance. She was well dressed and talking with a street vendor. She was standing outside the building where Eric Northman lived, although the picture was taken years before Northman took up residence. Susan searched the records and found that before Northman was there, another vampire, Sophie-Ann LeClerq, had been resident. People called her the Vampire Queen of New Orleans and there were plenty of pictures of vampire guards standing around the building in uniforms at night.

It all could have been a coincidence, but Susan’s instincts told her it wasn’t. She dug around, asking questions, and pressing those who knew about vampires. She showed the pictures of both of the missing women. She found people who had supplied food and other things to the palace, tracing from vendor to vendor to try and build a picture of who had access and who came and went. Susan covered the long wall of her living room with pictures and testimony. She drew intersecting lines.

Then, one day after questioning some of the people who were going in and out of the Palace, Susan’s research disappeared. She couldn’t explain it. It wasn’t a big file, but no matter how hard she
searched through her electronic folders, she couldn’t find it. She had paper notes, but her interviews, dates and locations were all in her electronic files. Susan fumed, knowing she should have printed out paper copies. She asked the internal IT department to see if they could run a trace on the file, but after a day she received word that the IT department was calling a halt. They told her the order to stop came from Susan’s supervisor. Susan rushed to her superior’s office, prepared to explain why this was important, but she knew just by looking at her boss that she wasn’t going to get much sympathy.

Her supervisor reminded her that her cold cases were on her own time and when she used Bureau resources to dig for some more information on the Palace, she was spending taxpayer money. Her supervisor asked Susan if she could explain her seeming obsession with vampires, and rather than get into the conversation, Susan reluctantly turned more of her attention to her other, non-vampire investigations. Susan thought the mystery of the woman standing outside of vampire central looked as if it would stay just that – a mystery.

Then, something unexpected happened. Susan opened her email one morning to find a message from an anonymous person. She didn’t recognize the address and when she ran it through all the FBI cyber protocols, it came back as unknown. It was a known signature by the Bureau and linked to information provided to several news outlets in North Carolina almost a year ago. The information had led to a break in a financial fraud ring and Susan felt a frisson of excitement.

Once she was given the ‘all clear,’ she opened the email to find a single document. It contained both the names and invoices of vendors who delivered things to the vampire building! The file also had three other names and one of those names was one of the women she had been tracking, the one she’d seen in the photo outside the palace. There were a few facts about each of the people, including the names of surviving family.

Susan looked at the receipts. These were mostly for food, but there was also a cable bill. In each case, the bills were uniformly high until the same month, and then they all dropped. It wasn’t conclusive, but it was odd.

Susan took everything to her supervisor and laid it out. She walked her through each piece and included the little she’d learned from her cold case.

“It’s thin,” her supervisor told her, “but you should pursue it.”

What Susan hadn’t told her supervisor was that the anonymous source had promised that if she showed progress, there would be more information coming. Susan knew she would be able to find more and she emailed back to the address that she had the green light. The message bounced back as undeliverable, but somehow Susan wasn’t worried. She knew that whoever this was, he or she would know.

Susan found new energy as she tracked down each of the vendors, receipts in hand. Some she’d spoken with before, but others, like the cable provider, were new. It was the cable company that was the most informative, although finding someone who could speak with her was the most difficult task she faced. Finally, they were able to confirm that on a certain date they received a call that cancelled over twenty boxes that had been installed in the Palace. The cable boxes had been in place for some time, some of them for as long as ten years. “Was there any explanation as to why they didn’t need them anymore?” Susan asked.

“No,” the representative told her, “They were all returned to our office on the same day and were tagged in and sent to our reclamation center.”

Susan knew she was on to something. There were no new names associated with the woman she had...
originally tracked, but she spent time looking into the other two names. It was the man, Denny, who provided the break. His mother was still living in upstate Louisiana. On a hunch, Susan drove up there so she could interview the woman face to face.

The house was like so many in this part of the state, a shotgun two-story with a porch across the front shaded by a tin roof. The woman who answered the door was thin and dry-looking, her lips a straight line and pressed tight. “I appreciate you coming up here to talk about my boy,” she said courteously and invited Susan in.

The living room was shabby but scrupulously clean. There were photographs of an attractive male. Susan was guessing that Denny had been an only child. The pictures were of a smiling boy who grew into a smiling man. “He was a blessing,” the older woman said, her eyes likewise traveling over the photographs. “He was so gentle and he loved to laugh!”

“How long ago did your son go missing?” Susan asked.

“The first time was almost right away after he went to New Orleans. I told him not to go, that he’d find trouble, but he told me it would be a better place for him. He was…special…you see. And folks here didn’t understand.” Susan realized the woman was telling him her son was gay. The woman lived in a small town in an out of the way place. Being gay out here could go one of two ways, and Susan guessed Denny was leaving so he could stop hiding who and what he was.

“How soon did you know he was missing?” Susan asked.

“Right away,” the woman nodded. “He didn’t call home. Denny always called home every night. He worried about me being here all on my own.”

“I’m so sorry,” Susan made sure she looked sympathetic. “But you heard from him again?”

The woman bit her lips together, and then she looked up in a way that was almost mischievous, “Yes, I did, actually. A couple times.”

Susan held her breath and sat very still until she was sure she had herself under control. “That’s not in my report. When did you hear from him?”

“Well,” the woman told her, “The first time was almost two years after he disappeared. He called me from out of the blue on my birthday. He told me he couldn’t talk long but he didn’t want me to worry. He told me he was living in a nice place with nice people. Of course, I did worry, but he told me he had found a place he fit in. I knew not to ask too many questions about that, but he did sound so happy.”

“Do you remember anything else he said, maybe about who else was there with him or about the place he was staying?” Susan asked.

“No,” the woman slowly shook her head, her eyes unfocused as she visibly tried to recall the conversation. “Mostly he talked about how happy he was and that I shouldn’t worry. He asked if I was okay for money and I told him I was.”

“Did he ever send you money or a letter?” Susan felt her heart pounding when the woman nodded.

“He sent me a card for my birthday another time.” The woman showed the card to Susan, but unfortunately she hadn’t kept the envelope. The writing inside was nothing more than some words from a son to his mother, the letters looped and sloping.

“Any other time?” Susan asked.
“Just the once more. He called to let me know that he was still in the same place but that some things had changed. He told me he thought he might be in love and that he knew I couldn’t understand, but that he hoped I would be happy for him.”

“Did he describe this person at all?” Susan asked.

The older woman blushed a little, “Well, you know my boy was special,” she stammered.

“I think what you’re trying to tell me is that your son was gay,” Susan nodded. When the woman looked embarrassed, Susan said, “I want you to know that I think love is a gift, regardless of the form it takes.”

It seemed to reassure the woman and she nodded, wiping a slow tear from her cheek, “Denny said he was very tall and blond. He said that he was sure this was the one, and he asked me to wish him luck.” The woman gave the dates and Susan realized that if Denny was in the vampire building, this call would have happened after Eric Northman took up residence. Susan knew in her heart that the man Denny was describing had to be Eric Northman.

“And did you hear from your son again?” Susan asked.

“No,” the woman whispered. “You see, I just knew something happened to him. My people, they know things, and one night I knew my boy was gone.”

Susan struggled to keep the scowl from her face. The woman sitting across from her was another of those silly, backwater simpletons. When she was sure she could speak without sounding sarcastic, she asked, “Do you remember when that was, Ma’am? The night you got the feeling?”

“Of course,” the woman nodded, and gave Susan the date. It only took a moment to realize that the date the woman provided was within a week of the date the cable company reported the service at the vampire building cancelled. Susan shook her head, telling herself it was just coincidence.

The agent asked a few more questions and then drove back to New Orleans, pushing the speed limit all the way. She stayed up all night writing up her report and spent the entire next day editing and assembling exhibits. When she presented her findings to her supervisor she had a moment when she was sure her boss would say it wasn’t enough, but instead she said, “Well, Susan, what’s your next step?”

Susan took a deep breath and said, “I’d like to pick up Sookie Northman and Devrah, the other woman who lives in that building. They take walks every day through the Quarter so they’ll be easy to approach. I want to bring them in for an interview as persons of interest.

The Northmans were favorites in New Orleans and they often got space in local newspapers, so Susan expected her supervisor to warn her about harassing a pregnant woman, but that didn’t happen. Instead she said, “Do you think either of these women is directly involved?”

“I don’t know,” Susan admitted. “But even if they aren’t directly involved, they would still have to know something about what’s happening under that roof. It could be what they don’t say is as important as what they do say. It could tell me something.”

The next day, Susan joined two other agents on Royal Street. When the two woman, Sookie and Devrah, turned the corner and started toward them, flanked by men that Susan knew were their guards, Susan nodded and one of the agents stepped forward, holding his badge out. “FBI,” he announced to the guard who stopped in front of him.

Susan stepped forward, too, her badge extended, “Sookie Northman? I’m Susan Anderson from the
FBI. I had the pleasure of speaking with you several months ago.”

“I remember,” the blond woman replied. She had a slight sheen of sweat on her upper lip, even though it was still early and not particularly warm yet, and she was pressing against her pregnancy with her hand.

“I hope you’re feeling all right today,” Susan smiled tightly.

“I’m fine,” the woman responded, her voice tight as well.

“We’d like you to come with us down to FBI Quarters. I would like to chat with you about some information that’s come to our attention involving missing persons.”

“Mrs. Northman is on her way home,” the woman Susan knew was Devrah spoke up.

“It won’t take long,” Susan smiled politely at Devrah, “We would appreciate your coming with us as well.”

The agents closed in around the women, crowding aside the guards. One of the guards was already on the phone and the other stepped forward, “I will be going with her,” he said, looking at Sookie.

“You are welcome to follow us. We will be going to our office,” and Susan handed him a card. She knew he wouldn’t make it past the lobby and he knew it, too.

“Don’t you need a warrant?” Sookie asked.

“This is an interview,” Susan said pleasantly, “We’re not arresting you,” but she allowed the words to linger, opening the possibility that arresting might come next. “You are both persons of interest in an on-going federal investigation. I am sure you don’t want to complicate things by resisting.”

Sookie looked as if she’d protest again, but she was already walking with the agents. Susan had them loaded into separate vans and they pulled away from the curb, the guards both on phones as they left. It had gone even easier than Susan anticipated.

When they got to their offices, Susan had the women placed in separate rooms. She knew this would add to any anxiety they felt, and that could be useful. For the next six hours, Susan interviewed Sookie Northman. When the woman asked for water, she delayed enough to make sure the woman was uncomfortable. When the woman’s stomach grumbled, Susan ignored it for another half hour before offering her something to eat, which the woman declined.

About four hours into the interviews, Susan received word that a person had arrived downstairs claiming to be the attorney for both women, but Susan asked that his credentials be verified before he’d be admitted. It was a stalling tactic and they all knew it, and it worked. It proved somewhat difficult to find records of a Mr. Cataliades in any of the standard law schools. When it was discovered the attorney had received an Honorary Doctor of Law from Harvard, Susan decided she’d gotten as much as she could and nodded to have the attorney brought upstairs.

Mr. Cataliades arrived in a barely suppressed ball of fury. He was shown into Devrah’s room first and he collected the woman whose identity they had established as housekeeper of the ‘palace.’ He flung thinly veiled threats of legal action and bad publicity over what he was calling their ‘stunt.’

When Susan opened the door to Mrs. Northman’s room, the blond woman was leaning over, both hands on her pregnant belly, and Susan felt a moment of worry. The woman didn’t look well and if she were to have suffered some problem as a result of her visit here, there could be splash back on the Bureau, which the Bureau would be quick to splash back on Susan. “Are you feeling…” Susan
started to say, but the attorney literally pushed her into the wall in his rush to get to the Northman woman.

“Sookie?” he said, kneeling down in front of her, and then, his eyes literally flashing red, he growled, “Call an ambulance!”

Two of Susan’s fellow agents poked their heads in the door and one lifted his phone. Susan wondered how quickly she could exit and get to her supervisor before someone else did. She looked at the faces of her colleagues who were starting to give her the stink-eye, so she asked one of them to get some water for Mrs. Northman. “Sookie Northman?” the female agent asked and Susan could see her disapproval toward Susan grow. The female agent moved swiftly and returned with two bottles of water.

The woman, Devrah, was sitting on a chair beside the blond, and she took one of the bottles that arrived, opening it, and insisting Sookie drink. The attorney was still squatting before her, patting her knee and making reassuring noises. He asked the agent who brought them water how soon the ambulance would arrive.

“I’ll find out,” she told him and headed into the corridor. There were others crowding now, drawn by the drama that seemed to be unfolding and the identity of their celebrity guest.

Susan looked up to see her supervisor’s face and she knew right away she was in trouble. Her supervisor walked right past her. She introduced herself to the attorney and then assured Mrs. Northman that the ambulance was on its way. She carefully picked between apologizing and expressing her concern over Mrs. Northman’s distress. Sookie Northman was starting to look a little better by the time the medical technician arrived. He asked if she felt up to walking and she was starting to nod when her attorney stood up and, rather gently, picked up the pregnant woman as though she weighed nothing. “It will only be a few more minutes now, my Dear,” he told her.

“You will be hearing from me,” he hissed, looking directly at Susan.

The entourage swept through the building past all the curious faces. Susan could see how this would look and she turned to her supervisor, opening her mouth to say something, but her supervisor held up a hand, saying, “I can’t talk about this right now, Susan. Consider yourself on leave.”

Eric Northman rose to an unsettled feeling. Something was not right. Sookie’s scent on the pillow next to him was too old. He reached out and couldn’t feel her anywhere close and he felt as if a cold hand wrapped around his heart. He rushed from their temporary bedchamber to find Thalia in the hallway waiting for him. “She’s in the hospital,” Thalia said without preamble. “Get dressed. The car is waiting.”

Eric usually took care with his appearance, but not tonight. “What happened?” he asked as they rushed to the car.

“I’m not sure, but Cataliades is at the hospital. He knows.”

It was a tense drive. James was waiting at the hospital door and he escorted them toward the maternity ward. Eric was so stressed his fangs were extended. Humans were looking panicked as he stalked past them, and a security guard started to walk toward them, but Thalia intercepted him. Eric felt her the minute the elevator opened on the floor and he rushed past James. She was in a hospital gown, looking pale against the stark white sheets. There were machines around her and there were fluids hooked into her arm.
“I’m fine!” Sookie assured him. “We’re fine!”

Mr. Cataliades rose from the chair positioned next to Sookie’s bed. He bowed and murmured, “I’ll be just outside.” Eric didn’t wait for the attorney to close the door. When Sookie held out her arms to him, he crawled into the bed next to her and carefully wrapped her into his embrace. Eric only felt the panic ease off as he pulled her sweet, strong scent into him and felt her warmth flow through him.

“What happened?” he asked.

“It’s a long story, but bottom line I got dehydrated. They checked us out and we’re both fine.” Sookie stroked Eric’s hair, smiling, and pressing her lips to his. Her lips were pale and Eric could see the stress around her eyes.

Eric kissed her again and held her against him. He stroked her belly and then, after a while, he felt the movement under his hand. Sookie sighed, nuzzling his neck, “You hungry?” she asked.

“I can wait,” he growled. “How did this happen?”

“It was the FBI,” Sookie told him. “They picked me up this morning during my walk.” Eric growled again, thinking of how long his wife had been in danger while he was in his day death. “I’m fine,” Sookie assured him again, reading his thoughts. “It was that same woman who came to the palace before, the one who has seen vampires meeting the sun. She saw a picture of Denny,” Sookie whispered. “She’s looking into missing persons and she received an email recently that had information pointing to the donors. She doesn’t know where it came from, but it promised her more information if she could show some progress. That’s why she was pushing Devrah and me so hard.”

Eric growled again, but before he could say any more, Doctor Ludwig sailed into the room, “Get up!” she barked and slapped the King on his royal buttocks. Eric detached himself from Sookie and carefully rolled from the bed so as not to jostle his wife. The doctor had continued walking around the bed and was examining the read-outs from several machines. “Good, good,” she said before turning to face them. “So, the contractions have stopped but I think it’s a good idea for Sookie to stay here over night.” Amy Ludwig gave Eric a stare, “You might consider putting together a room at the palace that we can use as a birthing room when the time comes. I can have my clinic send you a list of supplies. I don’t think we’re in for any surprises, but all things considered, having a baby in a human hospital might not be the best idea, and since you aren’t willing to move back to the Shreveport area, we should plan.”

“Not have the baby in a hospital?” Sookie asked. Eric could feel her concern, but it made no sense. Women had babies at home. “And they died a lot, too!” Sookie shot at him, reading his thoughts.

Doctor Ludwig laughed, “I love that he can’t hide a thing from you!” she said cheerfully. “It proves to me that there’s justice in this world!” but then Amy became more serious, “You really have nothing to worry about, Sookie. Even if we did need to do emergency surgery, we’d be prepared.”

“In my house…” Sookie didn’t bother to hide her skepticism.

“What happened?” Eric asked again.

“From what I gather, Sookie was questioned by the FBI for hours. She didn’t get enough water and she didn’t eat anything. The stress triggered early labor. I’ve controlled that and unless Sookie has some additional shock, I think we can count on Little Northman staying where he belongs until he’s finished cooking,” Doctor Ludwig laid her hand on Sookie’s stomach.

“So, they are both healthy?” Eric asked again.
Sookie held out her hand, which Eric took. The contact with her was comforting to him. Amy Ludwig’s expression turned softer, “Yes, Viking. They are both well.”

Sookie knew Eric was thinking of their other child and her heart hurt. “You need to get something to eat,” she reminded him.

“I’ll step out,” Amy told them. “Exchanging would be a good idea.” The doctor unhooked the monitors from Sookie but left the dripline in place. “Just be careful of that,” she told the telepath before leaving.

Eric nodded, and when the door closed, he maneuvered himself back on the bed. Sookie moved forward so she could sit between his legs and lean against him. Eric bit into his wrist and Sookie brought his arm to her lips, holding him lightly with both hands. As she drank, he moaned a little. When the wound healed, he pulled away to bite again. “Drink more,” he urged, “for our son.” Eric could feel his blood flowing through her as he dipped his head to her neck, licking, nuzzling, and then slipping his fangs into her. Sookie moaned now as Eric pulled her against him. He pushed into her back once, twice, and then he came, the stress of his evening and his relief at finding his wife and child safe making him abandon all control. “If you had been hurt, I would have killed them,” he whispered.

“I think that’s what got us into this mess,” Sookie whispered as she turned slightly to snuggle closer to him.

Eric held her until her breathing evened and he knew she slept, and then he waited some more until her breathing turned to sighs and then, after a bit, slipped into the throaty snores he found endearing. He managed to extricate himself from the bed to find Thalia, Pam, and Devrah waiting for him in the hallway.

“She’s fine,” he told them. “James and Ludwig will be accompanying her home in daylight.” He looked around, “Where is the lawyer?”

“He is threatening the FBI,” Thalia told him. “Cataliades told me the Prince has contacts with the FBI as well so he notified Niall. I don’t think you will need to worry about that agent again.”

Eric nodded, “That is good,” he acknowledged. He thought about what Sookie had told him. “The woman came after us because she received an anonymous message with information about the donors. Someone knew she was the right contact to pursue this. Sookie ‘heard’ her thinking that she was promised more information.” Eric looked at Pam, “You promise me you will be careful?”

“We have to know, Eric,” Pam nodded. “If this is Misha, and he has more, we can’t afford to wait.”

“You think this could work?” the Viking asked Thalia.

“There is more work to be done tonight, but yes,” his friend told him.

“Then do it,” Eric said. “I’ll return to the Palace an hour before sunrise,” and turning, he walked back into the room that held his wife and shut the door behind him.
Chapter 37 - The Rendezvous Point

New Orleans

Eric watched the street lights pass below him as he flew the short distance from the hospital to the Palace. James stayed behind to keep watch over Sookie, sitting in the corner chair of her room and there was another Palace guard stationed in the hospital corridor. Eric knew Mr. Cataliades would be leaving the Palace as soon as he and Eric spoke. The attorney would stay with Sookie, helping the guards and Doctor Ludwig to bring his wife home as soon as she was released in the morning. There were only a few short hours left until dawn and Eric felt all too well that he had too much to do before he could fall into his day death.

Earlier this evening as he lay in the hospital bed holding his wife, Eric asked himself why he was so certain that Misha, the King of New York, was behind the anonymous email to the FBI. There was no smoking gun, no bright line that connected Misha to where Eric now found himself, but the Viking knew he didn’t need it. All Eric had to do was look at Sookie’s pale face and he knew. Eric knew because he knew Appius Livius Ocella, and this was what Appius would have done.

It was this certainty that compelled him to change his mind about sending his Pamela back to New York. It was this certainty that had him growling in frustration that he would not be able to exact his vengeance with his own two hands. Eric landed lightly on the roof of the Palace and proceeded down the stairs, passing through the construction area. The Were crew started working both shifts today but, for once, Eric had no interest in what they were doing. Eric couldn’t spend time worrying about changes to his house when what made it home was in danger. It was why he snarled at Alcide Herveaux when the Packmaster stepped into his path.

“Whoa, hold on!” Alcide backed up, holding his hands out before him. “I just wanted to ask how Sookie’s doing. Everyone here is worried about her.”

Eric made an effort to retract his fangs before saying, “She is fine…better. Thank you for asking.” He glanced at the stairs, “I must go. Dawn approaches and I must make arrangements to bring her home.”

“Sure thing,” Alcide nodded. “Look, I just want to say that I’m happy she’s with you. You…” and he looked embarrassed, “Well, you’re good together. And when you see her, tell her not to worry. We’ll have this all wrapped up soon.” Eric could almost hear other words hanging in the air unsaid; the scolding Pam had heaped on his head for interfering too much and Eric growled as he headed down the stairs.

Eric knew the conspirators were in the office and he went straight there. He heard Thierry’s voice as he opened the door.
“It’s the direction he would expect,” Thierry, Pam, and Thalia were leaning over a map on the desk that dominated one end of the room. They all turned and waited until Eric stood beside them. The Viking could see the map showed New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Thierry’s finger was tracing the shortest route between New York City and Pennsylvania, which tracked through northern New Jersey and entered Pennsylvania just north of Philadelphia. “It is the quickest as the crow flies,” the Frenchman continued, “The problem is that this corridor is congested with traffic and you are in New Jersey, which is still Misha’s kingdom. Because of the number of people commuting here, there are traffic cameras that cover almost the entire route. Misha will have a feed from those cameras and you would be picked out quickly. He could have his agents intercept you well before you reached the border.”

“You entered New York before to trace the rogues,” Eric pointed out to Thalia and Thierry. “That tells me Misha’s border security has holes, so why would you consider waiting for Pam to leave New York before you reinforce her? Drive in to meet Pam halfway and at least then you are more against many.”

“It would be a clear violation of territory boundaries,” Thalia pointed out. “In times of peace no one gets too ruffled if you forget to give notice…”

“Most do in Moshup,” Max spoke up from the chair across the way.

Eric frowned, “But Judith of Pennsylvania does not?”

“She is afraid,” Thierry scowled. “She hopes by keeping her head in the sand that danger will pass her by. As a result, her state is like a free range. Thalia has crossed her kingdom many times and even I have never been challenged.”

“There is another consideration,” Thalia said carefully. “With the new police, it is likely that any complaint made now by any monarch will require an official investigation.”

“I can’t see Misha asking for your police to be involved in anything!” Pam snorted.

“That may be,” Thalia nodded, “But my charge from the Ancient Pythoness would require it anyway. To do that, I need to look somewhat neutral. I can’t be a part of an official investigation if it’s clear that I was a party to the theft from the beginning.”

“So, who will be there to help you if you run into trouble?” Eric asked Pam.

“I have every reason to be in New York,” Thierry spoke up. “I can say I am on my way to visit an old friend and mentor. I can say I am visiting the progeny of my former King. I can say I’m revisiting places of my past. There are many plausible reasons for me to be loitering about.”

“I don’t think you should be too close,” Pam told the French Sheriff. “If Misha is suspicious, your arrival would only feed his paranoia. Better you are available and close, but Misha shouldn’t see you.”

“Then we will find the best route out and I will be ready to join you on your signal,” Thierry bowed.

“You are going, too?” Eric’s question was more a statement than a question to Thalia and the Viking was relieved when she nodded.

“I will be there, but I won’t travel beyond the border unless there’s an emergency,” she confirmed.

“So, only Thierry would travel to Pam’s aid?” Eric looked around. “And what about you?” Eric asked Maxwell Lee.
“Max is staying here to coordinate things,” Pam spoke up. “If we need to arrange emergency transport or safe houses, he can best handle it from here. He has computers and all our contact information at his fingertips.” Pam smiled again, “I know you are worried, but I am confident that I’ll be out of Misha’s territory before he realizes anything happened.”

“Speed will be of the essence,” Eric sighed. He found he wished Sookie was home to hear the plan. His wife had a different way of looking at things and sometimes could find interesting solutions. It was yet another thing he loved about her, and he sighed again.

“So, you know who will be traveling into the territory. What else have you determined?” Eric asked.

“Well,” Pam started grinning. Eric couldn’t help smiling back. This was something they shared, their love of adventure, and when there was an element of risk, whether small or large, it enhanced their enjoyment. “I’ve called the manager of my club in San Diego. They’re due for a renovation anyway, so tomorrow afternoon they are going to have a large, suspicious fire. If all goes according to plan, it should be big enough to draw the attention of national news. I’m a majority owner, so, of course, they would call me and want me there to deal with the authorities. That will be my excuse to leave the next evening and Misha will have no reason to doubt my story.”

“Have you been in touch with him?” No one needed to ask. They knew Eric was asking Pam about Misha.

The childish delight dropped from Pam’s eyes, if not her voice, “Yes, I called him a few hours ago. I begged his forgiveness and told him I’ve been thinking about him, about us.” Eric could feel the shift in Pam. He knew that her mischievous appearance was just that. Underneath, his progeny was not settled about this thing she was doing.

Eric did not doubt that Pam would carry out the plan, but he wondered if at some point in the future she might come to realize that her heart was more engaged than she cared to admit. It was one thing to lie to an enemy. It was another to deceive someone who loved you, and Eric was certain that on some level, Misha believed himself in love with Pam. The Viking opened his mouth to protest when an image of Sookie lying in that hospital bed appeared in his head and he shut his mouth, knowing he would rather comfort Pam later than stop her now.

“Andrew will be sent to pick me up from the airport, as usual.” Pam was glancing around, trying to convince the others as well as herself that she was looking forward to what was to come.

“So, you arrive in New York and you receive the emergency call?” Eric rumbled.

“Yes,” Thalia spoke up. “Pam will make arrangements to leave shortly after their rising the next evening. Since she rises earlier than either Misha or Andrew, she will go to the office and use this,” and Thalia held up a thumb drive. “It only needs to be plugged into a port and then push the button to power up the laptop. Felipe’s person swears there is no encryption that can’t be broken with this thing. The laptop starts and this device reaches in and grabs everything on the hard drive. The hacker swears it’s fast. Once the drive stops blinking, Pam holds down the power button and the laptop shuts down. Pam should have enough time to get back upstairs and into bed before the King rises.”

“What do you mean by the drive ‘grabs’ information?” Eric asked.

“The memory will be wiped clean,” Thierry answered. “There is only one shot at this. We get all his secrets and he has nothing left to hurt anyone else for awhile.”

“So, if I do this, there is no going back,” Pam said out loud, her voice sounding unnaturally high.
In spite of Sookie, in spite of all that was at risk, Eric took Pam’s hand in his, “You are sure, my daughter?”

“Of course!” Pam laughed, but Eric could feel her emotions. When he looked as though he would say something more, Pam became more serious, “Don’t think that because I’m feeling a little guilty for playing Misha that I’m having second thoughts about this, Eric! I know what I felt from him and I know what I heard. He hates you, and this business with Sookie was too much of a coincidence for me.” Eric was almost convinced until her eyes dropped. She repeated the phrase she had used several times before, and Eric realized it truly reflected Pam’s desire. “I need to know,” Pam said, and Eric could feel that she did.

“We all do,” Thalia growled. “Of course doing this is a risk, but my gut says this is the right thing to do. I’d feel the same way about Appius if he was still here. Misha is too dangerous to continue.”

“You anticipate Misha will discover what happened before the night is over,” Eric said as a statement.

“I don’t know he will,” Thalia shook her head, “But we will be prepared for the worst case.”

“And if he does chase Pam?” Eric asked.

“If Misha leaves the safety of his home to threaten the progeny of my King, then I expect he would meet his final death,” Thierry answered.

Eric looked at Thierry, “You will be traveling with Thalia?”

“It is already arranged,” Thierry smiled. “We will take a private charter to a small airport in Scranton. No flight plan will be registered.”

Eric nodded briefly, then looked back at the map, “Scranton?”

“Yes,” Thierry ran his finger to the Pennsylvania city. “There will be a car waiting for us. We will travel down this major highway to this place,” and he pointed to Port Jervis. “Once Pam crosses the river, she is in Judith’s territory. To get here, Pam drives straight north from the City. There is less traffic on these roads so Pam will make better time. There are fewer traffic cameras. It will be harder to find Pam once Misha figures out what happened.”

“And you have determined how Pam will get from an airport to a city a few hours north of New York?” Eric smiled, anticipating the answer.

“I’ll check in at the airport and then wait until my flight leaves. Travel time to San Diego is five hours and I only need two to get out of New York by car. Max will have the car in the parking garage at LaGuardia waiting for me. With any luck, Misha won’t catch on until after the plane lands in San Diego and I don’t get off. I don’t know for a fact, but I get the impression he does have people check on me from time to time. It would be my luck that this would be one of those times. Anyway, I should meet up with Thalia and Thierry and be back in Scranton and on our way back here before Misha or anyone else has time to figure this out.”

There’s something else,” Thalia added. “I’ve called Stan. He had strong contacts with the FBI office in Dallas. They are calling their counterparts here in New Orleans. They’ll be seeing if they can use professional courtesy to get any information on the email that showed up here. In another year, this wouldn’t happen. Our force would be established and we would have our own contacts in the Bureau.”

“It is not your fault,” Eric told Thalia. The Viking felt the pull of the sun, the day rushing toward them all. “I have to speak with Cataliades. I am not happy to only have Thierry able to come to you
if you need help,” Eric whispered as he wrapped Pam in his embrace. “I am not happy about this any of this.”

“I’ll be back in a few days,” Pam replied lightly, “And within months you’ll be wishing I’d leave again!”

Eric kissed her forehead, then turning to them all said, “I will see you before you leave,” and walked out of the office and toward the front hallway where he knew the demon attorney was waiting.

Mr. Cataliades turned as the King approached the front vestibule. He had a small briefcase in his hands and his eyes widened when he saw Eric. “Ah! You’re here! I am most anxious to return to the hospital. Doctor Ludwig assured me before I left today that the Queen was out of danger, but I won’t rest easy until I see her with my own eyes. I am so sorry it took the staff here such a long time to get in touch with me.” Eric had heard that is was several hours before they could locate a phone number for the demon.

“Of course, my number is programmed in the Queen’s phone, and, of course, you, Miss Pamela, and Thalia also have my private number. It never occurred to me that the crisis might happen during a time that not one of you would be available. I have made certain that the number is also with your housekeeper and her daughter.” The attorney shook his head, “Those people will regret their treatment of the Queen.”

The demon attorney opened the briefcase and extracted several pages which he presented to Eric with a flourish. “These are copies of the documents that were hand delivered to both the local FBI office here in New Orleans and FBI Headquarters in Washington DC. I have put the Bureau on notice that we intend to sue them for endangering the Queen and her child today. I have also made it clear that we consider their treatment of you and the Queen as species discrimination and that we intend to pursue legal action in that regard as well.” Eric glanced at the documents in his hand. They looked impressive and Eric had no doubt that Mr. Cataliades would be thorough in his attack.

“If you need help with the media, Bartlett Crowe’s child, Twy, has contacts with the press here. I am sure Bartlett would provide her services,” Eric handed the documents back to the attorney who tucked them back in his briefcase.

“That could be helpful,” Mr. Cataliades acknowledged. “Public opinion does mean something to these government agencies. The pressure of bad publicity could make them amenable to sharing records and cooperating with Miss Thalia in the future.”

While a part of Eric wanted to march down to the FBI office and take it apart, brick by brick, he knew that in all likelihood he would lose in any direct fight. Shaming the Bureau into inviting vampires in as consultants and partners would mean a longer term victory, still, his fangs descended and he hissed his frustration.

The attorney seemed to understand because he said, “While our options may have some limits in how we may approach the Bureau for restitution, you should also know I have informed the Prince of this unfortunate incident. Niall has pledged the full use of his sources and his influence to make certain this type of harassment is not repeated. He was most concerned about his Granddaughter’s welfare…” Mr. Cataliades paused, and there was something in the tone of his voice that told Eric there was something the demon wasn’t saying.

“What happened between you and the Prince?” Eric asked point blank.

“It’s not something I am at liberty to discuss in any kind of depth,” Mr. Cataliades answered, but his eyes were almost pleading.
“Because of the confidentiality agreement you signed,” Eric guessed. When Mr. Cataliades nodded, Eric asked, “If I were to guess, could you tell me if I guessed correctly?”

“I’m not sure without hearing the statements,” Mr. Cataliades answered, but before Eric could growl his frustration, the demon said, “What I can tell you is that Miss Thalia is not under the Prince’s order. She has both information about the nature and the depth of the concern, although she may not realize it.” Eric considered the attorney’s words. Clearly there was something else that needed to be said about Prince Niall and it had to do with Sookie’s welfare, but the demon was being compelled to remain silent.

“Are you under a spell to keep silent about the matter?” Eric asked.

“No, I am not under a spell,” the attorney shook his head. “It would be easier if I were. No, the restriction on speech is more on the order of a curse. If I break my silence, I am assured that there will be nowhere to hide from the bad luck that will come my way.”

“A Fae’s curse is no small thing,” Eric observed.

“I am not the only one who labors under that burden,” the attorney bowed elegantly.

Eric thought about who else might be under the curse, and Mr. Cataliades took Eric’s silence as the opportunity to pull out the Prince’s contract. “I also wanted to bring something else to your attention about these settlement agreements. There are several clauses which taken separately mean little, but if taken together, which they could be, would secure the guardianship of any and all offspring to the eldest living relative in the unfortunate instance of your deaths.”

“Who would be Niall,” Eric frowned.

“Yes, it would undoubtedly be the Prince. As guardian, he would be entitled to act on the behalf of any minor until they reached the age of majority, including relocating them, making arrangements for education, in short, stepping into the shoes of the parents with little to no oversight.” Eric growled as he thought about the Prince’s rush to have both he and Sookie sign the documents.

“Now, had you read the contracts yourselves, you might not have seen this clause because the contracts spell out more clearly your right to appoint your own guardian. Were you to do this, you could also appoint a conservator or a board to oversee the decisions of that guardian, and it would be a person of your own choosing.”

“I don’t understand,” Eric stroked his chin, “If this provision was so apparent, why bury the other? Surely Niall would anticipate our appointing our own guardian!”

“Quite so,” Mr. Cataliades also looked thoughtful, “But this is where the agreement becomes more interesting,” and the way the demon used the word, ‘interesting’ seemed to mean ‘tricky.’ “The way the guardian must be appointed and registered relies on the reader recognizing a certain phrase. For the appointment to be recognized as valid, it would have to be documented and registered in a rather archaic way. Frankly, the custom referenced in the agreement is something that went out of favor hundreds of years ago, but unless you wish to renegotiate the contracts, I might suggest you authorize me to register the person of your choosing using the old form.” The attorney folded his hands and rocked back on his heels.

“Do you think Niall anticipated our catching this?” Eric asked.

“I believe the Prince has survived and thrived because he is willing to take risks when he believes it is in his favor,” the attorney answered rather enigmatically.
“So, he probably figured he had better than a fifty/fifty chance,” Eric smiled.

“It would be unusual to find both the guardian clause and understand the reference to the protocol needed to name an alternate,” the attorney nodded.

“Sookie understands I have asked Thalia to serve as guardian for our children,” Eric told the demon. “I will remind her when I see her tomorrow. If you can start the work during day hours, that would be best. I would not wish to delay. Oh, and Desmond…” The attorney’s eyes widened. It was not often that the Viking addressed him by his first name, “I would appreciate you waiting to tell the Prince until all the official paperwork is completed; when Niall can no longer interfere with the outcome.”

Mr. Cataliades was chuckling as he gathered his papers together, “I am sure the Prince will be most pleased that you have designated someone of Miss Thalia’s reputation. I would think it would prove difficult to protest your choice knowing she has the approval of the Ancient Pythoness herself as a protector.” The attorney turned toward the door and gathered his things, “I pledge to you that I will stay with the Queen until she is ready, and I will personally escort her home. She will be here, where she belongs, when you next rise.”

“I am in your debt,” Eric bowed.

Mr. Cataliades looked troubled, “No, Majesty,” the demon replied. “It is I who am in your debt and I will make it my life’s work to repay it.” It was quite the speech and it had Eric watching the demon’s back as he exited the Palace. Eric thought about what Desmond had said, that Thalia understood something troubling about the Fae Prince. Now was not the time to ask her, but Eric knew that time would come soon.

Eric was already lying in his bed when he made his last call of the evening. As the call to Octavia Fant rang through, he looked at the empty pillow beside him. It had been a long time since he laid down for his day death without Sookie beside him in their home. He found he yearned for her and wondered briefly if that was his now, so fully-engaged emotions or a physical manifestation of the bond between them. Eric decided it didn’t matter as the phone continued to ring. He was ready to leave a voice mail when a very sleepy voice picked up the other end. “Is everything all right?” the witch asked.

“No,” Eric answered. “The FBI picked up Sookie and Devrah,” Eric realized he hadn’t checked on his housekeeper and made a note to do so as soon as he rose.

“I heard,” Octavia replied. “Devrah told me Sookie started having contractions when they were being detained by the FBI, but she said it stopped.”

“Sookie is better,” Eric acknowledged. “She stayed in the hospital overnight but she will be home tomorrow.” When Octavia made an approving noise, Eric said, “There is something else. Sookie heard her interrogator thinking about a mysterious email the FBI received recently, one that contained damaging information about us,” and Eric waited.

“And you want me to do what? Make that disappear, too?” Eric could hear the woman moving around. “Look, one time those folks will write off to a computer glitch or carelessness, but twice? They’ll be scouring through their systems looking for some kind of mechanical explanation, but after a while someone will suggest they look at us.”

“So, there’s nothing you can do?” Eric growled.
He wasn’t really angry at Octavia as much as the situation, but the woman’s voice when next she spoke was hard, “Eric, I like you! I like Sookie, but I shouldn’t have to remind you that you are the reason you are having these problems. I know that erasing the records sounds like the easy answer, but it would just spark more trouble.” Eric knew the witch was right, but it didn’t make hearing it any easier. “You’re the brilliant strategist!” Octavia said sarcastically, “Maybe you should start thinking like one!”

“You’re right,” Eric grumbled. “Forgive me. I do not think clearly when my…” Eric almost said ‘wife,’ but he suddenly felt that wasn’t enough. “My family is in danger,” he concluded.

The phone was quiet for a moment, and then Octavia sighed, “There may be a few things I can do. I can place some new wards around the Palace that will keep out anyone with ill intent. I can place a charm on Sookie, too, something that will repel anyone who means her harm.”

“Both would be acceptable,” Eric said, “And I thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” Octavia replied, “Because there will be an invoice on this. Time for us to get back to a place everyone understands. You ask for a service, and witches provide it for a fee. Of course, it’s not every witch that can say she provides services to the High King.”

“You can feel free to advertise that,” Eric joked.

“It occurs to me there is something else that can be done, and you don’t need me to do it,” Octavia told the Viking. “Sookie is Fae. She can alter what humans see. If she masks herself during her walks, the FBI won’t be able to detect her again.”

Eric frowned, surprised Sookie hadn’t thought of that, but, of course, until this morning she had no idea she would be targeted as part of an investigation. Then another thought occurred to Eric, “Can you enhance the wards around a place to exclude the Fae?”

“I’m assuming you mean full-blood Fae,” Octavia answered. “I can’t imagine you’d want to keep your own wife outside.”

Eric thought about it. There were many hybrids, like Sookie. If Niall had some ill intent it was more likely he’d send full Fae rather than hybrids, but in the end, Niall would use what worked. “Full Fae,” Eric agreed, and then cutting to the chase, he asked, “So you can do it?”

“Yes,” Octavia answered, “I can build a ward to keep out a particular species or a particular person for that matter. You have someone in mind?”

“No,” Eric answered, “No one yet. I just wanted to understand my options.”

“Well, if that’s all,” and the witch yawned, “I’m going to understand my option to go back to sleep!”

Eric heard the connection end. He hooked his phone into its charger and rolled over to face his wife’s empty pillow. Although the sun pulled at him, he sighed and got out of bed. He went to the closet and pulled out her favorite bathrobe. He sniffed it and was rewarded by her sweet scent. Eric draped the robe over his pillow and rubbed his face against it so her faint smell covered him.

“Sookie!” he thought, and then he knew no more.

XXxxx

They were all there to watch Pam off that night, even Sookie. Eric had risen to find that the smell that lingered in his nostrils was more present, and his eyes opened to his wife’s matching gaze. He had a moment of pure joy, but that happiness soon soured when they quarreled about making love (he
wouldn’t until he received word from Doctor Ludwig that it was fine), and then about Sookie coming downstairs. The compromise they reached was the chair that sat in the hallway. Pam had been curious about it. They all had to walk around it and the placement was awkward, but Sookie answered the unasked questions when she turned to Eric and snapped, “Stop pushing! I told you if I get tired I’ll sit down! If I’m not sitting, it must mean I’m not tired, and you can stay out of my head, thank you very much!”

Thierry chuckled, and Max took Pam’s bags and headed to the waiting car.

“We will see you in Pennsylvania tomorrow night,” Thalia told Pam. “You have the thumb drive someplace secure?”

“They’ll have to do a cavity search to find it,” Pam winked. She didn’t anticipate trouble, but she also knew her luggage would be taken upstairs and unpacked by Andrew. Since it was unlikely she would be able to take all her clothes with her when she escaped tomorrow, she did not pack any of her favorites to take back to New York. Pam had clothes hanging in the closets of both the brownstone in New York and the Beacon Hill house in Boston. While she packed earlier, she mentally checked off what favorite clothing articles and shoes she could justify placing in her carry-on bag for the supposed trip to San Diego. The cover story was that she had to be ready to speak on camera or informally, answering questions, so a heavier suitcase wouldn’t be questioned, but her favorites in Boston would be lost. After all, it wasn’t likely that Misha would ever invite her anywhere near his kingdom again.

Eric walked Pam outside. The door to the limo was opened but before she climbed in, Pam turned into her Maker’s embrace. “Be careful!” he whispered into her hair. “You are very precious to me. I have opened the bond to you. Please consider doing the same. Even though we will be far apart, knowing I can sense if you are in trouble will be comforting to me.”

“Stop worrying!” Pam hugged him back. “I’ll see you in a couple days.”

Eric returned into the Palace. Thalia and Thierry would be leaving shortly as well, but they would leave by the back entrance. Their travel coffins were being loaded into a van and they were bringing an extra coffin, just in case. Thalia and Thierry would ride in the back of the van to avoid any monitoring by traffic cameras along the way. The hanger that housed their flight was bonded and guaranteed discreet. It was large enough that they could drive inside and have the doors closed before they exited the vehicle. All precautions would be taken to avoid prying eyes. They would spend an extra night in Scranton in a safe house, but it would allow them to scout the road ahead of time and make sure their plans were in place.

While Thierry escorted Sookie to her chair, Thalia turned to Eric, “I don’t think Thierry will return,” she told him. “If Misha doesn’t pursue Pam, I believe Thierry will continue on and into New York. He feels now is the time to confront the King, and he means to fight him.”

Eric wasn’t surprised. He had watched his Sheriff work himself up to this over the past few weeks, and lately, he had been almost grim in his determination. “He senses his destiny is at hand. He must meet it,” Eric replied. “It is admirable.”

“Or foolhardy,” Thalia sighed. “He isn’t you, Viking, but if he gets himself finally dead, I will miss him.”

“Or, he could succeed, in which case you will soon tire of him and decide he is just another painfully vain King, although…” and Eric winked, “His social skills would be better than most.”

The driver walked in and nodded, signaling all was ready to go. “Bring her back safe,” Eric asked of
“I won’t fail you,” Thalia nodded, and she and Thierry entered the back of the van. As the doors closed, Eric wondered if he would ever see their faces again.

Sookie walked up behind Eric. She had made her goodbyes to Thalia earlier, knowing her husband would wish to have private words. “The only hands that could be safer for Pam would be yours,” she told Eric, wrapping her hands around him and laying her cheek against his arm.

“I wish I was going,” Eric said, watching the van’s lights turn the corner.

Sookie nodded. There was nothing she could say that would make this better. There were many reasons Eric Northman needed to stay in New Orleans, but in this moment, none of them seemed important enough compared to the possibility of losing Pam Ravenscroft.

The van pulled into the hangar building and the exterior doors were immediately closed behind them. The clang of the latch was heard and as if it were a signal, the back doors of the van were opened. Men in uniforms had gurneys in position, and the first of the travel coffins was rolled smoothly into place and wheeled away toward the waiting plane. Thalia followed the coffin, stepping lightly down on the concrete floor. Thierry followed, and then his face broke into a broad smile. “Did you get lost?” he asked.

“I heard you were headed off for some idiotic mission,” Karin the Slaughterer replied. “I thought I’d better come along to make sure you don’t get lost.”

“Does Thomas know you’re here?” Thalia asked.

“He’s my bonded, not my jailor,” Karin hissed in return.

“So, no,” Thierry laughed.

“Pam’s my sister,” Karin shrugged, “Thomas will get over it.”

Thalia nodded. “Then it is good. You can go with this one when he crosses the border illegally,” and she jerked her chin toward Thierry. “Maybe you can even keep him from finding the wrong end of a stake.”

“This Camel Turd?” Karin sniffed. “I’m there for Pam. If Thierry decides to pretend he’s a target for Mr. Pointy, that’s between him and his asshole.”

“So,” Thierry laughed, “You do care!” He turned to Thalia and said, “I told Thomas if we are ever both Kings, we should marry so that we can have Karin between us.”

“That’s not going to happen!” Karin scoffed. “Thomas told me you said that, and I told him you had to be drinking Fae blood because it’s the only thing that could explain that kind of hallucination. I only think it’s fair to tell you, we mock you when you aren’t around.”

“That’s what your mate said you’d say just before he wrapped his lips around my cock,” Thierry told her. He held his composure for just a moment and then they both laughed.

Karin recovered first and she glanced at the plane. Thierry watched her and when Karin turned to look at him, she realized there was no longer any trace of amusement on the Sheriff’s face. “I will watch your flank, Karin,” he told her, “Both for the sake of my brother and for your own. I am glad
you’re here.”

Karin could see his sincerity, but it was not the time for heart to hearts, so she said, “Don’t start fucking and fussing on my account.”

Thierry had opened his mouth to respond, but Thalia snarled, impatient with the bantering, “Just get on the plane, children!” Karin looked abashed, but Thierry just winked as they rushed up the stairs, jostling for seats.

As they finally settled in seats that were across the aisle from each other, Thierry said, “We should have sombreros!” When the women looked at him as if he had made some bad smell, Thierry explained, “The Three Amigos! That’s us.”

“Stop sniffing airplane fumes,” Karin grumbled.

“Where there is injustice…” Thierry intoned.

“You will stop that now,” Karin hissed, “Or I’ll stake you myself!”

Thalia looked from one to the other. Clearly they were just warming up and the next few hours in the air would be spent in a running verbal battle. Shaking her head, the warrior sighed and allowed herself to slip into downtime. Thalia knew it was a process; how these two people handled their nerves. Thierry and Karin would needle each other and poke fun now, but when the time came to fight, Thalia knew she couldn’t ask for better companions.
Chapter 38 - The Northwest Passage

Nautical Note: In the early days of exploration in the United States there was great interest in finding a navigable waterway that would allow traders to go from the east coast to the west coast, and from there to the rich lands of the Orient. This quest cost many their lives and, in the end, proved to be no more than a myth. To this day, the Northwest Passage is immortalized in story and song as a test for those willing to risk all for fortune and fame.

New York

Click, click, click, click. Pam’s high heels against the tile of the airport corridor sounded unnaturally loud. It wasn’t something she usually noticed, but, for some reason, tonight, it was all she could hear. Pam was walking a little faster since she wasn’t dragging a carry-on. She had opted to check her larger bag this time, which would mean standing at baggage claim with Andrew or whomever Misha sent to get her. Pam assumed it would be Andrew. Misha had come to the airport once to meet her, but she didn’t believe he would repeat that gesture this time. With a start, Pam realized her cheeks hurt and she realized her smile more resembled a rictus than some sophisticated businesswoman returning to her home. Pam stopped and stepped aside, allowing fellow travelers to stream by. She focused on trivial things until she felt her anxiety level drop and then she took a long, cleansing breath and mentally ran through her appearance, making sure she was under control.

Checking her watch, Pam rejoined the stream of people heading toward the exit gates. Andrew, or whomever was waiting for her would know when her plane landed. They would know when she was expected and Pam needed everything about tonight to look normal. For the third time since she’d left New Orleans, Pam checked the thumb drive secured in the inside pocket of her jacket, then held her head high.

As soon as she cleared the security checkpoint, she saw Andrew’s face. She smiled and was relieved when he smiled back and then slightly bowed. “Good evening,” she greeted him, and then said, “I brought a bigger bag,” when he glanced behind her. “I brought more of my belongings this time,” she added.

Pam had anticipated more of a reaction, but all Andrew said was, “I see.” He gestured that she should precede him and then walked slightly behind her as they headed to baggage claim.

While they waited, Pam asked, “How is he?”

“He was happy to hear from you,” Andrew replied, his eyes, along with everyone else’s, trained on the door that would start sending luggage toward them. “He has been busy.”

“I’m sorry I hurt him,” Pam said too quietly for anyone but a vampire to hear. “This...what is
between us is not what I expected.”

“My King does not form attachments,” Andrew stated.

“Neither do I,” Pam replied and then said no more. The claxon sounded and the belt in front of them came to life with a clank and then a mechanical chatter. People around them crowded forward, but Andrew and Pam held back. It was never easy to stand among humans, but in these kinds of crowds it was even more uncomfortable. Pam saw her bag, “There!” she pointed. Andrew used his speed to dart forward and grab the suitcase, returning to her side in an instant.

“Mommy! They’re vampires!” Pam heard a little girl say, and then she and Andrew were walking back to the escalator that would carry them upstairs and to the front entrance where the town car was waiting.

There was a new vampire standing by her car door and, for an instant, Pam wondered if she was already found out and this was the second brought to help end her. Making sure she didn’t appear startled, Pam smiled and settled herself into the back seat. Andrew placed her suitcase in the trunk and then sat in the passenger seat up front. “So, you’re not driving tonight?” Pam asked, keeping her tone light.

“No,” Andrew shook his head. “Not tonight.”

It took everything Pam had not to fidget as the new vampire sat behind the wheel and they pulled away from the curb. Pam watched the familiar sights pass by, and then they took an unexpected turn. “We’re not going to the brownstone?” Pam asked.

“No right away,” Andrew replied, and glanced at her in the rear view mirror. Pam hoped her expression was reflecting curiosity and not the rising panic that was roiling in the pit of her stomach. The car moved uptown and soon they were flanking Central Park. Pam watched the street signs roll by and when they were near East 74th, the car pulled to the curb. Andrew jumped out and held open her door. “This way,” he told her as he led the way into the Park. Within a turn, Pam knew where they were. The Loeb Boathouse came into view and he was there, waiting under the light.

“Once you rowed with me under the night sky,” Misha said when she came a little closer. “Would you indulge me again?”

“Of course!” Pam smiled, hoping the release of tension would be interpreted as enthusiasm instead of what it really was. She stepped forward, her hand extended, but Misha turned instead, avoiding the opportunity to touch her. He waved toward the waiting rowboat and waited when Pam hesitated before walking past him. As she stood on the small dock next to the rocking boat, she realized Misha did not intend to offer his hand or help her in any way. Undeterred, Pam kicked off her heels and taking them into her hand, she hopped lightly into the boat and took the seat to the front. As soon as she settled, Misha followed her. Andrew pushed the boat out into the lake as Misha shipped his oars. In a few strong stokes, the boat was away from the small dock and moving toward the middle of the quiet, abandoned water.

Pam looked up, knowing the surrounding light from the city would blot out any sight of stars above her, so instead she focused on the dark vastness she could see between the trees. Misha brought the oars into the boat and Pam felt the boat slow and then drift before she lowered her face to look at the King. She wondered if when she met his eyes she would see her death. Instead, he was studying her, his face oddly neutral. “Are you wondering if we’re really suited for each other?” Pam asked.

“No,” Misha shook his head, puffing his lower lip out just a bit. “I don’t doubt it. I do wonder why you fight it, though.” Pam almost sighed her relief and it took discipline to hold still and not sag as
her panic receded. Misha must have seen something because he said, “You think I don’t recognize flight when I see it? You come close, and then, just when you are opening to me, your petals unfolding like the roses I think of when I think of you, you seem to catch yourself. You pull back. Sometimes you even show me your thorns and then you run from me.”

Pam watched Misha. She had planned on using sex to manipulate the King tonight, and now she knew her instincts were right; the trick would be in waiting for the right moment. If she went to him too quickly he would be wary. If she held back too long, his ego would be bruised and she might need to find another way around his wariness. When the King remained silent, Pam dropped her eyes, “I…I do run,” she acknowledged.

Misha might have leaned forward and offered her forgiveness. He might have thanked her for acknowledging her failings, but he didn’t. Misha sat still, his hands flat against the seat, waiting.

Pam waited, too. She allowed her anxiety to show, knowing he would interpret it favorably. She looked around her and fidgeted before looking directly at Misha and shrugging, “It doesn’t help, though. I can’t run far enough or fast enough. I rise and the first thing I search for is your scent,” and then Pam dropped her eyes. Pam thought Misha would move toward her then, but he didn’t. Biting her lips, she added, “I am not sure I want this, this wanting you,” and she waited again, and this time he did react.

“Zaichik,” the King said as soft as a whisper, and his mouth twisted into a rueful smile.

“What am I going to do?” Pam asked him, and, in that moment, she knew it was a sincere question.

“You must choose,” the King told her. “I am not a vampire who can afford the kind of distraction you have presented me,” he told her. “I have a kingdom and those who depend on me. I do not have the luxury of time to chase you, as appealing as that may be,” but the way he said it, Pam could see he was not finding it appealing.

“It is time to make your decision, my Zolotse,” Misha told her. “I want more from you than what you have offered and if you are not prepared for that, then I think it best that Andrew drive you back to the airport and you never return.”

“What are you asking of me?” Pam asked, playing for time. It was one thing to distract the King with sex, but if Misha insisted on a blood exchange Pam knew she would be in real trouble.

“You will be mine,” Misha told her. “In most ways, I will continue to respect your preferences as I have demonstrated, but you will offer me your body to me as well.” The way he looked at her was different and Pam felt new steel in her backbone as she realized that suspicion and disappointment had brought the harsher side of the King to the surface. “You will offer me your blood,” he continued, “and from this point forward we will discuss any of your travel plans in advance.”

“I have obligations,” Pam said softly.

“It is time to choose, Pamela. I have been indulgent with you, but that kind of weakness on my part must be over.” The King’s mouth was hard and Pam started to worry that her opportunity to steer the situation was over, but then she saw the softening in his eyes. Misha might have been channeling her Grandsire, but underneath, there were still remnants of the vampire who had indulged her; desirous of her and begging for more.

“I have never bonded,” she told him. “Aside from my Maker, I have never even had a blood tie with anyone.”
“That is another thing,” Misha’s voice was strained. “I respect that your Sire is the mighty Eric Northman, but you will be bonded to me. You have told me he freed you from your Maker/Child bond. You must strive to put more distance between the two of you.”

Pam watched Misha carefully as he spoke and she caught the flash of hatred in his words. She lowered her head, hoping he would read that as submission, and then made herself nod, “Yes.”

“Do you mean that, Pamela?” and she could hear the slight, hopeful catch in his voice.

“Yes,” she said more clearly, not bothering to hide her feeling of triumph, and looked into his eyes. It was time for a gesture, and she knew what was needed. During the time just after her turning, Eric had taught her how to pleasure a man with her mouth. It was something she hadn’t done since, but she also knew the power the act could give a woman. It might look like submission, but, done well, it placed a man in the palm of your hand, and Pam needed that right now.

Holding Misha’s eyes, Pam leaned forward, lowering herself to her knees. The bottom of the boat was not even and Pam knew she would be bruised before she was done, but this was worth some discomfort. “What are you…” he started to ask, and then fell silent when she reached for his belt buckle. “Be sure, Pamela,” he told her, “Because I will take what I wish.” When Pam continued with her movements, Misha nodded, and then leaned back to allow her easier access and his fangs distended. Zipper followed belt and Pam made sure he saw her fangs as she reached into his boxers and pulled him out.

“Forgive me,” Pam breathed before she opened her mouth and sucked him hard, swirling her tongue around him in the way that had always left Eric gasping.

“I wish to,” Misha growled, and then grabbing her hair, guided her in a way to let her know he meant his earlier words to her and he would show no hesitation in demanding what he wished.

In the end Pam struggled to keep up with him. She knew the damage done to her throat would heal quickly, and in some ways she was almost grateful he hurt her. This new Misha, this harsh Misha, kept her in mind of the real reason she was here. The King had wrapped her hair in his fist and he used it now to pull her back from his lap. He looked down at her, and a slow smile formed. “I forgive you,” he nodded. “Now, you can get up,” and he jerked his chin at her seat, telling her he wanted her farther from him.

When Pam settled back and he had tucked himself away, he said, “I do forgive you, but you have not answered my question.”

“I did wish to return to you,” Pam rasped at him, “I miss you, but I can see now that things have changed. Perhaps it would be wiser not to try. You’re so angry with me that the peace offering I give you is something you just use against me,” and Pam rubbed her throat.

“I was rough with you,” Misha acknowledged almost with a shrug, and then he pricked his finger on his fang and touched her knee where it was bleeding from its contact with the bottom of the rowboat. “You hurt me,” he told her, his eyes on her knees as he helped the cuts heal. “I wished you to hurt as well.”

“Is this how it will be?” Pam asked and she was surprised to hear the tremor in her voice. “I tell you how I wish to be back with you, and punishment is how my gesture will be returned to me?”

“No!” Misha exclaimed and now the King’s superior look slipped into something less confident. “No, Zolotse!” and Misha held out his hand. “I was angry,” his voice was conciliatory now, “I was wrong to take it out on you as I did, but you did offer. I did warn you.” The King’s voice became
more conciliatory, “Please, my Pamela, please. Now it is your turn to forgive me!”

Pam had a sudden vision of what her future would hold if she was sincere in her desire to stay with the New York King. She had seen it before; the swift temper followed by the swifter apology as each physical act became harsher. Misha looked sophisticated on the surface, but his charm toward her was nothing more than grooming. In the end he would be as abusive with her as he was with everyone else that surrounded him, and then, for some reason, Pam thought of Andrew. Andrew was the exception.

Misha was still watching her, his hand extended, and Pam did what she had to do. She smiled, placed her hand in his, and said, “I do.”

When they were back in the car on their way to the brownstone, Pam purposely snuggled into Misha, wrapping her hands around his thick arm. The King radiated pleasure and Pam had a sinking feeling that the act in the boat was just a warm-up to what was to come. When Andrew exited the car she took her chance and whispered, “I want to ask one favor of you.”

Misha frowned, but then smiled slightly and kissed her nose. Andrew opened the door before Pam had a chance to finish and Misha hissed, “Close the door and step back, Andrew.” When they had their privacy again, Misha said, “And what is this favor, Zaichik?”

“I want to wait before starting our bond,” Pam made a point of pitching her voice to an almost girlish pleading and she accompanied her words with a small smile.

“I am not certain why that is necessary,” Misha said suspiciously.

“I’ve never bonded before,” Pam squeezed his arm again, mimicking every simpering female she’d ever known. “I want it to be special. I was thinking Boston. We could have the house to ourselves. A week. Maybe more,” and she dropped her eyes, pretending to be demure.

“Like a honeymoon,” and Misha looked pleased. “Of course, my Pamela. I will make arrangements. We can leave tomorrow,” and then he looked at her in a way that told her he was testing her, “If that suits you.”

Pam sat up, and unwrapping her fingers, placed her hands on both sides of his face and brought her mouth to his, sighing “Yes,” before kissing him.

Misha didn’t bother to hide his erection when Pam preceded him through the front door. She threw him a look over her shoulder and headed directly to the staircase. Pam paused when the King asked, “Perhaps you would like blood first?”

“Perhaps later,” she answered. Pam knew that lingering could lead to talking. Lingering meant time for her to say the wrong thing or for Andrew to start searching bags. Pam purposely unbuttoned the top two buttons of her shirt, pulling slightly so Misha could see the pink lace bra underneath.

“If you care to wait in the living room, I can take your bag right up,” Andrew interrupted. Pam glanced at the housekeeper and she could see that Andrew was not happy. He looked at her with open suspicion and Pam was glad she would not be here much longer.

“Later,” Misha growled and he stalked toward the stairs.

Pam waited until Misha looked directly at her before she laughed merrily and called out, “Catch me!” and she took off. She knew Misha was right behind her and they barely closed the door before he did catch her, wrapping her in his thick arms.
In past, Misha treated Pam as if she were some fine thing; a treasure that required special handling. It allowed Pam to forget in some moments that his flesh was not so soft, nor so rounded as the women she preferred. It was clear that as of tonight, the gloves were off. Misha ripped her clothes from her, then roughly shoved her face down over the end of the bed. “Turn your head so I can see your face,” he whispered, and with barely any preparation, he was in her, shoving hard. Pam was not ready so it took a bit before he was fully in her. He stopped then, long enough to bite his wrist and he held it to her mouth. “Drink, Pamela. Tonight I would have you know when you please me. I would have you learn everything I will require of you. The time for secrets between us is over. You wish to be with me, my Golden One? It is time you understand what will be expected. Tomorrow, I will drink from you and it will be my turn to learn your secrets.”

Pam knew she couldn’t refuse, so she latched onto Misha’s wrist and drank. His blood was strong and there was something about it and the pleasure he was bombarding her with through their tie that caused her to moan when he rocked in her again. “There!” he murmured. “That is how I like things,” and he rocked again.

It was a long night. Pam told herself she was using him, that she was playing him to get what she needed to save Eric. Some of the acts they shared were easier for her than others. Misha was primal and passionate. He enjoyed foreplay, but when it came to the act itself, he preferred abrupt with an equal mix of pain and pleasure. Pam quickly learned that piercing his nipples with her fangs was intensely pleasurable to him. Misha returned the favor by using his tongue and hands to bring her to one climax after another and Pam found herself wondering how she could wish him harm while at the same time she could lose herself to him so completely.

Pam did not suffer from mixed emotions when Misha surprised her by taking her anally. One minute he was plunging in her pussy and the next he was pressing into her other entrance. He used his strength and his fangs to hold her in place as he took her. He shared every bit of his pleasure, eventually stimulating her clit to force her to experience some pleasure as well. It wasn’t Pam’s first time, but it wasn’t an act she enjoyed. He came with a roar and collapsed across her, and Pam found herself looking at the nightstand, wondering what she could use to stake him as he pulsed and shuddered within her.

But then Misha did something unexpected. He kissed her shoulder and said, “Stay still. I will try to be as gentle as I can.” He withdrew and immediately replaced his member with his tongue. She could tell by the slightly numbing sensation that he had pierced his tongue and was applying his blood and saliva to her torn tissues. She had a moment of worry that he would ingest enough of her blood to be able to feel her emotions, but she knew it wasn’t likely. When he was satisfied, Misha pulled her against his barrel chest. She could feel that he was oddly at peace. It was more than being sexually satisfied; it was different. It was then that Misha told her about Appius. Pam was happy he couldn’t feel her emotions because she couldn’t hide the revulsion she felt. The King described how he had been given to the Roman for money and he described in some detail the brutal treatment he received, and how his survival had shaped him. He told Pam how even now, when he found himself angry or the world spinning out of control, he would repeat the act and how it brought him peace. “Not like tonight, of course,” Misha told her. “Tonight was about my finding pleasure, not clarity,” and he kissed her. “And I did find pleasure, my Pamela, great pleasure, and I thank you.”

“When you gain clarity, how is it different?” Pam asked. “Is that something I can do for you?” She wasn’t sure why she asked, only that there was something more here that she needed to know.

“No, my Golden One,” Misha purred, and he kissed her indulgently. “No, in order for me to find that kind of release, I need be very cruel, so cruel that I end my partner. To allow any creature to live after that act is no mercy,” and he tapped her nose as he would a young child.
Pam hoped her smile didn’t reflect the revulsion she felt, and she determined to keep her true purpose in being here firmly in mind, but it didn’t work. By the time dawn pulled her under, Pam wondered at her own sanity. She had moaned and shuddered in this man’s arms. She called out his name and he called hers. Misha had taken her in so many ways, and Pam found herself returning his passion. She blamed it on instincts, she blamed it on the sure knowledge she would never see him again, but mostly, she blamed her own weakness and she wondered how hate could mingle so closely to warmer emotions.

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New Orleans

“You’re restless,” Sookie chided Eric. They were laying together on the chaise in the downstairs garden. The air was less humid. Sookie was always warm now so, even though it wasn’t particularly good for the plants, the humidity level was lowered along with the temperature.

“It’s Pam,” Eric nodded. He was rubbing oil into her belly. His blood helped to heal the stretch marks, but their son was growing rapidly, causing scarring to start forming every day. “I can’t tell, but I think she’s anxious. If Misha somehow found out…”

“There’s no way he could have,” Sookie soothed her mate. “The only person who knows about any of this who isn’t there already is Thomas, and you know what he’s thinking.”

“Karin will have some explaining to do,” Eric chuckled.

“I can’t believe he didn’t expect it,” Sookie sighed. “Do you think they’ll really work? I mean, he is so demanding and she is so stubborn! All they ever seem to do is fight.”

“It sounds familiar,” Eric smiled softly, leaning over to kiss Sookie. “Although you were much more stubborn than Karin.”

“Well,” Sookie sighed, “Now that you mention it…”

“I wouldn’t have had it any other way,” Eric smiled, his large hand making lazy circles over their child. “This is a wonderful life,” he said, and in that moment, he felt how fortunate they were and he tugged his forelock as he had as a child to ward off any evil that might find him out of jealousy. He looked up to see Sookie smirking at him. She wasn’t exactly sure what he was doing, but she knew it had to do with some superstition. “I wish Pam was home,” Eric told her.

“If something were really wrong, I know you’d feel it,” Sookie stroked his cheek. “It’s going to be a long night, and tomorrow will be longer. Fretting about it isn’t going to make this any easier.” Eric knew Sookie was right and, as if to punctuate things, their son decided to make his presence known with a strong kick. “Oof!” Sookie winced. “Cheese and rice, Eric! Now you’ve got him going, too!” and Sookie rolled over and levered herself into a standing position. She reached for her robe and drew it around her. As she made a bow with the ties, she said, “Do you really think Grandfather was thinking about killing us?”

“Where did that come from?” Eric frowned. “There are many things I would accuse the Prince of being, but a kin killer is not one of them.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Sookie shrugged. “Still, it was a pretty creepy thing to do.”

“Fae,” Eric said, as if that explained everything. “Cataliades is making the arrangements. The next time we see your Grandfather, Thalia will be our officially registered guardian.”
“Which is great unless she doesn’t return,” Sookie said, somewhat gloomily.

“Of all of them,” Eric wrapped his arms around Sookie, “I trust Thalia to come back.”

“What do you think she knows?” Sookie asked. Eric had told Sookie about his conversation with Mr. Cataliades. They had speculated about it; everything from a secret plot to take over the world to the location of the lost city of Atlantis.

“Perhaps she’ll tell us that Niall is secretly related to the Ancient Pythoness,” Eric said the first outlandish thing that popped into his head. There was no good reason to speculate, so teasing seemed the better choice.

“Speaking of the Pythoness, Devrah informs me that if the construction isn’t finished by the time the old girl shows up, she’s going to be decorating with wolf skins,” and Sookie smiled. While they didn’t have a firm date, it was inevitable that the Pythoness would be coming to visit them. Mr. Cataliades had confirmed as much and it was decided the entire third floor would be placed at her disposal.

“We could go up and check on the progress,” Eric suggested, and when Sookie rounded on him ready to scold, he winked. “Don’t worry, my Lover,” he soothed her, “I have learned my lesson. You will have a place for our son,” and he kissed her head.

Sookie cuddled into him, laying her head against Eric’s silent chest, “Have you seen the flowers and cards the folks from the City have been sending?” she asked. Sookie’s overnight stay in the hospital became immediate news, the gossip tearing through the Quarter and from there to the rest of the City, the outcry spilling further when the news showed up in the morning editorials. Radio shows were lambasting the FBI and offerings for the Vampire Queen and Baby Vamp were being left at the Palace doorstep.

“I only noticed the letter of apology delivered from the Bureau,” Eric sniffed. “They assure me that the agent involved has been placed on disciplinary leave.”

“If they get more documents than what they had, they might not be so nice next time,” Sookie whispered.

“It is not like the old days,” Eric agreed. “Things have changed, and it seems, if we are lucky enough to survive this, we will need to change with them.”

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New York

‘Twilight.’ The thought bloomed across Pam’s mind, and, for the first time in many years, it brought a sense of urgency. Pam forced herself to swim up through the layers and clouds that seemed to hold her down. She became aware of her surroundings and a weight that was more than day death. Her eyes opened and she realized Misha was draped over her. Although her limbs were stiff, she was able to wriggle. Slowly, too slowly, she inched toward the edge of the bed. It took time before she moved enough that the King’s dead, inanimate, limbs fell from her and Pam knew if she was able, she would be sweating in anxiety.

With each second, Pam was closer. When she finally gained the edge of the bed, she literally rolled off, falling to the floor and hitting hard. She didn’t worry. There was no one alive in the house who would hear her. The shock was enough to cause some movement into her legs and through force of will, she started to move. Every effort was focused on one thing. Get to the door, and when she
gained the door, get to the hall. Pam didn’t waste time. She rolled down the stairs, ending up on her stomach on the landing of the office floor. She was on hands and knees now, the thumb drive that was in the jacket lining next to the bed clutched in her hand. With each foot she moved she picked up speed until she was at the desk. Pam’s movements were almost normal when she shoved the drive into the USB port, lifted the lid using the edges of her fingers, and then pushed the power button with the end of a pencil.

The machine blinked and then there was a whirring sound. The drive blinked, too, and Pam started to count off the seconds that seemed to race by as the machine went through its routine. It seemed to take forever and Pam waited for the sound that would signal Andrew or Misha rising, but then, the drive blinked three times in quick succession and went dark. The machine screen blinked somewhat ominously as well, then looked completely normal. Pam used the pencil to push the power button again, holding it until the machine shut itself down. Lowering the lid, Pam palmed the thumb drive and turned to rush back upstairs when another drive caught her eye. It was sitting next to Misha’s regular laptop. Pam couldn’t explain it, but suddenly she had both drives in her hand and she was racing at top speed up the stairs. She tucked the drives into the hollow platform of the wedge-heeled shoes she would wear tonight and then slid back into bed.

No sooner did she settle on her side than she felt Misha rushing toward her, his consciousness ping through the tie he had convinced her to form with him. She turned her eyes toward him as she had every other time she stayed with the New York King and made sure her smile was warm when he opened his eyes.

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Misha was in a good mood on their rising. They showered together and while Pam worked on her hair Misha arranged donors. As was his custom, the women who showed up were beautiful. They never talked except to acknowledge that they understood what was being asked of them. Feeding soon led to fucking and Pam had to dig deep to relax into the moment. They were just starting Round Two when Pam’s phone rang. It was the special ringtone reserved for emergencies. Pam was relieved when Misha reached for the phone and presented it to her himself. “I’m sorry,” Pam murmured, gracefully exiting the snarl of bodies so she could drape herself over the chair. She let her manager speak for a few minutes before interrupting him to say, “Can you hold on a minute?”

“I am sorry,” Pam told Misha. “I don’t want to break the mood, but I think you need to hear this,” and she gave her best pleading look.

“If you think so, Zolotse,” the King replied and he backed out of the brunette he’d been in. “Ladies,” his tone became business-like, “I thank you. Please take your clothes and leave. Andrew will take care of you.” When the redhead threw a pouty look, Misha snarled, all good humor gone, and both the humans started moving with more purpose.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Pam pushed the speaker button, “Go ahead,” she told her manager.

“I mean it, Pam,” the stressed voice said, “We need you out here, and I mean an hour ago. The authorities have some idea this was deliberate, and it looks like they are going to accuse us of being involved in some way. Turn on the television! It’s on every major news station! They’re worried it’s going to take out half the block and it’s still nowhere under control. I don’t know what was in the basement, but whatever it was, it went up like a fireball from Hell and now the fire fighters are worried about toxic exposure. We need damage control and there’s no one else who can do this.”

Misha’s lips were pressed together as he stalked to retrieve the television remote. The screen came to life showing a news bulletin with a serious human reporter voicing over aerial footage of the
nightclub fire in San Diego.

Pam threw the King a look, “I don’t know what to do…” and she threw him her most helpless female expression.

“Of course, you must go,” Misha growled. “Perhaps I should send Andrew with you.” Pam tried to look grateful, but her mind was racing, scrambling to come up with excuses. Fortunately, Misha then said, “No, it would only complicate things. Get what must be done completed quickly and then return to me.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Pam said into the phone and then she disconnected. “I am so sorry,” she stood and glided to Misha, wrapping her arms around him in the way she knew he liked.

“For what, my Pamela? For being responsible? For fulfilling your obligations?” Misha was near purring and Pam was once again grateful she had maneuvered him into foregoing the exchange. He would not have been pleased, knowing how foolish she felt him in this moment. “I will have Andrew make arrangements for your return flight. You can come directly to Logan and Andrew will bring you to the Boston house.” When Pam made a noise, Misha seemed to interpret it as disappointment, because he tapped her lip and said, “Our time will be delayed only by a matter of days, and then, my Pamela, we begin our existence together.”

“Yes,” Pam angled forward, anxious to have her face so close that Misha wouldn’t be able to accurately read her. She kissed him, waiting for his signal that they needed to get going, and she didn’t have to wait long.

“Get what you need to take with you together,” Misha sighed. “I will ask Andrew to get you a seat to the west coast.” The King glanced at his watch, “There should still be domestic flights available if you wish.”

“They are fastest,” Pam nodded. “The sooner I get there…”

“Yes, my Zaichik!” and Misha was smiling, trailing fingers over her small breasts, tweaking a nipple and then turning to the door. Pam showered again and pulled some clothes together. She packed a few things, just enough to look credible, and used the smaller suitcase she had in the closet here. These clothes were headed on a one-way journey. If all went well, Pam would be able to claim them, but if things didn’t go well, Pam would abandon these belongings rather than risk capture by getting too close.

She was slipping into her shoes when Misha returned, “The car is ready. Allow me,” and Misha took her carry-on and carried it for her down the stairs. He walked her outside, holding her hand as Andrew placed the bag in the trunk and then walked around to the driver’s door. “Text me as soon as you arrive,” he told her. “I will expect to speak with you tonight.”

Pam leaned in and brushed her lips against Misha’s. The past twenty-four hours had been a confusion of emotions and sensation and Pam felt bruised in every way she could. She knew what would come next and while she should also know she should welcome the fact that she was another step closer to freedom, she found herself looking at Misha’s broad, funny face with sudden affection. “What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Pam answered, and then without another word, she glided into the car.
Chapter 39 - The Breaker Line

Nautical Note: There are places along the coast where the remains of coastline break the surface of the water; ancient rock that was once hill and mountain. They rise above the surface in jagged lines like teeth waiting to snag the bottoms of the unsuspecting or unlucky, but, if you sail well, you can slip behind these hazards to find quiet water.

New York

Pam stared out the window as the car inched along in evening traffic. The drive across the bridge to LaGuardia wasn’t far as the crow flies, but no distance was short in New York.

Pam could feel Andrew’s eyes on her. Since the time of her rising, she had felt the housekeeper’s disapproval. The suspicion had been there last night, too, when she returned from New Orleans, but now it was almost a living thing between them. Judging it would be another thirty minutes of seething silence before she was at the airport, Pam decided to confront him.

“Out with it, Andrew! And don’t tell me there’s nothing to say.” Pam leaned back, allowing a sliver of sarcasm to tint her words.

“I do wonder,” Andrew said softly, “why the sudden change of heart. You have been affectionate with my King, but you have made him chase you as well. You have held back your affections and made him work for every morsel, so why surrender to him so completely now?” Pam held the housekeeper’s eyes in the rearview mirror. Andrew’s words sounded as if they were mere curiosity, but the hard stare he was giving her told her he meant something else.

“Perhaps I realized it was foolish to run from something I really wanted,” Pam replied. “Perhaps,” Andrew countered, his eyes moving back to the road. “And so amorous! No protest although we both know how you feel about sharing yourself with men. It could hardly have been satisfying for you.”

Pam was happy Andrew wasn’t looking at her. Although she was unable to blush, Pam could still feel the sting of embarrassment. It wasn’t something that happened often, but the memory of her body’s reaction to Misha was all too present. “It was surprising,” Pam tried to keep the emotion from her voice, but she could hear the undertone anyway. It caused Andrew’s eyes to snap back again, and Pam told herself that wasn’t a bad thing as she struggled to bring herself under control.

They sat in silence then, inching forward, the minutes slipping by. Pam checked her watch, knowing she had just over an hour to make the flight. Originally she planned to loiter in the lobby just long enough for Andrew to pull away from the curb, but now, seeing the housekeeper’s naked suspicion, Pam decided she should go through the TSA checkpoints and wait until her plane was ready to depart before making her way to the parking garage, and from there to freedom.
They were pulling off the highway to the airport when Andrew spoke again. “I have long believed my King to be a superior vampire. I have never seen him swayed by money or other temptations, until now. You found a way to get behind all his armor and in the end, he is willing to set aside his best instincts.”

“What are you saying?” Pam challenged him.

“You are dangerous to him,” Andrew told her. “You have awakened something in him that is not natural to who he is, and you are not acting as you should while you do it.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to like the person who is replacing you in Misha’s affections,” Pam said waspishly. It was a tactical feint because so far Andrew’s remarks had scored too close to the truth. If Pam could get Andrew moving in another direction, one that could discredit him if he stumbled in front of Misha, it would be better, so she planted seeds she hoped would spur the housekeeper’s jealousy.

Pam was sure she scored a hit when she saw the slight tightening of the skin around Andrew’s eyes, but then the vampire smiled slightly. “You mistake the nature of my affection for my King. I have no ambition to be anything other than what I am. I am my King’s keeper, and I will guard him to the end.”

‘And that may not be much longer,’ Pam thought, and then wondered at her own certainty.

Unlike other times, Andrew didn’t rush to open her door when the car glided to a stop. Instead he retrieved her suitcase from the trunk and set it on the curb for her. “I will be here in two night’s time,” he told her, all sign of cordiality gone. “If you aren’t here at the appointed time, there will be no place you can run that I won’t find you. I will make it my mission to have your blood in him, and then we’ll see.” With a stiff nod, Andrew turned back to the car.

Pam knew then that her earlier instincts were right. She could not afford to allow Andrew to continue.

Pam pulled the suitcase handle and, wheeling her bag behind her, walked to the TSA Preapproval line. It was shorter than the other line that handled the regular passengers, but this was New York, the people waiting still snaked around stanchions and ropes. After close to twenty minutes, Pam was checked through and on the other side of the barrier, sitting on a bench, she used reassembling her belongings as an excuse to look at the faces. All the time she stood in line Pam checked those around her. She spotted a few Weres, but they seemed to be on legitimate business. She didn’t notice any humans paying particular attention to her and she didn’t detect any vampires, not one. That wasn’t unusual. Most vampires still preferred taking Anubis when traveling, in spite of the higher prices, but for some reason, tonight the lack of other vampires in the terminal made her more vigilant.

When the TSA guards started to look closely at her, Pam smiled and walked slowly toward the terminal, one voyager in a sea of voyagers. She walked past her gate, stepping into a news stand. Pam tried on sunglasses, using the mirror to watch traffic behind her. She heard the announcement that her flight was boarding, and she turned back toward the gate. She walked past the boarding gate again, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Finally, she sighed and Pam walked back down the corridor, making her way to the main terminal and the tunnel that led to the parking garage.

The car was just where Max said it would be. The key was stuck under the front wheel well, a magnet placed along its side that peeled off as soon as it was detached from the car metal. It was not a flashy car, but it looked like something Pam would drive. There was money in the glove compartment and a GPS that booted up the route she needed to take. As Pam drove down the circular ramp that would take her to the cash booth, she wondered if the airlines paged her. It
happened sometimes, when a passenger who had checked in didn’t tag in their boarding pass at the jet way. If Andrew or Misha had watchers in the terminal they would hear and the hunt would be on.

There were five cars ahead of her, and the driver in the lead car seemed to be having some sort of complicated conversation with the booth attendant. Pami’s fingers drummed against the wheel and her eyes darted to the rearview mirror. With each passing minute, each slight advance as another car paid and then moved into traffic, Pam felt her anxiety ratchet higher. She looked at the closed cash booth next to her and wondered if her car would be able to crash through the bar that blocked the driveway, and, if it did, how far she’d make it before she was taken. It seemed like forever, and then it was her turn. Cash changed hands and in an almost anticlimactic moment, Pam was pulling into traffic and moving forward, the clipped accent of the English woman speaking directions from the GPS sounding unnaturally cheery.

Traffic was slow, but as Pam swung west and then north she noticed that slowly but surely her speed picked up. When the skyline of Manhattan dropped into her rear view, Pam felt the tension she had been carrying in her shoulders start to fall away and, with a small smile, she turned on the radio and found a bouncy, 80’s rock station. ‘Home,’ she thought and the idea of rejoining Eric and his Queen never felt so sweet.

Port Jervis

They drove as far as the great bridge that crossed the Delaware River and then turned around, driving back a short distance to a wooded area where they could pull off the road and park the car behind some low-hanging branches. “Did we hear from her yet?” Karin asked.

“No,” Thalia shook her head, “But it’s still early. They rose an hour ago. It will take time for the call and to arrange the flight.”

“What if Misha insists on a charter flight?” Karin asked.

“Let’s hope your sister can find a way to talk him around it,” Thierry shrugged. Since their rising, Thierry had abandoned his usual light-hearted attitude. His shoulders were squared and his posture rigid. He seemed hyper-vigilant and Thalia recognized the signs. The Sheriff was tapping into the instinctive hunter that every vampire carried within them. Thalia could tell by the looks Karin was shooting him that she recognized it, too.

“Why don’t you get out of the car and take a run?” Karin suggested. “You’re making me crazy!”

Thierry shrugged and did get out of the car, but instead of taking off into the woods, he moved to the trunk and tapped. Thalia hit the button and the trunk opened for him. “What’s he doing in there?” Karin asked.

Thalia didn’t answer, she just shrugged and dropped into down time. Thierry got back into the car with a small, black box in his hand. He plugged the cord into the power outlet in the dashboard and turned on the device. It took a minute to warm up. There was a screen that wasn’t well defined. It had a map of sorts and, after a minute, Karin recognized it as a road map of their area. There was a small dot that seemed very far away from them. “That’s the car,” Thierry answered her unasked question. “When the dot moves, we’ll know Pam is on her way.”

“You bugged her car?” Karin asked.

“If you want to get technical, Max bugged her car,” Thierry shrugged, “Besides, what kind of idiot would rely on a phone signal or Pam’s ability to call? There are laws in these states. Talking on her phone could get Pam arrested, or at least picked up on the grid. Better this way.”
Karin nodded, but then sighed loudly when the vampire proceeded to drum his fingers first against the dashboard and then against the window. “Why don’t you get a blood?” she growled. “There’s some in the cooler in the trunk.”

“Chilled, bottled blood?” Thierry grimaced, “No thank you!” and turning to look out the window into the night, started humming.

Karin sighed again, and with a snarl, Thalia came out of down time, “Enough!” Both Karin and Thierry jumped as the small vampire said, “It wasn’t enough to be stuck with the two of you on the plane with your incessant snarling and bitching? Now I’m stuck with you in a much smaller place! If you don’t both settle down, I’ll stake you and complete the mission myself!”

For once, Thierry didn’t make a snappy comeback. Instead he told Thalia, “I wouldn’t have thought it, but I’m nervous.”

Thalia didn’t look surprised, “You have worked many years to find yourself here.”

“The funny thing is, I thought I’d find another excuse,” and Thierry smiled, wryly.

“What do you mean?” Karin asked him.

“He is telling you that he has had opportunities to fight Misha before. I would have thought he would have picked up the stake and attacked the night Misha ended his Maker, but each time, he didn’t act,” Thalia explained.

“But why?” Karin swung to face Thierry.

The French Sheriff shrugged, “I couldn’t say,” he told her. “Each time I felt sure I had done the right thing. I would tell myself I wasn’t prepared, or that the timing wasn’t right. I would tell myself that I could not explain my actions to whomever was with me…each time an excuse.”

“Were you afraid?” It seemed unlikely, but Karin had to ask.

“Perhaps,” he answered unexpectedly, “but I don’t recall that sensation at the time.”

“But this time is different,” Thalia said for him.

Thierry nodded, “Yes, each step seemed to lead forward. I feel now, sitting here, that for once, the time is now, that each terrible thing Misha has done has brought us to this place.” He smiled wryly at Karin, “I don’t doubt he will come tonight. I don’t doubt we will fight. It seems fated.”

“But if all goes well, we won’t see him until the next Summit Assizes, and he’ll be spitting mad,” Karin told him.

“I believe in fate,” Thalia said gravely, “And my money is on the Frenchman.”

“So, why are you here?” Thierry asked Thalia.

“Perhaps to keep the two of you from getting in too much trouble,” Thalia replied. She wasn’t smiling, but there was a quick glint in her eye.

“That’s not it,” Karin insisted. “You have been around my Maker as long as I’ve been with him, and that’s a long time. Eric speaks of you with affection. There was that time when you got in trouble and all turned against you. The vampires would have banished you back to Europe and it looked as if the Ancient Pythoness would agree, but Eric stood and argued for you.”
“It was a good speech,” Thalia shrugged.

“What is it that binds you together?” Thierry asked.

“History,” Thalia told him. The others thought she would stop there, not telling them anything more, but then Thalia said, “I knew Appius long before the North Man was made. I knew him then for the twisted sadist he was.”

“Who was his Maker?” Karin asked.

“I never knew,” Thalia told them, “And I am older than Appius.” She settled back, staring out into the woods. “I am convinced he sought this life. He would have had opportunity to see us. We would be drawn to battlefields, so much easy blood. Who would notice one more hand-to-hand fighter who used teeth as well as weapons? Some of us even fought for hire. It was a risk, of course. Even though the humans worshipped the Gods of death, we were still something other. Our weakness in daylight was hard to keep secret.” Thalia’s eyes stretched across the years and almost unconsciously she settled back, adopting the stance of a storyteller. “I like to think he surprised his Maker and forced the exchange,” Thalia nodded. “If Appius cut him deeply enough, the vampire would have been almost forced to drain Appius to heal himself. Appius would have known to bleed himself first, too, to get a head start. He was crafty that way.” Thalia looked at Thierry who was in the passenger seat beside her, “You see, I think Appius had a plan. Once he was made, he allowed his cruelty along with his strength to push him quickly up the vampire hierarchy.”

“Were there Kings then?” Karin asked.

“No,” Thalia shook her head. “No, we were too busy surviving to try to arrange ourselves into that kind of hierarchy. Of course, that wasn’t good enough for Appius. He had been a centurion and he yearned for the promotions he felt he’d been denied in his human life. He bullied weaker vampires and fought those he felt he could. He was willing to take enormous damage to prove himself and even though we were separated by long distances, it didn’t take long for word to circulate among the vampire that the Roman was dangerous, even for us.” Thalia nodded, “He had no interest in making then, just killing. He would drain whole villages and leave the corpses piled in the crossroads.” She turned around to look at Karin, “He was a rapist then, too. He wasn’t so pronounced in his preferences, but he liked them very young,” and Thalia’s lip curled. “Not like we vampires took much notice, though. Our attitude toward humans then was even less than it is now. We would jeer those who tried to communicate with them and we looked down on our own who took their money.”

“There were many humans, though,” Thierry observed. “It had to be clear to you that they would dominate the land.”

Thalia shrugged, “Like ants dominate the ground that we walk on every day. They were of no consequence, and Appius could have gone along his merry, bloody way, but it wasn’t good enough for him. He decided he liked vampire blood best and he started preying on his own.”

“That couldn’t have gone over well,” Thierry said, and then turning to Karin, said, “Nice family you’ve got!”

Karin hissed, but Thalia silenced her with a look. “You’re right,” Thalia told Thierry once order was restored. “I had heard of him, but it was in hunting him that I first met him. He was a cold bastard, black hair and dark, flat eyes. He was well muscled and he used vampire blood to make him even stronger than he was. He almost ended me, but in the end, I subdued him. I trussed him to a tree and I sent another to summon a tribunal. In those days, it was any gathering of five of more of our kind. It took almost until dawn and I thought for sure they would order Appius to meet the sun and be over, but they didn’t. They ordered him banished to the North.”
“You freed him?” Thierry asked.

“Obviously,” Karin hissed, “Now shut up and let Thalia tell it!”

“They did,” Thalia nodded. “They agreed that a vampire with Appius’ strength could be of great value if he would promise by oath to stop preying on his own, and Appius did.”

“Why would you trust his word?” Thierry asked. “He was no honorable character!”

“I didn’t,” Thalia confirmed. “I told the Old Roman that if I heard he was where he didn’t belong, or I heard he broke his oath, I’d be the one to come find him and I wouldn’t wait for the others this time.”

“And he believed you,” Karin breathed.

“He did,” Thalia nodded, “And what’s more, he decided he liked me for it. When I would travel in his territories he would make a point of finding me. He enjoyed gambling and we would play for all sorts of things. Sometimes it was personal forfeits or consequences, or sometimes a trinket or piece of work that needed doing.” Thalia looked directly at Karin, “Sometimes we played for the fate of whoever Appius had tied up at the moment.”

“That’s how you first saw my Maker?” Karin asked.

“Appius was toying with him,” Thalia nodded. “It was the first time I’d seen the Roman with an older man, but when I saw the Viking, I understood. He was well made and handsome. For some reason, he had shaven himself and that gave him a more youthful appearance. It was clear that the Roman intended to prolong his play, and it was equally clear that the North Man was trying to figure out how to kill Appius. There he was, naked and bloody, huddled in the corner of the room. I don’t know if he was lucid enough to know I was there, he’d taken a lot of damage, but I could see the hatred in his eyes and it tickled me to think that this creature should survive, so I played Appius for his fate.”

“You wanted Appius to turn him?” Karin asked.

“No,” Thalia shook her head, “I wanted to turn him.”

“What happened?” Thierry was leaning forward, his hands on his knees.

“I lost,” Thalia said simply. “I lost and the Roman celebrated by turning the North Man in front of me.”

“You saved him,” Karin said quietly.

“Did I?” Thalia asked, and then she said, “Yes, I suppose I did.” She smiled quickly, “I was not happy about it and I was sure that bastard, Appius, cheated, but in the end I got the last laugh. I don’t think the Old Roman had any intention of turning the Viking, but when I expressed an interest, he couldn’t stand it. If I wanted a thing, he had to have it and so, Eric Northman was made. I know Appius came to regret it, and he took that out on your Maker,” and Thalia nodded, remembering the many times she would find the Viking in some terrible straits. “I started to make an effort to run across them more often then, and I learned to cheat.”

“So, you saved him again,” Thierry said softly.

“There was something about him,” Thalia nodded. “He was a fighter, and funny when he had teeth and tongue to talk. In spite of everything, he maintained a kind of dogged hope that his lot would
improve. I admired that about him.” Thalia shook her head as though clearing away cobwebs, “In the end, Appius was unable to restrain himself from finding trouble. I and some others convinced him to cut the Viking loose and head into the East rather than bring more trouble onto himself.”

“And so, Eric Northman began his own existence,” Thierry said.

“And he found me,” Karin added.

Thalia nodded, “I couldn’t have predicted then where he would end up, but I never doubted there was something of destiny about him.” She looked at Karin and Thierry before saying, “And here we are.”

“But it’s not just affection, is it?” Thierry challenged her. “I know why I’m here. My excuses have run out and I will go in search of my fate or my final death, and Karin? Karin is here because she fights for her sister, but what about you? There is something that drove you here. You have said you won’t cross the border. You have said you won’t engage in a fight unless it comes to you. There is no clear reason for you to be here, and yet, here you are, sitting in a dark car with the two of us. Why?”

“Perhaps it’s guilt.” The words were so unexpected that Karin and Thierry sat completely still in that way vampires have.

When Thalia didn’t say anything more, Thierry finally asked, “Guilt about what?”

Thalia didn’t hide her face. She looked them both in the eye and said, “When I was in Nebraska for that Fae ceremony between Sookie and the Viking, Niall pulled me aside. He told me he would show me something. He took me into the woods and had me look in one of those fairy fountains and he told me that my actions would determine the North Man’s future.”

“What did he show you?” Karin leaned over the seat, her face serious.

“He showed me two fates. I saw your Maker being staked by De Castro…” at Thalia’s words, Karin hissed and reared back. Thalia waited for her to settle before nodding, “Sookie was there. She had her arms wrapped around a girl child and she was crying. But Niall showed me another vision, one where Eric and Sookie were on thrones. There were children around them, a boy and a girl. Then the Prince told me if I wanted the Viking to survive, I had to stay away from him.”

“Rhodes,” Thierry gasped.

“Rhodes,” Thalia nodded.

“They lost their child,” Karin hissed. “Eric suffered! He suffers still!”

“After all, I have betrayed him,” Thalia nodded. “I can’t forgive myself for believing the fairy.”

“It would be just like Niall to show you what he wanted you to see,” Karin’s voice was harsh. “I just never thought that you, of all people, would fall for something like that!”

“Don’t judge!” Thierry hissed back at Karin. “The Fae know things. Look at the future that has unfolded for your Maker! Look at how things have unfolded for you!”

“You think I’d trade this new position for Eric’s grief?” Karin snarled.

“What if the vision was true and the trade allowed your Maker to live?” Thierry countered.
Karin retracted her fangs, but, after a minute, she turned back to Thalia, “You have to tell him.”

“I know,” Thalia nodded. “I will once Pam is home safe. He may banish me, and it would be within his right to do it, but I will serve him as best I can this last time.”

“I don’t think he’ll banish you,” Karin disagreed. “I think he’ll understand this wasn’t your secret. Not really. It was Niall who revealed it to you when he should have told my Maker. Fucking Fairies!”

“I think Niall was doing what he felt was best,” Thalia said slowly, but she thought of what she’d overheard when the Ancient Pythoness had hidden her away. “Since when do fairies ever mean well?” Karin scoffed. “If you mean fairies will do what is in their best interest, then I’d agree and Eric has to know about this. Niall is in their home all the time now. He visits and makes noises about that…” and Karin hesitated before saying, “child she carries.”

“It does not sit right,” Thierry agreed.

“It is a child of their bodies,” Thalia snapped. “I can’t explain it either, but I accept that it is.”

“Regardless,” Karin shrugged, “Niall had a hand in the destruction of their first and now he stays close for their second. Who knows what mischief he has planned?”

“Well, you can eliminate damaging either the Viking or Sookie from your suspicions,” Thalia looked out the window, “because I am to be appointed guardian should any accident befall them.” The small, dark vampire didn’t look back and her voice was gloomy as she said, “It is the least I can do.”

Karin was about to say something more when Thierry announced, “She’s moving!” All eyes turned to the GPS box and they watched in rapt attention as the small dot on the screen started to move slowly but inexorably north.

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Misha hummed to himself. All was as it should be. He had found his life’s mate. She was beautiful, accomplished, and she submitted willingly to him. He told her his secrets and she had not rejected him. If anything, she seemed to accept this part of him and even offered to help. ‘Zolotse,’ the word floated through his mind and he saw her again, her pale hair floating around her face, the delicate pink lace covering her small breasts. Misha’s mouth curved upward as he finished pulling out a white, transparent robe. There were some clothes he had purchased from time to time, thinking to see them against his Pamela’s skin. Now he felt all would come to pass.

Misha had showered again once Pam left. He felt renewed and he didn’t bother dressing before padding downstairs to the living room and then on to the office. He could call his housekeeper in Boston, but there were certain arrangements he wished to see to personally for their extended stay. Misha sat in his high-backed, leather office chair and waited for his desktop to boot up. His eyes traveled over his desk and then they stopped. The thumb drive he had set on the blotter next to the keyboard was missing. Pursing his lips, Misha swept his eyes over the surface of the desk, cataloging each item and its position. Each thing was where he left it and his perfect memory acknowledged them. Wrinkling his brow, Misha lifted the portable keyboard. It was unlikely that something might have knocked it out of position, but the house had been plagued with a mouse once. It was possible, but it wasn’t there.

Misha pushed out his chair and looked at the floor below the desk. There was nothing out of place on the thick carpet. Below, Misha heard the door open. “Andrew?” he asked. He knew he didn’t have to raise his voice. His housekeeper would hear him.
Andrew was beside him in a moment, and Misha asked, “The drive, the one with the rest of the documents on Northman. Did you move it?”

Andrew’s eyes also swept over the desk as he said, “No, Majesty. It was here last night.” Andrew shut his eyes and breathed in. He was not the best tracker, but Andrew’s nose was very sensitive. His eyes opened and he told Misha, “Pam was in here, and recently.”

“My Pamela?” Misha’s face looked troubled, but then he recovered and turned around. With grim determination, he lifted the top of the laptop and pushed the power button. The machine whirred and the familiar screen saver came up, but then Misha realized there were no icons on the desktop. The King moved his fingers swiftly over keys and twirled and clicked the mousepad. Where there had been rows of orderly files, each containing their carefully categorized secret, there were none.

“Find her!” Misha roared. “Find that bitch now!”

Andrew reached into his pocket and pushed buttons. His voice was a low hiss as he spoke. Misha turned back to his main computer and brought up his facial recognition software. He positioned the search for a two hundred mile radius and fed in the picture of Pam from the vampire directory, then pushed the button. Andrew was just finishing his call when the first results came up. Misha saw photos of Pam taken by airport security cameras and roadside traffic cameras. Each photo was date and time stamped.

“There will be agents waiting for her in O’Hare,” Andrew told him.

“Chicago?” the King questioned.

“She flew commercial. There is a plane change there. We will pick her up.”

Misha banged his hand on his desk. “How could I have been so stupid!” he fumed. “She played me! She toyed with me!”

“We will get her,” Andrew assured him, “She can’t hide from you.”

Just then, the facial recognition brought up another photograph. It was date and time stamped a little later than the others and it showed Pam’s face driving a car. Misha’s fingers flew, getting the geo-positioning of the camera that took the picture. “She’s not on the plane,” he told Andrew. “She’s still in New York,” and Misha’s fingers flew again, plugging in the coordinates to locate the position precisely on a road map. “Here,” Misha exclaimed, pointing to a place just north of the City.

Andrew nodded, and he started making more calls. He turned briefly to the King, “She would stay on main roads. She will be heading for either Canada or Pennsylvania.”

“Pennsylvania,” Misha pronounced. “It is fastest, and Judith is too weak to challenge vampires crossing into her territory.” Misha didn’t bother adding that it had been his own flood of rogues that had weakened his neighbor’s defenses. Too many passing over too long a time period had destroyed Judith’s ability to patrol, and, as so often happened, when her defenses weakened, her strongest vampires left her.

“Jason is north now,” Andrew informed his King. “And there are others. They were cleaning up the facility in the hills.”

“Get them on the road!” Misha growled. “I want her found and subdued. Tell them to call me as soon as they have her, and tell them I want her coherent!”

As Andrew completed his calls, Misha headed upstairs. He found black pants and a shirt. He
preferred these colors for knife work. It didn’t show the blood so quickly.

Pam had been driving north for almost a half hour with no incident. She lost the local radio station and was twisting the knob, trying to find something other than Gospel rock. She found an Oldie’s station playing ‘Only Fools Fall in Love,’ and Pam thought of Bubba. As the chorus started up, Pam warbled along. Her voice was not concert-quality, but years of singing madrigals and rounds with her family had trained her reasonably well. ‘Newburgh,’ the exit proclaimed. ‘Only one more hour,’ Pam thought, and then she was thrown against the door and the whole world was glass breaking and screeching tires. It was as if she was on some kind of wild ride and she thought she could see the passenger door bending toward her when her head hit against something and she knew no more.

“The dot stopped,” Karin said.

“It could be construction,” Thierry tilted his head and kept his eyes pinned to the dot. “They like to do their road work at night here,” he explained further.

“Where is that?” Thalia asked.

Thierry tapped the dot to expand the map, “Newburgh,” he told her.

“If it’s construction, she should be doing some moving,” Karin was becoming agitated.

“Not if they stop the whole lane,” Thierry observed, but he could feel his own anxiety level rising.

“Let’s give it another couple of minutes,” Thalia nodded. The tension in the car seemed to rise with each passing second.

When the second hand swept around Karin’s old fashioned wrist watch one more time, she said, “Something’s wrong. I can feel it!”

“Can you?” Thalia challenged her. “Can you feel anything through the tie between you?”

“No,” Karin acknowledged, shaking her head.

But then, the dot that was the car vanished. Karin, Thierry and Thalia all stared at the screen. The glowing lines that represented roadways still shone, but the dot that was Pam was gone.

“Tha’ts it!” Karin roared, and turning to Thalia, said, “If you are staying on this side, get out!”

Thalia nodded and opening the door, told them, “Don’t assume the worst. You know approximately where she stopped. Cruise the area and if all looks well, you should be able to catch up with her. I will watch for her car from here.” They all had a description of the rental car and the license plate number. It would make things a little tricky without the tracker. The bug would have given them some forewarning before she approached them.

“And if it doesn’t look well?” Thierry asked from his position in the passenger seat.

“Then call me,” Thalia told them. “I’ll get there quickly.”

“What?” Karin asked as she slid into the driver’s seat, “You telling me you can fly?”

“Not all of us need to fly to move fast,” Thalia replied dryly.
Karin shifted into gear and within no time was making the U-Turn across the median and speeding on her way into New York.

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Pam woke to the stinging and burning of silver. She was lying on her stomach and her hair was across her face. Her arms and legs were bent behind her and she could tell she’d been bound in silver chains. “Well, Sleeping Beauty decided to join us,” a familiar voice said, and Pam recognized Jason, Misha’s new second, as he squatted down next to her face.

“What happened?” Pam asked, “Why did you stop me?” She allowed her voice to tremble. Feigning cluelessness could sometimes throw some doubt into an enemy’s thoughts, but Jason just laughed.

“Good try, Traitor! You have just the right blend of weakness and damsel going for you. Too bad you didn’t fall into a fool’s hands. You might have had a chance.” Behind Jason another vampire laughed, and Jason glanced over his shoulder. He was grinning when he looked at Pam again. “Yeah,” he told her, “no chance for you! Misha’s on his way and Andrew told me he was killing mad. I sure hope you’re ready, Pamela Ravenscroft! Misha has quite the reputation. I doubt there’ll be one inch of skin left on your body when he’s done with you!”

Peeling skin from a vampire was messy and extremely painful. Because of their nature, the skin would start regenerating almost as soon as a patch was removed, causing the victim to experience not only the pain of the removal, but the burning itch of regrowth. It was a torture that was reserved for those who had committed truly heinous crimes, and Pam had no doubt that Misha would consider her as now being in that category.

Pam had no way of knowing what time it was. She could feel it was nowhere near dawn, so she knew she couldn’t have been unconscious for too long. She wondered how long it would take Misha to get there. She wondered how long it would take for Thalia and Thierry to notice she was late. Mostly, Pam wondered if she would survive this night and what she would do differently if she did. While she waited, Pam tried to determine how many vampires were around her. In addition to Jason and the vampire Jason with whom seemed most friendly, Pam could hear five other separate voices. It was a depressing thought. It meant the odds were nowhere near even, and Pam knew that without help, she had no chance of being able to come to someone’s aid if a rescue attempt could even find her. Every time she moved, even a little, the bare chains smoked and cut into her flesh further. If she struggled enough, she supposed the silver would eat through her wrists and ankles, leaving her with seared stumps and no way to escape or fight. ‘Damn!’ she thought, and wondered how she hadn’t seen the car before it rammed her.

Pam replayed everything she remembered of the road before her capture. She thought it possible that if there was a witness, the police might be called, but Pam realized with a sinking feeling that the road had looked abandoned and she knew then that the car that pushed her from the road had been traveling without headlights.

“All too easy,” Pam grumbled out loud.

“What’s that?” Jason snarled, and kicked her hard for emphasis. “What did you say?”

“I said I made this too easy for you,” Pam snarled between gritted teeth.

“Yeah, you sure did!” Jason said with glee, “And my being the one to find you means one nice bonus for me. Guess you could say that I owe you one!” and then Jason drew his foot back and kicked her in the stomach again.
“You’re welcome,” Pam wheezed when the pain receded enough.

“The King wants her in good shape,” Jason’s friend reminded him.

“The King wants her able to feel what he has in store for her,” Jason smirked. “I’d say that Miss Pam is in a feeling mood,” but Jason didn’t kick her again.

It seemed a long time before the car pulled up, but Pam suspected it wasn’t more than half an hour. By the way the vampires moved toward the sound and the tone of their voices, Pam was pretty sure Misha had arrived. It was all but confirmed when Andrew said, “How did I know you were a problem?” and in one swift movement, he brought his foot down on her upper arm and Pam heard a distinct snap before the pain bloomed through her.

“You’ve made your point,” Misha’s voice was sharp. Pam’s eyes were barely open. Her hair, which had been soaked in blood from the wound where she struck her head, was stuck across her face. With no way to pull it away, it had started to dry, sticking to her eyelids, nose and lips. She felt him, but then again, she had no choice. She had had so much of his blood last night, unless he chose to block her, Pam would experience the King’s emotions.

She expected to feel triumph, or anger, but instead she felt a sad, lonely resignation. When he reached down to pull her hair aside, she didn’t flinch. She could see her death in his eyes, and she could see it brought Misha no joy. His thumb lingered on her cheekbone, perilously close to her eye, but he didn’t gaze at her. Instead he traced her bones slowly, and his mouth was almost soft as he squatted beside her.

“We should take her someplace safe,” Andrew was telling the King.

“Leave us,” Misha replied, his gaze never leaving Pam.

“There will be time for this once we get her someplace we can defend,” Andrew insisted, and Misha rose then. Pam couldn’t see what happened, but she could hear the King’s snarl. She was sure the others moved off then and Pam could see Misha’s shoes turn back toward her. This time when he squatted he had a small, blunt knife in his hands.

“Andrew is worried there will be others coming to look for you,” Misha was smiling, running his thumb along the edge of the knife’s blade. “He would prefer we move you back to New York. We have a warehouse there.” Misha could have been explaining why they turned left and not right, and somehow the cheery lack of concern he showed chilled Pam to the bone.

“Of course, I think we have a few hours before anyone will come to find you here, don’t you think, Zaichik?” Misha turned his head to the side so he could look in Pam’s eyes.

“I don’t know,” Pam answered. She hoped someone would be looking, but, in truth, she wasn’t sure.

Misha nodded, “I understand,” he told her. “It is one of the things I admired about you, your courage.” He glanced over his shoulder, “Andrew assumes I will draw out your death, my Pamela, and it is possible I will. Your fate is truly in your own hands.” Misha set the knife down behind him and grabbing Pam roughly, raised her up almost to her knees, twisting her broken arm, and plunged his fangs into the space between her neck and shoulder. He drew greedily from her, and Pam did the only thing she could think. She focused on her affection for him. She remembered all the times she had cried out in his arms and found herself wanting him, in spite of herself, and she sent it out from her as well as she could.

The King pulled back from her, his fangs bloody, and he held her in place, awkwardly balanced on
her knees, and then let her drop to the ground. He sat back and looked at her, his face neutral, and then, after a while he leaned forward a little more. He picked up the knife and used it to stroke along her jaw and then scraped blood tears from her face. He raised the blade to his mouth and delicately flicked his tongue to capture her essence. When he finished, he wiped the blade quickly on his pants, “I don’t understand, my Pamela. You would have me believe you care for me, yet here you are, having stolen my property and running, doubtless on your way to my enemies!”

“The price for loving you is too high,” Pam gasped. “You would take everything I care about to earn your love.”

“If you loved me, I would be all you would care about,” Misha said reasonably. “But we delay, and Andrew is right, our time together now is precious.” Misha used the knife blade to slice away the seam of Pam’s shirt, causing it to open, showing her bra. “Where are the things you stole from me?” Misha asked her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. What things?” Pam whispered. She focused all her energy on sending confusion and hurt, but Misha just shook his head.

“You will have to be a much better actress to fool me,” he smiled and he used the blade to cut through the side panel of her bra. “Things will be much easier for you if you just tell me where you hid them,” Misha purred and then he reached with his fingers to stroke the side of her exposed breast.

“I’m telling you, I don’t know what you mean,” Pam shuddered. She had a sinking feeling she knew what would be next and Misha didn’t disappoint. With a movement as swift as any striking snake, he grabbed her breast and with one swipe, cut the end of her nipple from her body.

Pam couldn’t stop the howl she made as Misha squeezed harder, his face close to her ear, “Tell me!” he screamed. “Where are they?”

“Go to hell,” Pam cried out when she could stop screaming.

“I’m already there, Zolotse,” Misha smiled sadly, “and it would appear that now it’s time for you to join me.”

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“What’s the point of being blood related if you can’t sense each other any better than this?” Thierry growled.

“We don’t have a blood tie,” Karin snapped back, “We share bloodlines. But since no one cared about you enough to give you a sibling, I can understand why you’d be confused.”

Thierry and Karin had been bickering for the past half hour. They found the stretch of road that was still littered with broken glass and shards of metal and they stopped the car, walking up and down the shoulder, peering into the dark trees that stretched beyond the roadway, but to no avail. Deciding Misha’s men wouldn’t take her far, they started cruising back toward New York, hanging their heads out of the windows to try and catch even the slightest noise. That was how they found the car. The sound of its engine cooling caught Thierry’s attention. There was no doubt it was the one that had been arranged for Pam. The passenger’s door had been pushed halfway into the car’s body. Karin confirmed the blood on the dashboard and wheel was Pam’s.

“If she was dead, I’d know it!” Karin insisted, not waiting for Thierry to ask the question. “She’s out here, somewhere!”

“Where did you say Pam was going to hide the thumb drive?” Thierry asked.
“She told me the platform heel on one of her shoes was hollow,” Karin told him. “Why?”

Thierry leaned through the broken window and straightened up with a shoe in his hand. “Do you think?” Karin asked.

“Only one way to find out,” Thierry replied, and with a quick snap he broke the heel from the shoe. The hollow area held not one but two drives.

Karin looked at the devices in Thierry’s hand. “She’s got nothing to bargain with,” she said out loud.

Thierry nodded, “We need to find her. Think, Karin! Focus! How can we find her?”

Karin’s face was a mask of anguished concentration as she stood still, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open. “I can’t feel her!” she cried out, and then, biting her lips, she said, “Her phone!” Fingers flying, she dialed a number and Thierry heard someone pick up.

“Max!” Karin cried, “Pam’s phone! Does it have a locator program on it?”

“Yes, she had it installed after the last time she tossed the phone out of the car window,” Max replied.

“Turn it on!” Karin was almost weeping with relief. “Send us the coordinates! Hurry, Max!”

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Thierry and Karin ran the half mile back toward Pennsylvania which was where the program told them Pam’s phone was located. As they rounded a small curve in the road, they heard the hiss of vampires.

“I’ve been through her clothes twice,” an unfamiliar voice was snarling. “There’s nothing here!”

“Misha should take her apart,” another voice growled. “The bitch probably shoved it up some body cavity.”

“I think they’ve already looked,” a third voice snickered. “But maybe they’ll be willing to let us take a turn before they end her.”

Karin wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or furious. Jerking her chin to indicate the direction she would take to circle these vampires, she glided into the dark, using every trick she’d ever learned in her many years as a paid assassin. Thierry moved also, low and slow to avoid detection. He saw a dark shadow he assumed was one of Misha’s men, but then the shadow moved abruptly and was gone and he knew Karin had claimed her first victim of the night.

The vampire in front of him almost stumbled over Thierry and the French Sheriff had to move very fast, indeed, to take advantage of the vampire’s surprise. He surged up, clapping one hand over the vampire’s mouth while shoving the wooden stake up and under the vampire’s ribcage with the other. He followed the vampire as he collapsed to the ground and held his hand tight over the man’s mouth until he was sure the vampire was finally dead. Pulling the stake loose, he rolled the vampire under some bushes with his toe and moved forward.

“Drake?” another vampire called, and Thierry stood straight up.

“No, not Drake,” he said softly as the vampire’s eyes widened, already dead as Thierry drove the stake forward again.
“Stop screwing around,” Karin hissed behind him, close to his ear. “I’ve already taken four and you’re dancing with this loser!”

“Lost?” a voice said behind them.

“Hello, Andrew,” Thierry said out loud before turning. The Asian housekeeper was standing in the pale light of what little moon there was. He was looking loose limbed, his balance forward on the balls of his feet and he held a thin, slightly curved blade.

“Hello, Thierry,” Andrew answered, his feet moving carefully to try and flank them. Karin moved just as lightly and Thierry could see that Andrew recognized her now. “You must be Pam’s sister,” he smiled. “How nice. We’ll make this a family affair. We take care of the Viking’s progeny and then we’ll finish the mighty Eric Northman, too.”

“You talk a lot for someone who is looking at two vampires,” Karin smiled.

“I won’t have to fight both of you,” Andrew smirked. “If you both try to take me, your Pamela will be dead. Misha has been working on her for a while and I don’t know how much is left.” He shook his head ruefully, “No, I’m afraid one of you will have to leave the other if you hope to save her.”

“Bastard!” Karin hissed.

“I can’t take him,” Thierry said, all humor gone from his voice. “He is too skilled for me.”

“Then he’s my pigeon,” Karin squared her shoulders. She had a knife but no other weapon. “Go get Pam!” she hissed.

Thierry nodded and moved further into the trees. He could hear a slight moan and he knew he was heading in the right direction. Pam was trussed on the ground and she wasn’t moving much. Thierry could smell the massive amount of blood loss. Andrew hadn’t been kidding. She wouldn’t last much longer.

“So, you’ve come to try and save the maiden, fair,” Misha appeared beside him, closer than Thierry had anticipated. The King’s knife stabbed toward him and it was only Thierry’s desperate twisting motion that saved him from being slashed. Pirouetting on both toes, Thierry allowed his momentum to carry him behind Misha’s broad back and he stabbed quickly with his stake, but Misha managed to avoid his thrust.

“You’ve become faster,” Misha complimented Thierry. “But you always did show such promise. The King moved more quickly than a man of his size should have, and Thierry barely avoided being wrapped in Misha’s grasp. The French Sheriff knew all too well the strength Misha could command. If the King managed to get Thierry wrapped in his arms he would be able to crush him, bone by bone.

“I have been training,” Thierry said lightly, dropping unexpectedly to the ground and coming back up with Misha’s knife. “You taught me that, that I should always seek to better myself.” Thierry pivoted again, kicking out a leg and connecting with Misha’s thigh. The King grunted and fell down to one knee. “You always were a good one for advice,” Thierry said and twirled around Misha, slashing him across the back and the smell of fresh blood pulled another moan from Pam.

Thierry would have preferred to make this a battle of many cuts, slowly draining the New York King of his strength, but the Sheriff couldn’t be sure how Karin’s battle was proceeding. He pushed in closer, too quickly this time, and was rewarded with a punch near a bundle of muscles in his back that sent Thierry to his knees.
Misha rolled on the ground, coming up with another knife, “Too easy!” he sighed, and headed to Thierry. The Sheriff remained still. He was hurt, but he hoped if he pulled the King in closer he could use surprise to his advantage. It almost worked, and in the end, Misha was bleeding from another long cut, but it didn’t tip the fight toward the Sheriff.

Thierry was aware of the sound of fighting from near the road now, and he took it as a good sign. “Won’t be long and Karin will finish off your boy toy,” Thierry smiled rakishly. “What will you do without your precious Andrew?”

“I don’t think my King will need to worry about that,” Andrew said, stepping forward from the direction of the road.

Misha stilled then, a slow smile crossing his face, “It appears you’ve found your final death,” the King said pleasantly.

“It does appear that way,” Thierry shrugged, but as he squared his shoulders in anticipation of Andrew’s strike, a long, silver sword appeared protruding from Andrew’s chest. The housekeeper’s mouth moved once and his eyes sought Misha, and then Andrew was no more.

“I got lost,” Thalia said, stepping over the housekeeper’s body.

Thierry turned toward Misha, “I thought you were going to sit this one out,” he said, his eyes never leaving the New York King.

“In the end it was too tempting,” Thalia shrugged. “If I’d let you defeat all these foes you never would have let me forget it.”

“Too true,” Thierry said, but in spite of his banter, the smile had dropped from his face. He crouched, holding his knife forward. “Can you see to Pam?” he asked.

Thalia was already moving. Thierry heard Thalia hissing something, and then he heard the sound of the bright pop of the chain that held Pam breaking.

Misha’s gaze never left Thierry’s. “You think to become King, little vampire?”

“I think it’s time to avenge those who had suffered by knowing you,” Thierry hissed in return.

“And who have I ever hurt that didn’t deserve it?” Misha asked.

“You and I have different definitions,” Thierry made a feint with his knife and Misha stepped forward and the same time Thierry threw himself in the other direction, pushing his blade up to the hilt in the King’s shoulder. Misha roared and twisted, pulling the knife from Thierry’s hand. The King reached back and pulled the blade from his own flesh, and then turned it to use it against the Frenchman.

The King was moving toward him and Thierry turned, looking for his stake. Instead, Thalia yelled, “Here!” and she tossed him her sword. Thierry caught it by the hilt and, using the King’s own momentum, ran it through Misha in one, smooth action.

The King fell, and Thierry stepped to stand over him. Pam stood then. She was covered in gore and there were places her skin was missing. She was leaning on Thalia and Thierry could see the fierce one had given Pam her blood.

“Finish it!” Misha hissed, writhing in pain. Thierry was certain the blade of the sword was laced with silver and he wondered at Thalia’s certainty that she was willing to wield a weapon that could so
easily be turned to give her own death.

Thierry looked at Pam, “I would offer you this,” he said. “He has done you great harm. It would be your right to end him.” Thalia was watching Pam and when she stepped forward, Thalia supported her. Thierry offered Pam the hilt of his knife, and Pam took it in her hand.

Thalia lowered Pam carefully so she would be close enough to strike. Misha had remained silent and even now, as the slight woman leaned over him, he kept his silence, holding Pam’s eyes.

Pam looked at the King, and after a moment, she dropped the knife. “I can’t,” she said, and to Thierry and Thalia’s horror, Pam Ravenscroft kneeled down and kissed Misha’s forehead.

“Zolotse,” Misha whispered, “I told Andrew that I would be with you until my final death. You see? I was right.”

Pam nodded brokenly, and a red tear ran down her cheek. “Goodbye,” she told him, and leaning against Thalia, she allowed the fierce vampire to push her up and walk her away.

Thierry picked up the knife, and when Misha looked at him, the Frenchman pushed the knife home. “I claim New York and all its possessions,” he declared, and so Thierry became King.
Chapter 40 - Fair Seas

Outside Newburgh

Pam shuddered under Thalia’s arm, and it was in that movement that Thalia knew Misha, the King of New York, was truly gone. She kept Pam walking out to the road toward a commercial van. Thalia knew the keys would either be in the vehicle or in one of the piles of clothing that dotted the area. The back doors opened to an empty cargo area. There was a blanket in the back, and Thalia helped Pam to climb in and wrap herself up. “Stay here,” she instructed her younger friend.

Thalia could smell fresh blood, which meant that there was at least one other vampire still among the undead and she hoped that vampire was the Viking’s other child. She found Karin skewered through with a silver sword. The sword had been driven with such force that its blade was at least a foot into the ground. “You look like a bug in a museum,” Thalia said dryly.

“I feel worse,” Karin hissed in return. The Slaughterer didn’t ask the fates of the others. Being pinned to the ground hadn’t affected her hearing and she had heard Misha’s words and Thierry’s. Instead she asked, “Please turn on your phone. Thomas will be frantic.”

“You gave him my number?” and Thalia distended her fangs to emphasize her displeasure.

“I couldn’t trust Turd Boy to live through this,” Karin said gamely. There was smoke drifting from her wound and they could both hear a continual hiss, like water hitting a hot skillet. Thalia stalked around the Slaughterer, trying to determine the best angle to pull the sword free that wouldn’t cause more damage. With the silver on the blade, so like Thalia’s own, the fierce one knew that once the blade was removed the fight would begin. Karin would bleed profusely, the silver having prevented her veins and tissues from sealing over.

Finally deciding on the right angle to attempt the extraction, the small vampire leaned over Karin’s shoulder and cautioned, “This will hurt.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Karin nodded once and closed her eyes. The movement was fast. Thalia kept the sword from slipping one way or the other, causing more damage, but the blood flow that followed was aggressive. Thalia ripped at her arm and set her blood against the outpouring, hoping that the age and magic of her own blood would counter the effects of the silver. It was with relief that Thalia watched the blood slow, and she could almost feel Karin’s flesh knitting.

“Thierry!” Thalia called, and when the Frenchman appeared, they turned Karin over and Thierry used his own blood to try and stanch the flow from where the sword had passed through her. The effect was not so fast or effective, but, still, Karin’s wound improved.
When the gush turned into more of a slow seeping, Thierry ripped open his wrist again and held his arm to Karin’s mouth. “Drink!” he told her.

“Thomas won’t like it,” Karin tried to turn her head.

“Thomas will like it less if you are finally dead,” Thierry replied reasonably, and gripping her head, clapped his arm across her mouth. Karin drank and then used her fangs to drink more. “There!” Thierry smiled, “See? You can make a lovely mate when you are being agreeable. Now that I’m a King, I can start the petition right away. Who do you think should be declared bottom, Thomas or me? Or do you think we should formally trade off at each anniversary?”

“I can’t believe we like you,” Karin said weakly, withdrawing her fangs. “You are such an asshole.”

“It’s true!” Thierry smiled broadly. He glanced up at Thalia, his expression becoming less humorous as he gauged the distance he would need to carry Karin to get her to the van. “I am going to lift you now,” he told her. “We could say it’s a blood offense, but we both know you’ll dream about it later.”

“You’re just trying to piss me off,” Karin gasped, her eyes betraying her panic for a second. She knew when Thierry picked her up the internal wounds that were trying to heal would scream in protest and Karin hoped she wouldn’t humiliate herself by adding her own voice to the operation.

“Not at all,” the new King tutted, at the same time lifting Karin in a swift, single movement. “I’m being your knight in shining armor, your own Prince Charming…”

“My own personal boatman in a sea of shit, my own rock among boulders…” Karin gritted out between clenched teeth, every movement, every step burning and tearing. She kept on with her string of insults until Thierry gently deposited her in the flat back of the van beside Pam. As he stepped back to shut the door, Karin whispered, “Thank you.”

“You can wait to express your gratitude until our formal pledging,” Thierry chuckled gently.

“You’re drinking Fae blood!” Karin growled. “You’re hallucinating!” The driver’s door opened and Karin could smell Thalia. “Please!” Karin whispered. “Turn on your phone. Tell him.” Karin could hear the rustle of fabric and movement, she was sure Thalia heard her and understood. With a sigh, Karin turned her eyes to her sister.

Pam was wrapped in a blanket, but her clothes were covered with drying blood. “Pam?” Karin called. Pam looked at her then and rewarded Karin with a weak smile. “Are you in a lot of pain?”

“Probably nothing compared to you,” Pam whispered, then after a few moments, she said, “Thank you for coming for me.”

“That’s what we do,” Karin wheezed, feeling things within her begin to shift in a really unpleasant way. “We’re sisters.”

“Promise me you won’t pledge to Thierry,” Pam growled.

“You know I have better taste than that!” Karin wheezed.

“I heard that!” Thierry called from the front seat, and the van began to move.

Pam reached forward and took Karin’s hand. “I’m glad you’re here,” she told her, and then they said no more.

New Orleans
“They survived!” Eric exclaimed. He started moving quickly around the room, throwing articles of clothing into a small black bag. The Viking tossed his phone on the bed and Sookie, who was sitting cross-legged in the middle of it, read the text Thalia sent.

“I think she’s trying to tell us that they were both hurt pretty bad, Eric. Want me to call Amy?” Sookie couldn’t help but read her husband’s mood. The initial relief was quickly replaced by something else. Eric’s not thinking to call Doctor Ludwig suggested to Sookie that for the first time ever she was experiencing what Eric felt like when he panicked.

Eric stopped his pacing and Sookie felt an immediate lightening of his spirit. “I always said you were clever, wife,” he told her.

‘And don’t you forget it,’ Sookie sassed silently, her fingers already moving through the contacts list. ‘Where should I tell the doctor to go?’ she asked as the phone rang.

‘Tell the troll to text Thalia. She’ll send an address,’ Eric replied, equally silent. It was becoming usual for them, this shorthand of verbal and nonverbal communication.

As soon as the message to Doctor Ludwig was sent and Sookie received the acknowledgement, she started to set down the phone, but it vibrated in her hand. She checked the caller ID, “Thomas!” Sookie announced, and held it out to Eric.

“I’m leaving my post,” Thomas announced as soon as Eric opened the connection.

“Temporarily,” Eric snapped. “I would expect nothing different when Karin is injured.”

“I wasn’t sure of the protocol, so I thought it best to inform you,” Thomas voice was stiff with tension.

In spite of everything, Eric found himself smiling. He could tell Thomas was stressed. As a bonded partner, the new Louisiana King would be feeling Karin even more clearly than Eric through his Maker’s bond. Still, this vampire had thought to call his new High King to register his plans and that spoke to a level head in crisis. “I am also heading to Scranton,” Eric announced. “I have a charter flight that will pick up my coffin so I can be in Scranton at my rising. We can meet up there and travel together.”

“My plane is leaving now,” Thomas’ voice was tight. “I would prefer to race the sun.” Eric checked the clock on the bedside table. What Thomas was doing was extraordinarily dangerous. Were there any delay, an auto accident that shut down a road or a problem in the flight, Thomas could be caught by the sun and become finally dead. Then Eric’s eyes drifted from the clock to Sookie, her dress rucked up around her hips as she watched him from her perch on their bed. What wouldn’t he do for her?

“Then I will see you at the house,” Eric replied, freeing Thomas from any obligation to wait for him, and Thomas didn’t bother to hide his relief. “Tell my daughters that I will see them soon,” Eric asked of his de facto son-in-law, “And Thomas…tell Karin I am proud that she went to her sister’s aid.” Eric knew by reminding Thomas there had been a higher purpose to Karin’s actions he was interfering with the relationship between this vampire and his progeny, but he felt certain Thomas was not told of Karin’s adventure in advance and that would sit hard.

“As you say,” Thomas said tightly, and then, “I will see you in Pennsylvania,” and the phone disconnected.

‘Will he leave her?’ Sookie asked, her head cocked to the side.
‘Unlikely,’ Eric answered her, and then came up on the bed on one knee so he could get close enough to kiss his wife. ‘Karin is a sickness in him, like you are a sickness in me.’

‘Nice!’ Sookie scolded him, but she took his hand and with the help of his strong arm, maneuvered herself from the bed, and then stepped within the shelter of his embrace as they headed to the door. In just a few more days they were assured they could move back upstairs into their quarters, and Sookie was ready. The extra luxury of having a sitting room where they could cuddle on the couch or sit in chairs, instead of on the bed, to talk was something she missed.

Sookie walked Eric downstairs, and then outside to the curb. ‘Bring them home,’ she said silently, then “Come home to me,” out loud.

There was a small crowd gathered across the street as there was most nights. Some of those gawking were part of a local tour group, but most were fans and casual tourists, hoping for something like what they were witnessing right now. Sookie was all too aware of the cameras that clicked and the telephoto lenses that whirred as Eric first leaned over and kissed her belly, his hands cradling both sides of her, and then, looping his arms further, pulling her to him, his head coming toward her, his perfect eyes her whole world. The moment his lips touched hers all those around them no longer mattered. There was only his Viking and the connection they felt to each other. It was a good kiss, one she felt all the way to her toes and left her lady parts tingling. “I’ll be back!” Eric whispered in his terrible Arnold Schwarzenegger imitation, and then, stepping away, he kissed her hand and was gone.

Little Rock

Earlier that evening and hundreds of miles away, Thomas had felt his bonded’s distress. He realized as he replayed the sequence of events that over those hours he had experienced many emotions, but surprise wasn’t one of them.

From the time of his rising, he had known something was off. When he figured out the story Karin told him about visiting Indira was a lie, he had been furious, but not surprised. It was Karin’s custom to text him upon rising when they were apart and when there was no text from her, Thomas called Indira, only to find out that Karin hadn’t even bothered to arrange a cover story. Indira had no idea where Karin was and that started Thomas texting Karin directly. On his fifth message, Karin sent back a one-line answer, ‘What’s up?’

Thomas texted back, his fingers stabbing at the phone screen. He made clear that he knew she had lied to him. He told her in brief, terse words that he knew she wasn’t at Indira’s. He demanded she explain herself and all he received was a three-word answer, ‘Can’t chat now.’

When his subsequent texts went unanswered, he was sure Karin had just switched off her phone. Furious, Thomas activated the tracker he had placed on Karin’s phone. It was something he’d arranged without telling her and he knew if she found out, she would scream at him about stalking and respect, but now he was glad he hadn’t trusted her. It only took a few moments, and the return came back. The geo-locating software told him his wayward mate was in Scranton, and Thomas found his anger being replaced once more by uneasiness.

Why was Karin in Pennsylvania? Thomas thought about it. On a whim, he texted Thierry, but there was no answer, and Thomas knew with a sinking certainty that they were together. “You sick fuck!” he shouted at the air around him. “If you fucking get her killed, you fat, French fuck, I’ll fucking flay you!”

Thomas decided to fly up north and confront them in whatever stupid scheme they were hatching. He called Anubis and got ahold of friend of his who worked in flight plans and logistics. What his
friend confirmed was that there had been a special flight out of New Orleans the night before, but it had amended its logged plan at the last minute to carry three vampires, not two. The plane had landed in Scranton, and the company was being paid handsomely to have the plane ready and waiting on the tarmac for two extra nights.

Thomas puzzled over everything some more. He knew about Thalia and Thierry’s earlier trip. They had traveled through Pennsylvania on their way to New York not so long ago and while Thomas wasn’t sure of everything they found, it had been enough to convince his brother to go along with Felipe de Castro’s offer of help against Misha of New York. Thomas was sure that Thalia was the third person on that plane and that both Thierry and Thalia would be with his Karin in Scranton.

But why were they there? It seemed so unlikely based on his history that Thierry was openly challenging Misha. That kind of duel was generally broadcast in some way, but there hadn’t been even a whisper across the vampire gossip lines. Thomas thought about the hacker they were promised by De Castro, and another thought occurred to him. He picked up his phone and called Indira back.

When the vampire answered, Thomas started by saying, “I apologize for my earlier temper. It appears I was mistaken in my information and it was wrong of me to become angry with you for something that was clearly not your doing.”

Indira was gracious. It was one of the many things Thomas enjoyed about this vampire and why he was relieved when she agreed to remain within his kingdom as Sheriff of Area 5. “Karin can be a handful,” Indira replied, and then added quickly, “If you don’t mind my saying.”

“I will try harder not to take offense when I’m hearing the truth,” Thomas replied, and then he asked his real question, “By the way, do you happen to know where Pam Ravenscroft might be? I tried calling her number, but she didn’t answer. I was hoping to arrange a meeting with her.”

“I heard she returned to New York yesterday,” Indira replied promptly. “I can’t understand the attraction, but I can’t dispute it’s there.”

“Thank you,” Thomas said quickly, “I’ll try reaching Pam on her cell again later,” and he disconnected.

It all started to come together and the picture Thomas was arranging in his head was bleak. The general sense of anxiety he was feeling ratcheted up further and Thomas called his friend at Anubis again. He called in all his favors to arrange an emergency flight out of Little Rock. He had no clear idea where he was going other than Scranton, Pennsylvania. He was told it would take a minimum of a half hour for the plane to arrive from New Orleans, and then more minutes would be wasted while the plane refueled for the flight to Pennsylvania. Thomas guaranteed the fee and passed his time either cursing Karin or pacing around his Palace striking things.

When it was time to leave for the private airport, the hum of electricity across Thomas’ nerves that he was sure was his mate suddenly changed and Thomas knew with a certainty his Karin was in pain. Thomas stood stock still and howled, his anger, frustration, and despair spilling over. He called for his car, determined to stand on the tarmac, waiting for the moment the airplane’s door opened to get on his way. He growled at his driver, threatening to take the wheel himself when he felt he was driving too slowly. He opened his phone and scrolled to Thierry’s contact when he saw a new name. Thalia had been added to his rolodex and he was sure it was Karin’s doing. Pushing the name, he texted.

When he arrived at the airport terminal, he texted Thalia again, and this time he received a response, ‘She lives. We are returning to Scranton. She asks for you. She can’t text you.’
Thomas rubbed his thumb over the words. ‘She lives.’ ‘She can’t text you.’ He knew that his mate was injured, and his fingers felt thick as he texted back, ‘I am coming to Scranton tonight. Send me the address.’

The plane pulled in and Thomas was already strapped into the seat before he remembered he owed his King a duty. There was no one appointed to watch the kingdom Eric Northman had entrusted him to rule and Thomas was leaving on a journey that could see him killed. Cursing that he now had more responsibilities than just himself and his mate, Thomas thumbed through his contacts and called Indira. In a few, terse words he informed her she was in charge for the next few days, and asked that she email him, carbon copying his remaining Sheriffs to confirm his intent. When that was finished, Thomas called Eric Northman.

Scranton

Thalia and Thierry brought Pam and Karin back to the safe house Max had arranged for them. There were ready blood supplies available in the area, so Thalia knew they could hunker down and await the coming of the North Man. He told Thalia his coffin would be held in a secure facility at the Scranton Airport and he would join them shortly after his rising the following night. Thalia knew he intended that they should all travel back to New Orleans together.

Thalia carried Pam down into the basement and Thierry followed, carrying Karin. Within seconds of their arrival, there was a popping noise and Doctor Ludwig was standing in the upstairs hallway. The Doctor didn’t need any help to find the open door and she was soon standing between them, grumbling and fishing around in her bag. She stopped looking from Karin to Pam long enough to growl at Thalia, “The North Man sent me. So, tell me once and for all, is that bastard from New York finally dead?”

“It is done,” Thierry answered instead.

Doctor Ludwig gave the Frenchman a less-than-cordial once over, “And does that make you the new Misha?”

“It makes me the King of New York,” Thierry replied, drawing himself up straighter, all sign of humor gone.

“Stop your preening,” Thalia growled before saying, “Karin was run through with silver. We used our blood to slow the flow, but she may still be bleeding internally.”

Amy Ludwig gave one last sniff toward Thierry and deliberately shoved him aside as she went to see Karin.

Thalia jerked her chin toward the stairs and she and Thierry headed upstairs to give the Doctor privacy with her patients. “What did I do to her?” Thierry asked once they were alone.

“She’s just testy because you can order her around now,” Thalia laughed dryly. “Kings do. She’s letting you know you may be able to summon her, but you can’t step on her.”

Thierry’s eyes went wide for a moment, and Thalia could see that another reality of what it meant to be King was starting to dawn on her young friend.

The new King’s growing sense of empowerment was short-lived. Doctor Ludwig stomped up the stairs and Thierry found himself running errands, searching for young, strong donors. It was several hours and some focused trolling before Amy was satisfied that both Karin and Pam had had enough fresh blood.
As the Doctor settled back, taking a break from her care-giving, she asked, “Is Karin’s bonded coming soon?”

“I’m not sure if he’ll make it here tonight,” Thalia replied, “but, yes, Thomas texted me he is coming.” When Amy didn’t say more, Thalia asked the question that seemed to be hovering in the air between them, “Are you saying there is no hope that Karin will recover?”

Doctor Ludwig gave the fierce vampire a look as if Thalia had three heads, and then she laughed, “What are you talking about? Karin’s going to be fine! I was just asking because Karin is already bitching about everything. That’s work for her bonded, not me!”

Thomas did arrive in the hour before the sun rose. Ludwig had gone and Thierry was sitting in the basement beside Karin. Pam was still awake, but had gone into downtime several hours earlier. Pam was facing the wall and Thierry knew Thalia was worried about her.

Without greeting his brother, Thomas shoved Thierry aside, savagely ripping his arm open and clamping it against Karin’s mouth, growling, “You better drink! And you better recover quickly, because I intend to make you suffer for what you put me through!”

Thierry watched Karin struggle for mere seconds before accepting the blood Thomas offered. She started crying tears of blood, but Thomas was having none of it, “Stop it!” he hissed. “You have no right to cry! You did what you had to do for your sister, but you didn’t trust me enough to tell me! I would have come with you!”

“No!” Karin pushed his arm away, “You are King now, Thomas. You couldn’t go running off. I couldn’t let you do that.”

“So you were saving me?” Thomas snarled again, and then just as quickly, his face softened. “You foolish woman, what life is this without you?” He wiped the blood from her cheeks and offered the drops to her. As she looked up at him, his face hardened again, and he ripped his healed wrist again, placing the bleeding wound over her mouth.

Thierry stepped away and with a quick glance at Pam, headed back upstairs.

Thalia was standing in the front room looking out the window onto the dark street. “Thomas will want to take her with him back to Little Rock as soon as they rise,” she said out loud.

“He will,” Thierry acknowledged.

“He will need to wait for the High King.” The small, fierce one turned. “The North Man will want to see both of his progeny. Thomas owes fealty to the North Man. It would not do to push the Viking too far away.”

“Thomas knows that,” Thierry agreed and then flopped himself into a chair. “I can feel the approaching dawn. I will also be leaving at first night, but my trail leads south.”

“New York,” and Thalia smiled thinly. “What a terrible King you’ll make!”

“Well, thank you!” Thierry replied. “In truth, I’m not too worried about it. You’ll be around to keep me in line.” He reached into his pocket and removed the two thumb drives he’d taken from Pam’s shoe earlier that evening. “These are what Pam went to get. I’ll count on you and your police to work with De Castro’s man.”

“Let’s hope that what we find on these was worth all this trouble,” Thalia sniffed.
“Of course it was worth it!” Thierry laughed. “After all, now I’m King!”

XXXxxx

Eric Northman arrived the next night at the safe house within an hour of sundown, as expected. He swept downstairs to find Karin already dressed and sitting on her bed. The Viking could feel that she was still in some discomfort and he turned to Thomas who stood beside her, “I would offer my daughter my blood. As her Maker, it will help her to heal more quickly.” It was a courtesy really. Eric could have simply ordered Karin, and everyone knew it, but Thomas bowed and thanked Eric.

“You smell interesting,” Eric whispered as he sat down on the bed and pulled Karin closer so they were side by side.

“That’s one way of saying it,” Karin smirked, and then took care as she bit into the neck Eric offered her. During the past forty-eight hours she had taken blood from no less than four vampires, including Eric, and a number of human donors. Thomas told her she smelled appealing, but she could tell he was lying.

“We would take our leave now,” Thomas announced when Karin pulled back.

“I saw your plane idling at the airport,” Eric nodded. “It is a good thing someone handed over the energy business in such good financial condition. The cost of holding that plane in a place like this must be costing your kingdom a fortune.”

“I am paying the cost from my own personal funds,” Thomas bristled, and Eric filed away his new King’s tendency to pride. Thomas glanced at Karin again, not bothering to hide the burning in his eyes. “I will give you some time alone,” he told Karin and Eric, and then walked at normal speed up the basement stairs.

“All is well, daughter?” Eric asked.

“He’s going to make me feel every second of his worry over and over again,” Karin sighed. “I’m going to be eating dirt for a long time.”

“You have found your true mate,” Eric stroked her hair. “Now it will be up to you to figure out how to live with him.”

“Thank you,” Karin said, a slight smile playing around the corners of her mouth.

“For what?” Eric asked her.

“For this wonderful life,” Karin replied. She leaned forward and kissed her Maker slowly on the mouth. Of his vampire progeny, Karin had been the least enthusiastic about their lovemaking, even in the beginning, so this degree of affection was a surprise. She pulled back and with a quick glance at the stairs, said, “He is becoming impatient.”

“Come and see us when you are settled again,” and Eric pulled her close to kiss her head once more before releasing her to walk carefully up the stairs and back to her own life.

Eric then walked over the Pam’s bed. During all this time, Pam had remained in downtime, her face to the wall. “I’ve come to bring you home, daughter,” Eric told her and he stroked her arm. Eric could see the angry red patches of skin and knew what it meant, but he could also feel that Pam had suffered something worse. She had no limbs missing, but when she rolled over and looked at him, Eric could see his Pamela’s eyes were hollow and he felt a sad emptiness from her.
“I can’t,” Pam told him and as Eric stroked Pam’s hair, he realized there was still blood and dirt in it. The Viking pulled back the blanket to see that his sophisticated, fashion-conscious, Pam was still wearing the same clothes in which she’d fought and been tortured. “Come on,” Eric said gently, “I’ll help you get cleaned up.” He walked her upstairs and then to the bathroom. Moving slowly, he undressed her and then, after turning the water on hot so her skin would feel warmed, he helped her into the shower. Once she stood under the water, Eric dropped his own clothes and joined her, turning her away from him. When he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his chest, his Pam broke down.

Eric washed her as carefully as he had the first night she rose with him. He washed her hair, murmuring words of encouragement, treating her as gently as any heartbroken creature, because Eric recognized that was what was truly troubling his progeny. “You did the right thing,” he whispered against her head. “He could not have been left to continue.”

“I know I did,” Pam whispered, “but it hurts so much!”

When Pam was clean and dressed in fresh clothes, Eric had her sit upstairs in the front room. He asked Thalia to go in search of another donor for her. When Thalia returned with two, he personally oversaw Pam’s feeding, trusting his Pam not to injure either of the young women, and she didn’t disappoint.

When Pam finished, he asked, “Are you feeling any better?”

“Yes,” Pam nodded, “But I haven’t changed my mind. I won’t be returning with you to Louisiana right away.”

“You’ll return to Maude,” the Viking stated. When Pam nodded once more, Eric asked, “Do you have a way to get there?”

“I know she’s at Sanctum,” Pam shrugged. “She told me she really needs some help getting things set up and she had suggested that I come for awhile,” and then Pam bit her lip. “Is that okay?”

Eric brought Pam over to a couch and then pulled her against him. “You need never ask,” he told her. “You are welcome to join me when you are ready. Your place will be waiting for you.” They sat there, together, and in time Pam relaxed against him. Eric could feel her relief, and knew as much as his daughter loved him, she needed the kind of help only a woman and time could give her.

After a bit, Pam asked about Sookie. That sparked a conversation where they spoke of small things and then of business plans. Eric told Pam of the Ancient Pythoness’ upcoming trip and Pam chuckled as she conjectured about the uproar the visit would cause at the Palace. When the conversation shifted to the fate of Nabila, though, Eric could feel Pam’s sadness return.

Thalia joined them, “Thierry is getting ready to leave. I thought you should know.”

Eric nodded, “Maude asked Pam to lend a hand in Connecticut.”

Thalia didn’t look surprised, and said instead, “I heard from Minnesota just now and she is on her way here. If Pam is agreeable, I will come with her to Sanctum. It has been some time since I have seen that place, and I find I have things to discuss with Maude.”

“Forgive me,” Eric pulled Pam close, kissing her head. “I must talk with Thierry before he leaves, but I will return in a minute.”

“Don’t be silly, my Maker,” Pam scoffed, for a moment sounding like herself. “Tell Thierry thank you for me. He saved all of us, you know.”
“How quickly they forget,” Thalia sniffed, and then sat down near Pam so Eric would know his
daughter wouldn’t be alone.

Thierry had the car out front and he bowed briefly as Eric came into view. “My King!” he smiled.

“Your Majesty!” Eric replied, and then, his face becoming more serious, Eric said, “I am in your
debt.”

“We are in the debt of each other,” Thierry grinned. “Your progeny survived, and I am a kingdom or
two richer.”

“What are your plans, now that you are King?” Eric asked.

“I will travel to Misha’s New York Palace,” Thierry shrugged. “The laptop is there, along with his
records. I will box them and send them to Thalia. She is in the best position to sort through what is
found. Then I will contact some old friends. There is no one left from Misha’s inner circle, which
saves me from much uneasiness,” and Thierry laughed. “A clean slate! I will find my Second and
leave that vampire in New York.” Thierry crossed his arms, “New York I know. I know the business
and I know the territory. New England is something I don’t know.”

“So, you intend to keep Tranh’s kingdom within your territory?” Eric wasn’t surprised, but there
were other considerations.

As if anticipating the direction High King’s mind was taking, Thierry replied, “I will retain it. It is
adjacent to New York. There are ties between the kingdoms now. I’ve always been fond of Boston
and Misha’s Beacon Hill home will be a convenient base. The treaty with Sanctum will stand,
though,” and Thierry waited until Eric acknowledged the gesture. “In fact, I have it in my head to
speak with Maude and offer to expand the area over which our neutrality agreement would apply.
Maude would still have to buy the actual real estate from her neighbors, but I would give assurance
that she would have my support in expanding.”

“And what of the Carolinas?” Thierry went suddenly still and Eric fought to keep his face serious.

“It is my hope that something will be found among Misha’s things that would allow Nabila to return
to her kingdom. I have no wish to rule a place so far away,” Thierry was speaking quietly, and
giving every indication that the matter was of no consequence.

Eric wasn’t fooled by Thierry’s show of disinterest. “And will you petition to pledge yourself to
Louisiana and Arkansas?” he asked the New York King.

“Alas,” Thierry shrugged, “As much as that might be my fondest wish, I fear that after this latest
adventure, my Thomas will have little affection to spare me. Your progeny is a greedy and selfish
vampire.”

“Too bad,” Eric nodded, “You will just have to cast your sights for an alliance elsewhere.”

“C’est la vie!” Thierry agreed, and with another lower bow, he got into the car and drove away.

When Eric walked back into the house, Thalia was standing in the hall. Eric could hear Pam’s voice
and thought she was talking on the phone with Maude. “Things have changed for all of us,” Thalia
observed.

“It is not as the old days,” Eric agreed.

“Misha was one of the last of the old ones, aside from you, Viking, and you were always more
modern than most of these new Kings and Queens,” and Thalia snorted.

“I don’t know why you scoff,” Eric turned to her. “It is your organization that will benefit most. If there is one thing I now appreciate, it is that we must pay closer attention to human customs.”

“That is in my head as well,” Thalia agreed. “The last of the hold-overs must be brought in line. No more donor pools or blood slaves. We must have different rules about capturing and torturing those who do us harm.”

“It will be a less exciting world,” Eric Northman smiled.

“Will it?” Thalia challenged him, and turning, they headed back into the living room area to await the arrival of Maude.

New Orleans

“Do we have to go downstairs?” Sookie stretched out on her side and then wiggled her way backward until she was spooned against Eric.

It had been two months since Thierry had taken over the New York throne. The fight that resulted in Misha’s final death and the transition of the throne had left echoes.

Pam remained in Sanctum, but they had heard from her that once the child was born, she would return to New Orleans.

The thumb drives Pam had taken from New York had yielded many secrets. Thalia and her experts found that Misha had assembled files on many of the Kings and Queens, including Bartlett Crowe and Phoebe Golden. Thalia had taken care to understand what she was seeing, and then informed the interested parties. The message to all who had been archived and set on Misha’s electronic shelf, awaiting their turn to be exploited was clear: “I know your secrets. Stop doing things that can injure all of us!”

In some cases, what Thalia’s people found was old news, but in others, the damaging information was current, and Thalia spent much time negotiating, and if that failed, outright bullying those whose behaviors could create problems in this new world they were creating.

The second drive Pam had taken from Misha’s desk yielded the remaining documents on the New Orleans donors. When Eric saw the extent of the files, he couldn’t help shuddering in relief. The evidence Meg had collected would have earned him a final death if it had been released to the human police. That night, Eric laid his head against his growing child and swore to Sookie that he would honor his old promise to her, to turn all humans over to human authorities all the rest of the days of his unlife. “I will also see to it that those within my sway do the same,” he told her.

The deleted material on those plots Misha had already triggered was also found on the laptop. Felipe de Castro’s man was able to pick through the protocols and recover much of the data, and among the trashed records he recovered were the falsified documents and emails that had cost Nabila her kingdom. When Thalia informed her, Nabila was so relieved she sagged to the floor. “I owe you a great debt,” Nabila told the fierce vampire once she recovered.

“You owe me nothing,” Thalia told the Queen in exile. “You owe your debt to Thierry. He never doubted you. It was he who sent me the laptop, and he specifically requested that our expert look for information that would prove your innocence.”

That night, Nabila called the New York King, and, for the first time in almost a year, she willingly spoke with him. By the end of the conversation, Nabila confirmed she would return to her kingdom
as its reinstated Queen, and Thierry told her he would recommend to the High King that she be reinstated as Clan Chief of Moshup.

The days that stretched before Eric and Sookie never looked so bright, and their happiness in each other reflected their new optimism. “Your Grandfather is coming,” Eric reminded her. “You might have told him you couldn’t see him tonight, but you did agree.”

“What if I just send you?” Sookie asked, and then reached behind her to take Eric’s hand so she could pull his arm around her.

Eric chuckled. “A Queen keeps her commitments,” he scolded her, “And next time you should just say, ‘No.’”

“Spoilsport,” Sookie sighed, and then she rubbed her butt against Eric’s semi-hard cock. Eric found he was almost always at half-mast when he was around his wife these nights. They were more careful in their lovemaking. Their son was growing quickly, and Sookie was finding that most positions were not comfortable, but the increased sensation caused by hormones and the narrowing of her sheath as her pregnancy progressed more than made up for the lack of variety.

“You think to make me the cause for you being late?” Eric growled, but he found he didn’t have the heart to get out of bed.

Instead, he brought Sookie’s leg backward across him and, with a dipping motion, entered her again. “Gods!’ he sighed, “You are like a velvet glove around me!” He backed up and then pushed forward, his fangs distending and his breath coming in harsh gasps as he inhaled their combined scents.

It wasn’t that Sookie smelled uncomfortably Fae. Her scent was sweeter, but not so pronounced that Eric felt himself in danger of losing control. What goaded them both, acting as an aphrodisiac, was the increased power of Sookie’s telepathy. They almost never spoke aloud now when they were alone together, except to tease, and when they were making love, their physical joining combined with their mental joining made the experience profound. There were times Eric felt like a young man in his Father’s court again, drunk on the knowledge that fucking was the best thing in the world and every woman was his for the taking, except now it was even better.

Reaching down between her legs, Eric rubbed her pearl and allowed his full pleasure to wash through them. He played his favorite rolodex of memories of the two of them making love, knowing she could see it as clearly as any pornographic movie, and she returned the favor. The disadvantage was that they rarely lasted any length of time, but with the pregnancy nearing term it was probably all to the better.

Taking care not to touch Sookie’s sensitive breasts or hard belly, Eric snaked his other arm up and around just above her waist to hold her to him, and prompted by her mental urging, he slipped his fangs into where her neck joined her shoulder, causing her to scream out, clenching and milking his own orgasm from him.

When Sookie stopped breathing like a steam engine, she asked, ‘Well, ready now?’

‘Ready?’ he sent back, aware his mind felt mushy.

“Niall,” Sookie said out loud.

“Niall, who?” Eric laughed.

Sookie laughed, too, and rolled far enough away that he fell from her, leaving a damp patch on the sheets. “Come on, I’ll get the shower started,” the telepath laughed, shaking her hair to fall further
down her back. Eric watched her softly rounded hips, and the sway of her golden locks, and found he couldn’t stop smiling. He set his nose against the damp spot and inhaled deeply. After a half-minute, Sookie called out, “I mean it, Eric! Time to get moving!”

‘You’ve broken me,’ he sent her, and felt her almost immediately start to cross from amusement to aggravation and he moved quickly to join her. Eric had learned that as delicious as his wife could be when she was willing, her mood in this last month could turn on a dime.

She was opening her mouth, doubtless to yell at him again, when he was behind her, taking the shampoo from her hand, and then massaging the soap into her scalp. He felt her relax under his hands and he smiled again.

‘Will Thomas be coming tonight?’ she asked him silently.

‘I don’t think he’s finished making Karin suffer,’ Eric replied, and together they laughed again.

“But Thalia will be here,” Sookie sighed. ‘How many times tonight do you think folks will talk to me and not to my belly?’ It was becoming a source of irritation for the telepath that everyone who came in contact with her never looked her in the eyes. Instead, they addressed all remarks to someplace around her belly button.

Ignoring her, Eric continued, “Cataliades will be here as well, but not until your Grandfather has left.” Eric massaged Sookie’s shoulders and sent her a question when she flinched.

‘It’s nothing,’ she told him. ‘I was moving the furniture around in the nursery. I must have pulled something.’

“Again?” Eric asked aloud.

“Devrah was helping. Truth be told, she did most of the shifting. I just mostly cleaned,” and Sookie leaned into Eric’s thumbs.

“That room is so clean even I can’t smell anything.” Eric gently scolded. He wondered if he should ask Doctor Ludwig about Sookie’s obsession with cleaning and rearranging the nursery, but decided to wait for the arrival of her friend, Tara DuRone. With only a few weeks left until Sookie’s due date, Tara had decided to come down to the City and help with any last minute arrangements. Tara had three children of her own, and she didn’t make Eric feel foolish for asking things he felt he needed to know.

“I can’t help it!” Sookie shrugged, stepping past him to exit the shower and reaching for the towel. “I just find myself in there, re-making the bed, and checking the diapers. I guess I’m just getting excited.”

Hand in hand, they walked through the double doors that led from their chambers into the hallway. Owen and Charles nodded, and Charles headed for the staircase. Eric waited for Sookie to walk first into the elevator, and Saul made a show of getting her seated on the chair that was in the elevator for his own use. “You are just glowing tonight, Miss Sookie,” he told her, and Sookie beamed back.

Niall was waiting for them in the garden space. Eric had left the softer furniture in place even after they moved back onto their renovated floor. Sookie was uncomfortable sitting on hard surfaces, and she liked spending time in the lazy atmosphere of the enclosed garden. On their entrance, Niall turned, wreathed in smiles. Sookie thought he’d been watching the fish playing in their small fountain. “My Granddaughter!” he greeted, but his gaze almost immediately dropped to her belly and he placed his hands on both sides of the child within her before leaning over to kiss her cheek.
“Greetings, Grandfather,” Sookie smiled back. Ever since Mr. Cataliades had pointed out the odd wording in the asset transfer agreements, Sookie had felt cautious around Niall. When Eric and Sookie explained the steps they’d taken to formally name Thalia as guardian to their child, Sookie thought for a moment Niall looked angry, but it passed so quickly, she told herself she was mistaken. Since then, the Prince had done nothing Sookie could see that was odd or tricky, but, still, she couldn’t quite fully trust him.

Eric brought the chess board to sit closer to the couch where the Prince had settled and Devrah herself brought in a tray with fruit punch and ginger cookies. Niall beamed as Eric arranged the pillows on Sookie’s preferred chair. “In all of my many years,” he told them, “This is the most content I believe I have ever been.” Sookie took the hand the Fae offered and allowed Niall to help her lower backward into her seat. As was the Prince’s habit, he leaned forward to place his hands full over her child, lowered his head, and whispered a blessing she could feel tingling through her. It always made her feel wonderful and when she’d asked him about it, Niall told her that the blessing of the Fae was something reserved for the lucky few, and that, in time, she herself would grow into the power to bestow the same upon others.

The game had barely started when there was a sound at the door. It was Mr. Cataliades and he bowed quickly. “I apologize for interrupting…” he started.

For whatever reason, Sookie felt happy to see the demon and she said, “Of course you’re welcome, Desmond. Please! Join us!” as if he was supposed to be there at that hour.

From nowhere and everywhere, Sookie heard, ‘What are they playing at?’ It took everything she had not to jump in surprise, and then Thalia arrived. Thalia had been expected, but when the small vampire walked over to stand close to Mr. Cataliades, Sookie heard, “They have both come to cause trouble! They would do well to guard their tongues and not try to interfere with this!” and Sookie had a clear vision of her son as he would be.

Almost before she could think things through, Sookie turned to the Prince, and said, “What is it that you don’t want Desmond and Thalia to tell me, Grandfather? What is it they know that affects my son?”

“You hear me!” Niall’s eyes widened and with those words, Sookie found herself fully within the Prince’s mind. It was a bright place and cold.

Sookie felt herself standing as though in a large room. She could see the Prince scrambling and scurrying about like a great spider, hiding his thoughts behind other thoughts, but she still caught enough to ask aloud, “What is it, Grandfather, that makes this child so special?” and as soon as the words left her lips, she could hear Niall’s relief that her other child was dead.

The Prince stopped his mental movements, and Sookie could see he knew she’d heard it all. Although she was still in his mind, she could see the Prince who was in the room had risen. Eric rose as well and his fangs ran out. As though from somewhere very far away, Sookie watched as Thalia took a step closer to her Grandfather, and Mr. Cataliades seemed to move closer, too.

“Did you cause it?” Sookie asked from her body’s mouth, but her mind demanded the answer of the Prince in a way that had him leaning away from her. Sookie brought her hands to rest over her child, and she found she could press the Prince harder through her will. “Did you?”

“No!” Niall’s voice was less steady now. “But…”

“But you knew,” Thalia said out loud. “You knew what Rhodes would mean and still you allowed it to happen.”
In that moment, many things became clear to Sookie. She could see Niall’s face as he spoke with Dermot, proud and dismissive. She could feel his disdain and rejection of their first child, and most damning, she felt his triumph in knowing that this magical child had replaced the other. All of these things were revealed as she stood in the open spaces of Niall’s mind. She was aware that the Prince was trying to expel her, but it felt less than a gnat flying against the window.

Eric hissed and started to move toward Niall, the chessboard tipping and the pieces scattering over the tiles. Sookie turned to her husband, realizing Eric had shared some part of this with her. She knew Eric meant to kill Niall, and, for once, the thought of ending another creature didn’t bother her.

Niall was almost physically twisting from side to side, and Sookie understood that somehow she was holding him in place. It was all unfolding before her in a bright, slow motion, when the Prince finally slipped some part of the hold she had on him, and shouted “Stop!” It was enough to cause Sookie to question, and that moment of doubt allowed the grip she had over the Fae Prince to loosen. Niall dropped all his guises. He stood revealed before them, a creature of light and terrible beauty.

Turning toward Eric, he snarled, “You think to kill me, Oath Breaker? Who told you of my Granddaughter? Who steered you toward her? I am the reason you stand here today, High King, and her mate! When they came to stake you, who came to your aid? Who saved your kingdom?”

“You killed my child!” Eric replied, his voice shaking, and he stepped closer, yet it was not the Prince, but Sookie who stopped him.

“No, Eric!” Sookie said sadly. In all of this, Sookie hadn’t never risen from her seated position. The stress and tension all around her caused her own Fae features to manifest, but, for some reason, she felt utterly calm. Turning her head, Sookie realized could ‘hear’ everyone around her now. It was more than just ‘hearing’ Thalia’s and Desmond’s thoughts. She could hear what they knew, and the ties and promises that had caused them to hold their secrets, and she could hear the guilt they felt in that knowledge.

Sookie could hear her Grandfather as well, and she saw his deep and terrible certainty that in doing what he had done, he saved them all.

A single tear slipped down her face as she said, “No, Eric, you can’t kill him! He’s my kin, and killing him will destroy your ability to command the loyalty of others.” Sookie wasn’t entirely sure what she meant, but she knew it was true. Eric was in her head, sharing her knowledge, and it allowed him to step away from the Prince. Her Viking came to stand beside her and Sookie extended her hand. Eric helped her to stand from the chair and in the moment it took for her to collect herself, she heard Niall’s smug pleasure at what he was sure was her softer nature reasserting itself. The Prince thought it was her weakness, and Niall’s derision helped to guide her next words.

“You are no longer welcome in this house,” Sookie told her Grandfather. “I don’t wish to see you again. You are not to return here, or anywhere near me nor my family from today on.” Sookie heard the words loud and harsh in the room, but she also heard the words being said aloud within the space of the Prince’s mind, and Sookie knew that what she was doing was magic.

This wasn’t a magic that she had been taught, it wasn’t some trick or technique. What Sookie was casting was ancient and pure. It was the feet of the Earth Mother, and the spine of the All Mother. It was the prayer of every woman who ever carried a child under her heart, and it was the certainty of the Crone who met you at life’s end. She felt her words echo and then interlace into a barrier stronger than steel, and, from somewhere outside her, Sookie heard Niall whimper, “Please, Sookie!”

Sookie came back to herself again, and she saw the Prince was on his knees below her. She could feel his shock was real as he begged, “Please, Granddaughter, do not deny me this!” and the Prince’s
eyes lifted to fasten on her belly. Sookie saw a vision of Niall and a blond-haired woman sitting in a green field. There were two babies with them. One was quiet, but one was crawling over the Prince, bold and unafraid, and Sookie felt Niall’s sharp yearning.

Yearning turned to grief, real grief from the Prince, and Sookie felt something within her urging her to mercy. She knew somehow that if she didn’t allow some hope the Prince would be gone from her more surely than when he had taken his people back to his realm, but this time there would be no coming back.

Eric’s hand was on her shoulder, and she covered it with her own as she said, “When my son reaches the age of majority, I promise you I will ask him if he wishes to meet you. If he does, I’ll send word through the Pythoness or Finn in Nebraska. This I offer you, but until then, you will be barred from seeing him or being anywhere near us. There will be wards in place, and I will make it my life’s work to protect me and mine from spending one second around you.”

“Granddaughter…” Niall sighed.

“I’m not,” Sookie shook her head. “I don’t know who you are,” and with as much dignity as she could muster, Sookie turned around, showing her back to the Prince.

There was a flash of light and a sound like distant thunder, and the Prince was gone. “Call Octavia,” Sookie said quietly as she stepped into Eric’s arms. “I want the wards up right away.”

They all stood still then, Thalia and Mr. Cataliades, Eric and Sookie. After a minute, Thalia started forward and said “I am…” and Sookie knew she was about to confess.

Sookie wasn’t in that in-between place anymore, and her read of Thalia’s mind was fading, but it didn’t take telepathy to know that sometimes truth could damage as surely as lies, and Sookie knew that confessing what she knew would do that kind of damage to Thalia’s relationship with Eric.

Turning from Eric, Sookie took Thalia’s arms, interrupting her words, “You are our friend, Thalia, and more.” When Thalia looked as though she’d continue, Sookie pulled at her until she leaned forward, and then Sookie rather awkwardly hugged the vampire. Both women were short, so Thalia was forced to lean over Sookie’s pregnancy to make contact, and it was so ungainly that Sookie giggled. “You did what you had to,” Sookie told her quietly, “And Eric and I will always be grateful to you.” When Thalia glanced at Eric, Sookie shook her head just a bit and Thalia straightened, nodding back.

“So, you can read us all, then?” Mr. Cataliades asked.

“Well, for a minute or two,” Sookie nodded, turning her eyes to Eric. “I can’t explain it, but I’m kind of happy it’s going away.”

Sookie could feel that Eric knew something was left unsaid, but Sookie knew he wouldn’t press it, and she was grateful for his trust. “Things will be as they were destined,” he said out loud, and making a point of just looking into her eyes, he pulled her against him.

That night, as they lay in their sanctuary, Eric sighed again, and Sookie could tell that he was still troubled, his curiosity picking at him. “If it really bothers you, you can ask me,” she told him, stroking the fine hair that sprinkled his chest.

“No,” Eric sighed. “No, I am old enough to know that sometimes ignorance is a gift, and you, Älskade, have been a giver of many of my best gifts.”

Sookie couldn’t help the quick smile that formed on her lips as she turned toward him and wrapped
her small hand around his cock, “And what would some of those be?”

“Your sass,” Eric laughed, and placing his hand over hers, guided her in the right rhythm. “Your clever mind. Your beauty,” and he sighed as she added a small twist of her wrist. “Your creative imagination,” he growled, and he pulled her forward, helping her to move astride him.

As she sank down, both of them sighing, Eric reached up to run his thumb along her full, lower lip.

“When I last saw Karin, she thanked me for her life,” Eric told Sookie. “She called it her wonderful life.”

“And what about you?” Sookie asked. “Is this your wonderful life?”


They laughed then, and made love. They spoke of their future, of meetings and alliances, friends and upcoming visits. They spoke of the things that two people in love will always share, and as they laced their hands over the son who would soon meet them, they knew that the future held nothing but light for the Viking King and his Fairy Queen.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: And so it concludes. There will be an Epilogue which I’ve written mentally a couple of times, so should find its way to paper by next week. If you are curious about Fintan’s birth (which would happen within a few days), I wrote about it in When It Began last year.

I have so enjoyed this journey with you. A special thanks to both Ms Buffy and Breathesgirl for their editing and suggestions. A shout out to American Android whose art is the front-piece for this story. And thank you for reading.
Epilogue - A Distant Horizon

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: So, it is done! Won’t lie, it’s hard to walk away from this world, even knowing there are other worlds and other families of characters to explore. I have a premise and a glorious piece of art to craft around (Thank you, Gyllene). But for now, I’ll be taking some time off from fiction writing to read the fanfiction of others (about time!), finish replying to reviews, and converting my Swimming stories to pdf and posting them on my Wordpress site for download, if you’re interested. I’ve also decided to take a crack at some original fiction, and we’ll see if I get off page one with it.

In my real life I also write (nonfiction), but recently I’ve added teaching others about my field, which requires both preparation and some travel. For those who follow me on Facebook you’ve probably noticed the uptick in posts from places other than New England. All my way of saying you may not see anything from me for a bit, but don’t think I’m gone; simply germinating.

Thank all of you for reading, and I hope our trails cross again.

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The birds started to sing in a great, noisy chorus as the sun peeked over the horizon. The sounds were still new to the small boy. His life until recently had been spent between the great quiet of his rooms and the mechanized sounds of the city outside. He rolled over and pulled himself into a sitting position, staring at the soft slant of light that filtered through the window.

It was quiet here in a way he could sense all through him. When he was in the other place that until now was the only place he knew, he could feel the many creatures around him. It gave him energy and sometimes it jangled so much that crying felt best. Here he could barely sense any creatures. He looked around him, his blue eyes large in his pale face, and then there was a face above him. It wasn’t someone he recognized, but he felt that this person was supposed to be here, and Fintan Northman smiled.

“Well, my little man,” Niall Brigant sighed, “It would appear you prefer the light!” Niall glanced toward the hallway. The Prince knew that on the floor just above them the Viking had fallen into his day death and his Granddaughter was also fast asleep. “What say we go someplace where we won’t disturb your parents?” the Fae Prince smiled, and lifting the willing child into his arms, he willed them to the field that stretched over the place where Bill Compton’s house once stood.

It was six months since Fintan’s birth, and in all this time the Northmans had not returned to Bon Temps. Now that had changed. The excuse was the occasion of one of Jason Stackhouse’s children having a birthday. At first the couple was only going to visit for a day, but, after some discussion, Sookie and Eric decided it was time that the cousins had a chance to spend time together, so the
decision was made to re-open the country house and to stay in the neighborhood for several months.

It was the opportunity Niall Brigant had been awaiting.

Since the time of his banning, Niall had focused all of his attention on the thin connection he held with his Granddaughter. He felt Sookie’s yearning for Bon Temps and he felt her desire to reconnect with family. The Prince was sure it was only a matter of time before she was drawn back to this place, and so with much magic and great focus, Niall slowly built a tunnel through the wards and protections, but only here.

Niall had to hand it to her. Sookie’s magic, though unskilled, was formidable. It was only because Dermot built this place that the crack that Niall exploited existed at all. The other factor had been that Sookie herself had created most of the wards around this property. Had Sookie continued with her training, she would have learned that the hardest Fae to keep outside of your protections were family. Where there was a blood connection, there was always a vulnerability that allowed a family member, particularly a strong family member, to slide along your spells and interweave themselves into the very fabric of your magic. After all, below the surface, all blood-connected family in the Fae world were truly one.

“It is all very different from anything you’ve seen, isn’t it?” Niall smiled as he watched his Great-great-grandson turn his head first one way and then another, mesmerized by the green of the grass and the sight of leaves moving in the breeze. The child’s eyes were wide and his mouth open. “Of course, this is nothing compared to the beauty of the Fae realm,” Niall chuckled, tapping the small boy’s nose, “but you will be the judge of that yourself one day,” and Niall brought his face close to Fintan’s, earning a drooling smile.

When a bird flew by, pulling the baby’s attention, Niall reached into the child, searching for any sign of special awareness or the presence of magic, but there was nothing. What Niall could feel was that Fintan was emotionally mature for his age, handling the changes around him with great calm. The Prince probed further, and he was certain he could feel the child’s spark, strong but dormant. It was as it should be. There were times when the children of the Fae came into their powers as infants but, fortunately, those cases were rare. When it did happen, it was often difficult for the child and those around him. Niall heard the stories of Sookie’s childhood. She had been damaged by the early manifestation of her telepathy and Niall was pleased to think Fintan would be spared any part of that.

Most Fae started to manifest their gifts once they reached puberty, and then, as they entered the long, endless summer of their lives, their gifts would continue to appear and grow in strength, one after another, if they were fortunate. Niall was certain as he beamed at the sturdy boy in his lap that Fintan Northman would be most fortunate in both his abilities and his gifts.

The child looked up at him, a questioning look forming on his face, so Niall summoned butterflies to fly around him. The ruse worked, and Niall used the child’s delight to distract him while Niall pulled some of the clothes from the baby. “Let’s see what we’ve got,” the Prince chuckled.

As he manipulated arms from shirt sleeves and feet from the footed garment, the Prince marveled at how the old habits of handling babies came back to him so quickly.

“You are your Father’s son,” Niall told the baby as he ran his tapered fingers over long, plump limbs. “There’s nothing small about you!” The fairy ran his fingers over the child’s shoulders and paused over the small, bony protrusions centered in each shoulder blade. “That’s interesting! I don’t think they will spontaneously emerge, but I suspect you could manifest those later if you chose,” he said, half to himself.

Pulling himself from his reverie and focusing on young Fintan’s face, he said, “You will be the first
among us to reveal yourself in a winged form in generations. Perhaps it is your Father’s gift of flight that has triggered it,” and the Prince brought his face close again so that Fintan smiled and touched the Prince’s face with his chubby hands.

When the baby looked away, his hand reaching for another butterfly that remained just out of his grasp, the Prince placed his finger in Fintan’s mouth, running the tip over the child’s gums and the roof of his mouth. “Fangs buds” the Prince sniffed. “They shouldn’t emerge until later though,” he assured the child who’d become more solemn as if trying to figure out what this man was doing, putting his finger in his mouth.

As Niall started to withdraw his finger, Fintan bit down with his first teeth, causing the Prince to start a little. Fintan only had three teeth and all on the bottom, but they were sharp and he broke the Prince’s skin. Rather than withdraw, Niall held his bleeding index finger in the child’s mouth, waiting to see what he would do. Fintan’s eyes went wide and grabbing Niall’s hand with his own, he started sucking strongly. “So, blood calls you, too,” and Niall’s smile slipped, “Another gift from your Father.”

Niall could feel his own essence sparking a bit within the child as his blood entered him, and, fearing that it would be detected later, the Prince pulled his finger away. This time Fintan made a sound that was clearly a protest. “As well you should!” Niall said approvingly. “Never let others take what you want,” and Niall tilted his head a little as he said, “Now let’s see if there is anything of your mother about you.”

Niall catalogued Fintan’s slightly almond-shaped eyes and arched brows. When Fintan turned his head again, the Prince frowned. “What’s this?” he asked, and ran his finger over the slight fold of skin on the top of one of the child’s ears. It was subtle, the fold, but Niall knew immediately what he was seeing. With a slight smile, he manifested a glow in his hand and then in his index finger. He stroked the top of each of Fintan’s ears, first one and then the other. “There!” he sighed after a moment. “They will heal now, little King.” Fintan stopped grabbing at the shiny watch that peeped from Niall’s pocket to stare at the Prince. “I don’t think your misguided mother will have your ears butchered a second time,” the Prince assured the baby, his voice serious. “It will take a few months, but your natural shape will reassert itself. Your parents will just have to allow your hair to grow, as is our custom.”

Niall smiled and hummed as he started to redress the boy. “I think we can visit for a while,” the Prince said in that curious sing-song adults use with small children. “Your parents will sleep for some time,” and leaning over to tap the child’s nose, Niall said, “They made your sister last night, although they don’t know it yet. It will be our little secret!”

Fintan liked this man. He liked the way this man made him feel and he laughed in delight. He pulled at the man’s hand and the man laughed, too. The Prince tickled and made certain to support the child’s back and was rewarded by whole-hearted laughter before the child started wiggling to escape the Prince’s lap.

Niall allowed young Fintan to crawl from him, the child tumbling to the grass, but he frowned when he saw the child’s reaction. “You’ve not been allowed to touch the ground?” Niall asked. It was clear that Fintan was not sure what to make of the texture of grass. He pulled back from it, trying to scramble back into the Prince’s lap, while minimizing his contact with the blades. When that failed, Fintan became still, a worried look on his brow.

The Prince found he was angry to think that any future King of the Fae World should not have been given regular contact with the Earth from birth. Niall ground his teeth, worrying that Sookie had allowed herself to become so much a part of the vampire world that she was forgetting her duties in
teaching her child about the world of sun and growing things. When Niall’s thoughts turned to plotting over how and who could be used to remind his wayward Granddaughter of her obligations, he realized Fintan had stopped squirming and fussing.

Niall glanced down to find his Great-Grandson was balanced stock still on his hands and knees, staring at the Prince. Fintan’s startling blue eyes seemed to accuse the Prince and Niall felt his irritation soften. The child’s reaction was puzzling, so Niall reached out again, but still found nothing more than the soft, unformed thoughts of an infant. Still, there was something strangely knowing about Fintan Northman’s gaze, and Niall decided to watch his thoughts more carefully in future.

The sun was starting to climb a little higher and Niall knew that the day would become uncomfortably humid, but now, in the early hours after dawn, the damp on the grass kept things cool, so handling the child was comfortable for both of them.

Niall grabbed the child’s hands and helped him to stand, and then the Prince laughed at the expression on Fintan’s face as he tried to make sense of the feeling of grass under his feet. “You will be running through this soon, I promise you!” Niall told him. Fintan gurgled and wind-milled his feet then, mimicking walking, and Niall stood in one graceful movement, helping his Great-great-grandson to feel that he was, indeed, moving under his own power. After a few steps, Fintan loosened his grip and fell firmly on his backside, but, rather than cry, he laughed a deep, throaty laugh, and Niall fell onto the ground beside him, all dignity set aside. “You are a delight!” he told the baby. “Everything I hoped for and more!”

Fintan crawled toward his Great-Great-Grandfather, trying to pull himself up into the Prince’s lap again, and Niall accommodated him by lying down and lifting Fintan to lie directly on his chest. Almost immediately, the young boy settled down, his head resting over the Prince’s heart, and he screwed his thumb into his mouth. “You are a thinker,” Niall praised him. “You will make a magnificent King!” Fintan squirmed, seeming to want closer contact, and Niall opened his own shirt, allowing Fintan to make contact with his skin. The baby sighed and went still, and Niall could feel a connection between them.

“Yes,” he told Fintan, “That is how it always feels when you are with your kin. You will find joy in contact with others, not like those cold vampires, but you will find that it is in your contact with the Fae you are most happy.”

As Fintan seemed to calm, becoming almost drowsy, Niall said, “I will have to return you to your bed soon. Your mother will not sleep much longer. She will wonder why you are not calling for your breakfast, but I will tell you stories while we are together, stories of your future and stories of your family.”

The Prince waved his hand, and on the field in front of them an image formed of a tall, thin woman whose hair was the color of spun corn silk and whose eyes were ice blue. “That is your sister, Adele,” Niall whispered to Fintan, kissing his soft head. “She will be your greatest ally and your strongest warrior. She will embrace her vampire heritage and she will join with your Father’s other progeny. You will not always see eye to eye. She will be too quick to anger for you, but you will never find another who will be so loyal.” The image in front of them shifted. When Pam Ravenscroft joined the young woman, Fintan made a hooting noise of recognition. “Your sister will not always be so nice as she is today,” Niall whispered. “She will become hard, harder than your other sister, Karin.” Karin walked into view and though Niall could feel Fintan’s interest, the baby did not show the same level of enthusiasm as he had for Pam.

The images shifted again and Eric Northman appeared. “Da!” Fintan lifted his head. “Da!” he said again and pointed before returning his fist to his mouth.
“Yes,” Niall chuckled, “Your Father. He will remain High King long after he wishes the title gone. It will be your mother who will make it all tolerable.” Now Sookie stepped into the image, her belly heavy. “They will figure out the magic of their bed,” Niall laughed, “and they will decide they enjoy children enough to make more.” Niall absentmindedly rubbed Fintan’s back as he said, “My house will increase, far beyond any imagining. Brigant blood will hold sway over a far greater territory than even I thought possible.”

“Da,” Fintan mumbled again around his thumb.

“Yes, Fintan Brigant,” Niall said as he kissed the child’s head again. The Prince looked at the sky and taking Fintan in his hands, rolled carefully into first a sitting and then a standing position. “It is time, little King. We need to get you back.”

With barely a blink, Niall transitioned them both back to the bedroom in the Bon Temps house. He placed Fintan in the crib and said, “Now, this will be our secret, my boy. I will see you tomorrow,” and with a quick blink of light, Niall was gone.

Fintan looked around, wondering where the man had gone, but before he could really search, the door opened and Mama stepped through. “Well, I figured I’d have heard from you before now!” she said with her smiling face. Fintan lifted his arms and she had him all snuggled against her. She pulled his clothes apart and took the warm diaper from him. He didn’t like it, the quick change in temperature, but his Mama’s hands were quick and sure and he was soon in a drier diaper and being carried to the chair that meant breakfast. On cue, his tummy grumbled, and as he latched onto his mother, she said, “What is this?” She was wiping something from under his chin. It was red and she rubbed it between two fingers. “This looks like blood,” she said, and she pulled him from her and turned his head one way and then another, but when he started to wail, she stopped, and he resumed his meal.

“Well, never mind,” she said, and in that moment the sun shifted, catching them both in a beam of light.

XXxxx

Fintan was sitting on the soft rug in the long, light room near Mama. He couldn’t see her, but he could hear her humming. In another minute, she was walking through the hallway with a small bowl in her hand. “Hungry?” Fintan wasn’t sure what it meant, but he could smell something that made him remember how hollow he felt and he lifted his arms against her. She pulled his clothes apart and took the warm diaper from him. He didn’t like it, the quick change in temperature, but his Mama’s hands were quick and sure and he was soon in a drier diaper and being carried to the chair that meant breakfast. On cue, his tummy grumbled, and as he latched onto his mother, she said, “What is this?” She was wiping something from under his chin. It was red and she rubbed it between two fingers. “This looks like blood,” she said, and she pulled him from her and turned his head one way and then another, but when he started to wail, she stopped, and he resumed his meal.

“Da!” the baby cried, and laughing, raised his arms again.

“Yes, min son,” Eric Northman smiled, “Da!” The vampire leaned down and scooped up his boy under the arms, raising him high and tossing him into the air. Fintan laughed and Eric did it again.

“Cut that out!” Sookie scolded, swatting the Viking on his all-too-perfect behind. “I’m just going to feed him and if you get him all riled up he’ll throw it back as quick as he puts it down!” Sookie was already dressed for the party. She was wearing one of her older sundresses, and although it still pulled at the chest and hips, it fit better than it had a couple weeks ago.

Eric leaned down to kiss his wife and when she tried to cut it short, he shifted their son to one arm, pulled her closer, and claimed her mouth until she stopped struggling and sagged a little against him. “See?” Eric smiled evilly, “Isn’t that better?”
“You’d think after last night I wouldn’t have any more get up and go left,” Sookie said with a sparkle in her eye, “but you sure have the cure!”

“There is still time before we have to go to your brother’s house,” Eric said, and Sookie could see the interested look in his eye.

“Eric!” she exclaimed, “Fintan has to be fed, I have to finish icing the chocolate cake, and you still have to dress! We’re supposed to be there in two hours!”

“Plenty of time,” Eric let his voice drop, and he started backing Sookie toward the kitchen counter.

“Plenty of time for what?” Pam asked from the door.

“Nothing!” Sookie was blushing, and she ducked under Eric’s arm and headed to the refrigerator.

“Ma!” Fintan cried out and lifted his arms toward Pam.

“I can’t believe you get that!” Sookie set juice on the counter. “I’ve tried to get him to acknowledge me and you get ‘Ma’!”

“And who is your favorite?” Pam sidled up toward Eric and accepted the smiling child into her own arms. Nuzzling and cooing, Pam took Fintan to his high chair, and then turned toward Sookie, her face registering her disgust at the two bowls of cooling food. “What is this crap?” she asked.

“Peas and chicken stew,” Sookie answered. “You’ve seen the chicken one before. He likes it.”

“You are cute,” Pam told Fintan, bringing her face in close, “but you do have some disgusting habits,” still, she spooned some of the stew into the baby’s open and waiting mouth anyway.

“Do you think he smells more Fae?” Eric asked. The Viking was leaning against the counter, his arms crossed.

Pam leaned over and sniffed, “Yes, he does. Not so you’d notice right away.”

“Well, I am pretty much Fae now,” Sookie shrugged. “Guess it was bound to happen a little,” and turning to Eric, she said, “He can’t be all yours! I get to have a little bit of my own!”

“That’s strange,” Pam said. Eric and Sookie looked over to see her running her finger along the top of Fintan’s ear. “I think Pam’s right. Could his ears regenerate?”

“He is part-vampire,” Eric cocked his head to the side. “We regenerate body parts we lose. It is possible.”

“Well, Hell!” Sookie sighed, handing the cup into Fintan’s extended hands. “I was hoping he’d be able to blend with all the other kids. Guess we’ll have to figure something out.”

“We could have tutors,” Eric suggested.

“I want him to have a real childhood,” Sookie said sadly, “With friends, and homework, and after-school.”

“Then stay here in backwoods land,” Pam drawled, popping another spoonful of what she obviously
regarded as slime into Fintan’s open mouth. “He’ll have cousins here to defend him and the DuRone progeny. Even those Bellefleurs will make sure he’s okay.”

“I did love growing up here,” Sookie nodded, “Except for the people, but, like you said, he’d have lots of relatives and friends who wouldn’t see anything strange,” and Sookie tapped the end of Fintan’s nose, an action that always seemed to make him smile.

“He could have a brother or sister closer to his own age to keep him company,” Eric was looking at Fintan as he said the words, and Sookie could feel that although the Viking sounded as if he was joking, he wasn’t really.

“Well, I suppose he could, Eric,” Sookie rolled her eyes, “but I’d like to lose the baby fat from this one first, thank you very much!”

Pushing off the counter, Eric stalked toward her, taking on that slow, sexy roll he used when he was hunting or threatening, “You are finally soft and rounded, Min Hustru,” he said, his voice a low growl. “I would keep you this way forever,” and he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back against him. “No sharp edges to poke me and places that fit my hands,” and he opened his large hand in front of Sookie’s face and then moved it slowly toward her chest as if to illustrate, but Sookie was having none of it!

Pushing his hand away from its clear target, she said, “You know I like the idea of another baby, too, but right now we have to get ready to leave.” Glancing at her son, who, in spite of Pam’s best efforts, was wearing his dinner, Sookie said, “Pam, if you wouldn’t mind giving Finn a bath? I’ve got to finish this cake,” and she glanced again at Mrs. Bellefleur’s famous cake, half-iced on the counter.

“I will take my son for a shower,” Eric announced. With a few deft motions, Fintan was in his Father’s arms. “Come, son,” the Viking smiled at the baby, “We’ll discuss names for your new sibling.”

“I’ll have to get those shots again,” Sookie reminded him. “I’ll smell!”

“Worth it!” Eric hissed, stealing another kiss before vamping from the room, the sound of Fintan’s laughter loud and strong.

“He is serious,” Pam said, her eyebrow raised.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Sookie sighed. “I think he’s decided he wants an army.”

Pam frowned, “That seems out of character…” but then she said, “yet perhaps it is part of his transition away from the way of vampires.”

“What do you mean?” Sookie wasn’t sure why she felt that Pam’s remark sounded the littlest bit disloyal, but it did.

“All the new rules, all the deference we are required to show to humans. All I’m saying is that as High King, Eric is making us more human every day. Perhaps he thinks by having a family with children who grow as human children do, it will help us blend away our differences even more.”

“I don’t think that mainstreaming is what he’s thinking about!” Sookie exclaimed.

“Perhaps not,” Pam shrugged. “But, then again, when have either of you ever followed the rules?”

“I guess you’re right,” Sookie smiled, and turning back to the cake, she thought, ‘And I wouldn’t have it any other way.’
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